

Writing Sample**from****STEADY EYES**

A radio play by Hyukin Michaela Kwon

- Winner of the 2023 BBC International Playwriting Competition
- The full play, produced by BBC Studios Audio and first broadcast in June 2024, is available to stream on the BBC Sounds website and app

Central Characters

Luah

Soon-ja, Luah's mother

Jeong-hee, Luah's grandmother

Adey

Newsreader (female)

Professor Han (male)

Glossary (in order of appearance)

- Hwa-byung: Mental or emotional disorder caused by repressed anger or stress
- Hikikomori: Japanese term referring to a person who withdraws from social life and remains isolated, often confined to their room for extended periods
- Hagwon: Private educational institute or cram school
- Jesa: Traditional Korean ritual held to honour and commemorate ancestors

Note on punctuation

Ellipses before and after a news broadcast indicate that the news continues to play faintly in the background.

LUAH: (V.O.) I guess those short conversations I had with mum and nan respectively weren't so typical. I always felt there was something essential missing in our relationships. And what filled the empty space devoid of that essence was passive-aggressive, and sometimes downright hostile resentment.

NEWSREADER: (D) ... The US president has declared a global state of war and announced plans to implement military counteractions. ...

LUAH: (V.O.) That stereotypical representation of mother in popular culture—You know. Full of love, warmth and comfort; a soft pillar one can always lean on whenever they need emotional support—it always leaves mum and I bamboozled.

NEWSREADER: (D) ... The national security expert, Professor Han is here with me to discuss the countermeasures the Korean government is planning to enact. Good afternoon, professor.

HAN: (D) Good afternoon. ...

LUAH: (V.O.) We're bamboozled and annoyed because such a portrayal can't be any further from our experiences with our mothers.

NEWSREADER: So why do you think Luah feels this way? What is it that's missing in her relationships with her mother and grandmother? Why are their relationships filled with resentment?

LUAH: (PERPLEXED) Huh?

HAN: In order to explain that, we have to first look into what kind of mothers we're talking about here. Let's bring them in, shall we?

NEWSREADER: Sure. The three generations of women are now with us. Grandmother Jeong-hee Kim, aged 89. Jeong-hee's first-born daughter and Luah's mother Soon-ja Kim, 64 and Soon-ja's only daughter Luah Kwon, 34. Thanks for joining us, ladies.

LUAH: Er...

JEONG-HEE: What is this?

HAN: Let me start with the first generation. Jeong-hee, you got pregnant again right after giving birth to Soon-ja, so you couldn't breastfeed her. You fed her instead only watery gruel seasoned with salted shrimp, even though you were selling infant formula at the grocery store you ran. Why?

JEONG-HEE: I don't know. Feeding her the formula just never occurred to me.

HAN: Never occurred to you? At all?

JEONG-HEE: No.

HAN: Interesting. When Soon-ja was a sickly kid, you said something she could never forget and resents to this day. What was it, Soon-ja?

SOON-JA: My mum's top priority was always her younger brother who she looked after financially and... in all aspects, for that matter, over a long time, even when he was a married man. Neither her husband nor her children were as precious as her brother to her. At each mealtime, I had to bring hot food mum had just made to my uncle's house before I could have a bite. To justify herself, she said to me one day that if her child died, she could replace her by giving birth to another. She also said her husband could be replaced by getting married again. But, according to her, her brother could never be replaced since her own mother had passed away.

HAN: Right. That logic in itself is technically not wrong, I guess, but is this something a mother should say to her frail child with a congenital heart problem? That she could easily be replaced by another child?

JEONG-HEE: (IRRITATED) I didn't know she had a problem with her heart back then, did I?

HAN: That's true but not the point here. What I'm asking is, do you regret saying such a thing to your own daughter?

JEONG-HEE GRUMBLES INCOMPREHENSIBLY.

NEWSREADER: I don't think she intends to answer that question. We've got limited time—there's important breaking news that needs to be covered. Next question, professor?

HAN: Right, I'll move on to the next question.

SOON-JA: Can I mention one more thing before moving on?

HAN: Sure. Go on, Soon-ja.

SOON-JA: When I asked mum a few years back what kind of a baby I was, her reply was: 'You were absolutely wicked'. And by wicked, she meant evil. Evil! And you know why she thought so?

HAN: Why is that?

SOON-JA: Because I cried so much!

HAN: (CHUCKLES) But Jeong-hee, all babies are supposed to cry. That's the only way they can express their needs. Soon-ja was always poorly because you were negligent in taking proper care of her, hence all the crying.

SOON-JA: (SARCASTIC) Thank you very much!

JEONG-HEE: (DEFENSIVE) I was busy making money to support two households and she was so troublesome!

SOON-JA: (UPSET) Mum, nobody asked you to support your adult, married brother who'd been educated at a decent school and had a job. The only reason he left his job as soon as he'd got it was because, when he whined about how hard his work was, you set him up to run that grocery store and even bought him a house when you and dad had to build a life with nothing yourselves! No right-minded sister sacrifices that much for a brother.

JEONG-HEE GRUMBLES INCOMPREHENSIBLY AGAIN.

HAN: Let me try and defend Jeong-hee this time. Her such actions had been heavily influenced by her own mother, who had lost her eldest son in the Korean war and had consequently died of

hwa-byung. She had been the one who compelled Jeong-hee to be the pillar of the family from a young age and to look after her little brother, the only remaining son of the extended family after all the other ones perished in the war. To Jeong-hee's mother, only the sons mattered as they did to most other people of her generation. So, to a degree, such an old-fashioned notion as well as the lived experiences of the war had shaped the kind of person Jeong-hee became.

SOON-JA: I always tried so hard to understand mum and her excuses, but I don't want to anymore. Everyone in her generation had a tumultuous life, what with the Japanese occupation and the Korean war, but not every woman became a terrible mother as a result, did they?

HAN: No, but no one's completely free from those historical influences either. It takes years to unpack the complex interrelations of war, trauma and the consequent psychological issues that are passed on and evolve over generations.

NEWSREADER: I'm afraid we're up against time, professor.

HAN: (FASTER PACE) Right. Jeong-hee, when Soon-ja was a PhD student, you, jointly with your youngest daughter, were cruel to her, verbally harassing her for being a 'spinster'. It impelled

Soon-ja to run away from you into a marriage that only made her equally, if not more, unhappy. By choosing a man who never treated his family with respect, she reproduced the relationship between you and her with her husband.

JEONG-HEE: Are you saying it's all my fault that she met some poor imbecile?! I had high expectations for her, she was doing a PhD and all that, but she had to go get hitched to that incompetent who failed to become a professor after spending all those years studying! It's hardly my fault that she's always been poor.

HAN: I'm talking about her psychology rather than financial status, but seeing as you're too defensive to bring this any further... Soon-ja, one rainy day during your pregnancy, you had an irrepressible craving for green apples but didn't have the money to buy any. At the time, Jeong-hee was selling apples at her store. You didn't want to ask her for an apple, so instead you frantically walked about in the rain to suppress your craving. Was it because of pride that you didn't want to ask your mother for an apple that badly?

SOON-JA: I simply couldn't bear yet another derogatory remark from her, which was all that came out of her mouth whenever she saw me.

HAN: Right. I'll turn to Luah at this point. I believe verbal harassment from a mother is something you're familiar with, too. Isn't it, Luah?

LUAH: Er... Yeah, I guess.

HAN: What have you been called by your mother so far?

LUAH: Failure, loser, lunatic and some of the other words that mean a crazy person... And of course, spinster.

HAN: Soon-ja, why have you called your own daughter those cruel words?

SOON-JA: (DEFENSIVE) She was wasting her life away in her prime, stuck at home like a hikikomori, consciously missing all the good career opportunities that came her way and mooching off her badly off parents!

HAN: Now, Soon-ja, that rings a bell, doesn't it? You yourself were a competent woman who completed her doctoral studies, albeit without a degree due to pregnancy, and women with such a high educational background were very rare at the time. Nonetheless, you chose to be a full-time housewife who occasionally worked part-time teaching at a hagwon or tutoring

at home, your reason being you couldn't leave Luah alone at home. Do you think it was a wise decision, considering that Luah has pretty much followed your career path despite her artistic talent and potential?

SOON-JA: It was her own decision to give up the opportunity to further pursue filmmaking in America! She'd worked so hard to earn her place in master's programmes and that prestigious scholarship, although it didn't even cover half the tuition fees. We couldn't support her financially, but she could've taken out loans to cover the rest of the expenses if she really wanted to go. Instead, she chose to let that once-in-a-life-time opportunity slip by and then blamed me and my husband for not having been able to support her. We'd already bent over backwards to send her to that art school and even on that bloody term abroad in Canada, but she's never been thankful for what we've provided for her. For almost a decade, all she ever did was whinge and throw a fit. A decade! You watch your own child waste their life like that and see if those words don't come out of your mouth!

HAN: Sounds like both you and Luah have gone through a rough time.

NEWSREADER: Time's almost up, any final questions, professor?

HAN: Soon-ja, ironically, when you decided to separate from your husband a couple of years ago, you moved right next to your mother despite all your resentment towards her. Growing up, you were hit by her quite a lot because, as the biggest child, you were always her main target of criticism and punishment, even for the wrongdoings of your siblings. This has continued to this day in the form of verbal attacks, and when your brother's wife didn't show up to a jesa for your late father, she blew up at you. Since then, you haven't interacted with her at all for almost a half year now. Why did you move to live near her in the first place if you were going to avoid seeing her like this?

SOON-JA: (SIGHS) I thought... mum was alone without her husband, and I was going to be without mine too, so I reckoned we could rely on each other.

HAN: And could you?

SOON-JA: No, she's only been badmouthing me and Luah to my siblings, even making things up to slander us, whilst enjoying all the domestic service we provide for her. All that comes out of her wrinkly, toothless mouth is complaints no matter how we bend over backwards for her. I'm basically plagued by two ungrateful whingers!

HAN: Yet, you're still living right next to your mother, just as Luah has stuck with you despite your keeping on at her to move out.

NEWSREADER: I'm sorry to keep interrupting but It's time for your assessments, professor.

HAN: Right. Based on these accounts, it seems to me that Jeong-hee may be pathologically deprived of maternal love. A small percentage of females, both humans and animals, simply don't have in them the natural maternal instincts, which is why they often abandon or neglect their children. I'd say Soon-ja hasn't inherited this unfortunate... abnormality, if you will, but because she's never received natural maternal love, she's struggled to generate it on her own and consequently repeated the relationship between her and her mother with Luah. In conclusion, what's missing here is none other than love. The absence of this sine qua non in the most important relationship, that is the one between mother and child, can result in myriads of psychological issues. Both Soon-ja and Luah have suffered low self-esteem, anxiety, OCD and depression, and on top of it, Luah has struggled with crippling perfectionism and propensity for addictions, which, in her case, manifested as workaholism that burnt her out even before she graduated from university.

NEWSREADER: Thank you, professor. And ladies, thank you for sharing your stories with us. We now have clearer insight-

LUAH: (V.O.) Hey, he didn't mention the most important one: the absolute inability to love or to be loved. When you've never been loved for who you are by the very person who's supposed to, how can you expect or let anybody else to?

NORMAL NEWS FADES IN.

HAN: (D) ... cooperate closely with the American troops to stop the abductions as well as to prevent any possible attacks from the invaders. ...

SCENE 7, INT. LUAH'S ROOM, NIGHT

NEWS IS HEARD IN THE BACKGROUND.

LUAH: (V.O.) The internet was flooded with morbid predictions and concerns about the impending apocalypse. It hadn't been mentioned officially on the news, but everyone presumed that after all the animals had been abducted, it would be humans' turn. Even if it wasn't true, mass extinction was inevitable with all the animals gone from the surface of the earth. Nevertheless, fear or anxiety still hadn't struck me. Strangely enough, what I

felt instead was... something resembling relief, as if part of me was almost welcoming the end of the world.

NEWSREADER: (D) ... A growing number of citizens are reporting curious cases where they were accidentally exposed to a ray, after which their incurable illnesses or disabilities completely vanished. ...

LUAH: (V.O.) There was a neologism in Korean 'Yisaengmang', meaning 'this life has failed'. I was a failure with no accomplishments whatsoever in all aspects of life; a big disappointment to everyone but especially mum who'd expected great things of me. Ever since I forwent that only opportunity for me to move up the social ladder by means of higher education, I'd confined myself to regret and misery, constantly comparing my shabby reality with the glorious American dream I could've and should've achieved. The end of the world meant everyone, regardless of their social and financial status, it was 'mang'—failure for everyone. Equally. It'd be pointless to squabble over whether one had accomplished great things in their lives or not. Because we were all doomed. Equally.

SCENE 8, INT. LUAH'S ROOM, DAY

ALARM GOES OFF ON LUAH'S PHONE. LUAH WAKES UP WITH A GASP.
SHE BREATHES HEAVILY.

LUAH: (V.O.) The next day, I woke up from a chilling dream, where I saw two of the aliens behind the abductions walking in a deserted road on earth.

SPOOKY SCI-FI MUSIC WITH CHILLING METALLIC NOISES ARE HEARD
IN THE BACKGROUND DURING THE FOLLOWING NARRATION.

They had long and skinny torso and limbs, the colour of dark maroon like rotten wood, but they looked metallic at the same time, like rusty iron. The most striking feature was their heads that looked like samurais' kabuto helmets with a long and pointy crest shaped like a pair of forks with two prongs, all in that rusty metallic colour. Underneath those kabuto-like heads were a pair of eyes that were slanted slits, which looked so sinister that I was certain that they came to earth with a single purpose: to do it and all its inhabitants harm, most likely by exploiting them until their demise.