

Journey to Juneteenth: What Does Freedom Mean Today?

My grandmother spoke the way water moves over stones, heavy and hesitant, each word worn smooth by time. We sat at the dinner table, the same table where my mother had sat as a girl, where the scent of doenjang and sesame oil hung in the air like a promise we had already broken simply by being here. My grandmother was telling me about Korea. Not the Korea I knew, the one of K-dramas and Seoul street food, but the Korea that existed in 1950, when she was seventeen and the border was not yet a wall but a choice you made in darkness.

She had to leave everything behind. Her cousins. Her friends. The names of streets she had memorized as a child. She walked south with nothing but blind faith in a better future, a future she could not see, could not touch, could not even properly imagine. She only knew that staying still felt like a kind of death, and so she moved. She did not hear the news of her freedom for days. The war had already divided the country, but word traveled slowly to her village. By the time she understood that the south was no longer safe for her either, she had already begun to run. Freedom, for her, arrived late and incomplete. It was not a celebration. It was an evacuation.

I asked her about the cousins. She shook her head. She never saw them again. They became ghosts without faces, names that dissolved into the silence between her sentences. I realized then that my inheritance was not just her survival. It was her grief, compacted into the spaces where words should have been. This is what Juneteenth means to me. On June 19, 1865, enslaved people in Texas learned they were free two years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Their freedom was real, but it was delayed,

and delay costs something. It costs the years that cannot be returned. It costs the cousins you never see again. It costs the silence that settles into a family and never fully leaves.

I think about this when I sit in my American high school classroom, raising my hand to discuss a topic with my classmates. I think about this when I write essays that question authority, when I speak Korean in public without fear, when I choose my own future without having to walk through darkness to reach it. My grandmother paid for my sight with her blindness. She bought my voice with her silence. But I also think about what freedom still costs in this country. I think about the communities where freedom still arrives late, where the news of equality travels slowly, where people wait for promises that were already made. Juneteenth is not just a history lesson. It is a warning. Freedom delayed is freedom denied, and denial leaves scars that do not fade.

My grandmother passed me the baton of her unspoken grief. My task is to transform it into speech. To say what she could not say. To remember what she was forced to forget. To sit at this dinner table, eat this food, and speak the names of the lost into a room where no one will disappear for hearing them. This is what freedom means today. It means that when one voice is silenced, another must rise. It means that the delay ends with us. At the dinner table, I place another bowl of rice in front of her. She does not speak. She does not need to. I am here. I am speaking. I am free.