

To me, absence does not necessarily signify nothingness, lack, or zero. The inexistence of something can sometimes be more powerful than physical presence. After all, absence is what gives the donuts we so love their identity and produces scrumptious donut holes in the process. As a Medieval Art History concentrator, much of my time at Harvard has been spent poring over a history of objects pieced together from spotty, highly mystical accounts. It is often the information lacking from medieval objects that must be intuited and interpreted. This fascination with missing fragments has its precedent in my childhood.

During the sweltering summer of 2001, I visited my grandmother's house with my family. Although the heat was stifling and most acutely felt in the upper floors, the attic was my favorite place in the house. Hardly anyone ventured there anymore, and I reveled in having my own musty, dusty haven, where I could look through old comics, toys, and photo albums at my leisure.

One day, I spotted a particularly thick album I had yet to open. After about five pages and three sneezes, I stopped short at one faded, pastel-hued photograph.

It was a fairly normal picture of my young grandmother and her children on an outing. There was my mom in her frilly dress, my uncle with a smart little cap, my eldest aunt, my younger aunt in a fashionable bowl haircut and knee socks, and my youngest aunt in goofy sunglasses and a clearly hand-me-down dress...all miniature versions of familiar figures in my life. But on the left, the tallest one—who was this unrecognizable girl? Her short bob framed her oval face, as she stared solemnly at the camera from under the shadows of her hat—she was stunningly pretty, though serious. She wasn't a babysitter, since my grandmother was there, and if she was family, it was odd that I hadn't met her before, since my mom's family was extremely close.

I removed the photo carefully from its yellowed, protective sleeve and went downstairs to my mom.

“엄마 , who's this?”

My mom looked up from her magazine and stared at the photo in slightly pained bewilderment.

“Well, that...that's your 이모 , my older sister.”

“Huh? Why haven't I seen her before? Does she live in some remote place?”

Tears welled up in her eyes. It was the first time I'd ever seen my mom cry. It was also the first time I felt myself becoming more than a daughter—a friend, a sister, a shoulder to lean on, an ear to listen. She told me:

“Your aunt died of colon cancer when she was seventeen. This picture was taken when your aunt could still endure the pain to venture out of the house. Even at the hospital, she completed her art assignments because she missed being in school and still managed to be first in her class. She dreamed of studying art in Paris, and had she lived, I'm certain she would have become one of today's greatest painters. She never complained or resented her excruciating, early death, and actually cheered *us* up in our grief. I remember her last moments vividly. We'd all gathered around her emaciated body on her bed. She was thirsty and asked me for a glass of Coke, her favorite drink. After her final sip, she smiled at us and said she could see angels coming to get her. We weren't a religious family, but she urged us to love and believe in God.”

I was dumbfounded. I had unwittingly uncovered the most tragic, sensitive chapter in my family's otherwise happy history.

“She probably would have been my favorite aunt,” I said, trying to comfort my mom.

“Actually, you remind me a lot of her,” my mom said.

I have never known my aunt, but her absence has significantly shaped who I am today. In her untimely death, this woman became a legend in our family and my personal Joan of Arc. Her name, 신화, appropriately means ‘myth’ in Korean. She is, indeed, a myth to me: an epic tale of courage and grace. For the past nine years I've aimed to be as warm and open-minded as she supposedly was. I am in awe of her, and I feel a strange connection to her, despite—or maybe strengthened by—her absence from my life.

Myths, legends, and folk stories may or may not be true, and they might seem like exaggerated fables based vaguely on fact and reliant on hazy memory. But they also help us aim for the impossible, pursue things beyond the limits of our realities, and grow past our own expectations. I was flattered to embarrassment when my mom said I reminded her of her beloved sister. Now that I think about it, perhaps my love of art and having had the opportunity to study in Paris were not mere coincidences. Perhaps I am subconsciously carrying out the dream my aunt had left unfinished. More so now than ever as I look forward to life after college, I like to think of my aunt as living in my head, painting and sipping Coke. I think not about “What would Jesus do?” but “what would 신화이모 have done with the opportunities I'm grateful to have?” I am so proud to be my aunt's niece, and I'd like to thank her for providing me with her memory to inspire and guide my aspirations, even when I don't realize it.