



STUDIO OCHENTA ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT

CULTUREVERSE – EPISODE 8: THE DANGSAN TREE

[0:06]

NARRATOR: This is Cultureverse. A place where myths and legends come alive in the modern world.

NARRATOR: I'm your host, Yara Shahidi, and today we bring you a story about an extraordinary tree. Episode 8: The Dang-San Tree.

(Music)

NARRATOR: Our story begins one rainy morning in Ellicott City, Maryland. Kevin finds his HALMEONI, which means grandmother in Korean, apparently listening to the TV. But she's actually staring out the window, and the air feels heavy and sad.

KEVIN (quietly and cautiously): HALMEONI?

NARRATOR: She turns around slowly but says nothing. She looks thousands of miles away. Kevin notices she is holding a photo of his grandfather, who passed away one year ago... His dad Ji-Hoon (pr. ji-HOON) arrives home just before the rain intensifies.

[1:12]

JI HOON: (sensitively but matter of factly): Hey, kiddo. The anniversary of Grandpa's passing is soon. Will you help me prepare for the Jesa ceremony tomorrow?

KEVIN: Sure, dad...

NARRATOR: Jesa (pr. JE-sa) is a Korean traditional memorial service that is held the day before the anniversary of an ancestor's death. Foods, fruit, and makguli -or rice wine- are offered in their honor. As Kevin and his dad start preparing the dishes, Kevin looks over at HALMEONI. He wishes he could do something to make her feel better.

KEVIN: HALMEONI, how can I cheer you up?

HALMEONI (nostalgic): Oh, ah-ga (아가), you are so sweet. But what I really need is to find a Dangsan tree.

KEVIN: A what?

HALMEONI (nostalgic): A Dang-San Tree. We had one in our village back in Korea. It is a sacred tree that has a direct connection to the spirit world.

[2:13]

KEVIN: Wow!

HALMEONI (nostalgic): If I were back home, I would create an altar at the tree's base and leave some food and this photograph...

KEVIN: A sacred tree??? What's that...?

Narrator: But before his grandmother can reply, Kevin's dad gestures for him to come back to the kitchen and leave her be. As they put away the groceries, Kevin asks:

KEVIN: Appa (아빠), do you know anything about a Dangsan tree?

JI HOON: Why do you ask?

KEVIN: HALMEONI was talking about it. She wants to place harabeoji's photo at the bottom of a Dangsan Tree.

[2:53]

JI HOON: Well, the Dangsan is a sacred tree. It is often called the tree of life. It is a direct link between Heaven and Earth.

KEVIN: That's what she said! Can I... Can I find one here in Ellicott City?

JI HOON: Well... some people think there is one in the Patapsco State Park.

KEVIN(quickly): Where? Can you take me there?

JI HOON: It's a long journey, only for the most experienced outdoorsmen.

KEVIN: Journey? What is it 10 hours away?

JI HOON (Laughing): It's not very far away at all. It's maybe a 2-3 hour walk to reach it. But it's the spiritual journey that takes its toll on you.

KEVIN: What... What do you mean?

JI HOON: The Dangsan Tree is more than just a tree... some people believe it's a portal...

KEVIN: A portal?

JI HOON (dismissively): To the afterlife... but that's just an old story my mother used to tell me about trees like that...

[3:50]

NARRATOR: From the living room, HALMEONI snaps out of her dreamlike state and calls out:

HALMEONI: (yelling from afar): (GASPS, then says): It's not a story! It's true Kevin!

KEVIN: You mean we can go to the tree and be... connected... to grandpa?

HALMEONI: Yes!

JI HOON: Man, I shouldn't have brought it up now she's going to want to go...

HALMEONI: What do you mean "go"? You mean there's a tree like that in this place?

JI HOON: Well, kind of, a few years ago, a neighbor of ours told us this place was special because of a giant tree in the forest at the local state park.

KEVIN: That's gotta be it!

[4:33]

HALMEONI (sassy): So what do you say kiddo, you want to come with me to see harabeoji?

KEVIN (confidently): How do we get there?

JI HOON: Oh no... you wouldn't make it very far, mother. Just let it go, we can do the ceremony here. There's no reason to make a journey that far out. Your back is not what it was back when you and dad went on those long nature walks...

HALMEONI (annoyed, sassy): Oh! You're no fun!

NARRATOR: HALMEONI winks at Kevin. (SFX: Winking sound)

HALMEONI (mischievously SMILING): Fine... We'll do as planned...

Narrator: Later that night...

(Music transition- SFX knocking on the door.)

HALMEONI (whispering): Kevin... ARE YOU AWAKE??

[5:13]

KEVIN: Yeah... let's do this!

NARRATOR: HALMEONI (pr. HAL-mo-ni) brings a pack of essentials in a worn green backpack to Kevin's room. When grandpa was alive, the three of them would often go for long nature walks together.

HALMEONI (whispering, energetically): Okay. Meet me out front at exactly 4 am. I stole your dad's keys and I've got my old pack ready to go. We need to make it there before dawn if we're to make it back for the ceremony at the house.

KEVIN (LAUGHS): I can't believe we're doing this HALMEONI!

HALMEONI (nostalgic): If there's a real sacred tree in this place, it's worth the trip to see yeobo, my loved one.

KEVIN: YEAH!

(SFX Cricket sounds and Jeep sounds)

HALMEONI: You got your gear, you got your map... Are you ready??

[6:08]

KEVIN: You and Grandpa taught me well. Let's go!

NARRATOR: Kevin and HALMEONI (pr. HAL-mo-ni) start on the trail. Hints of the sunrise start to illuminate the sky, but just steps into the forest, it's as dark as night!

(SFX walking through the forest sounds and Kevin humming a favorite song of his grandpa's)

NARRATOR: Kevin's grandpa -or harabeoji (pr. hara-boji) in Korean- taught him how to fight off fear in the forest. Because fear is a hiker's worst enemy. But he can't help it...

KEVIN: It's soo dark...

HALMEONI (energetically): Remember what Harabeoji used to say: Imagine flicking a switch that casts a bright white light on the entire forest, as bright as the sun!

[7:00]

Narrator: Kevin turns up the power on his flashlight and catches the eyes of a deer!

(SFX DEER)

KEVIN: Hey little guy!!

HALMEONI (sweetly): See? Nothing to be afraid of.

KEVIN (SFX MAP manipulating + reading map): OK, so the map says walk a mile north and cross the swinging bridge and then...

NARRATOR: He looks at his watch. It's five fifteen, and it's still really dark.

HALMEONI: It should take us about thirty minutes to reach the bridge. It'll almost be six by then. We'll have light then for sure.

KEVIN: Halmeoni, if you could talk to grandpa again what would you tell him?

[7:39]

HALMEONI: I'd ask him if he's eating well. And I'd say to him the words I never got to say to him: 사랑해요 (saranghaeyo). It means I love you in Korean.

(Kevin continues singing. SFX walking through the forest)

KEVIN: You never said those words?

HALMEONI (happily nostalgic tone): We said it in other ways. It was always a bet of ours, when we were younger, about who would be the first to say it. When your dad was born I almost said it, but I wanted to win! Hahah

KEVIN: What about when Aunt Sangmi was born?

HALMEONI (happily): That was easy! I just said it to the baby instead, hehehe. Even after so many years, we just never did, and when he left this world, I thought it was too late... (PAUSE) This tree will be my chance to do it!

NARRATOR: Kevin smiles happily as they forge ahead through the forest and slowly the evening fog gives way to reveal...

(Water rushing)

KEVIN: The famous Patapsco Swinging Bridge! We made it! This says it's just a half-hour walk to the other side.

[8:59]

HALMEONI:(suddenly scared): Oh no... It's soo high up... I... I can't...

KEVIN: What's wrong HALMEONI?

HALMEONI (worried): 아이고 ! (Aigooooo...!) I thought it would be my back that stopped me on my way. But here I am, in front of a high bridge. I guess I will just have to tell him in my dreams...

KEVIN: Are you afraid of heights? Come on, we've come all this way... Here, you can hold my hand!

HALMEONI (sadly): My dear, I can't go further, no matter how hard I try I have never been able to support great heights like this. I would faint as soon as I looked down and then we wouldn't be able to get back home so easily.

KEVIN: But we're soo close!

HALMEONI: Let me see that map... Look, it's right after the bridge! You can go without me! Just promise you'll come right back. And if anything happens send up a flare and I'll call for help. Just walk across and you'll be alright.

[10:10]

KEVIN: Okay... Give me the photograph and the offerings we brought. I'll make a beautiful altar, just like you taught me. I promise!

Narrator: He takes a deep breath and steps onto the bridge.

Kevin: Here we go. Just imagine the huge lights, Kevin. Jeez, I can barely see in front of me...

(SFX RIVER BELOW WIND BLOWING)

NARRATOR: His flashlight beam is supposed to have a reach of 1400 feet, but it dissolves into the abyss in front of him. There is nowhere to run to except across the bridge.

KEVIN: Okay, I'll just walk very very fast...

(SFX FOOTSTEPS)

KEVIN: (tripping)Ow! oh no my flashlight (stumbling sounds, flashlight rolling away)

NARRATOR: At that very moment, the flashlight plummets into the water below and disappears.

[11:00]

KEVIN: NOOO!!!! How am I going to make it now? (Breathing in and out and trying to keep calm) Pull yourself together Kevin. This is for HALMEONI and Harabeoji.(Breathing in and out and trying to keep calm) If I run, I can make it in like fifteen minutes or less.

(SFX running across a wooden bridge)

KEVIN: AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!! (RUNNING, CHARGING HARD, THEN BREATHING HEAVILY FOR A WHILE)

(SFX: Time transition, zoom in-zoom out)

KEVIN: (SFX heavy breathing) Phew how long have I been walking?? (Breathing heavily) ten minutes, twenty? (increasingly enjoyed) How long is this bridge???? I've been walking for forever! Where is this tree???

NARRATOR: Suddenly, Kevin sees a spot of dancing light on the suspension cables of the bridge. It's so dark he can't even see in front of him but the light is now dancing in mid-air, beckoning him.

KEVIN: What... is that??? *(Pause)* *It's like a firefly! Halabeoji used to take me to watch fireflies in Korea... Hey! Will you lead me out of here?*

[12:13]

NARRATOR: The light bobs up and down and continues to quickly move forward, and Kevin chases it and is now out of breath.

(SFX running sounds)

KEVIN (OUT OF BREATH): We have been crossing this bridge for over an hour and a half now! Where are you taking me!

(SFX running sounds stop)

KEVIN (exasperated): I am not goin' any further, I'm tired, and I'm cold, and I'm...

NARRATOR: He collapses to the ground.

KEVIN (crying): I'm done! I'M DONE! I'm gonna send up the flare. I just want to go home!

NARRATOR: Suddenly, the light encircles him so fast, the air around him warms up.

KEVIN (gasping for breath): OK, OK, I'm gonna get up...

[13:10]

NARRATOR: The light moves back and forth before him, urging him to get up now!

KEVIN: Just lemme get a sip of-

(SFX Thunderous sounds of a large structure collapsing.)

NARRATOR: Kevin jumps up. Adrenaline has kicked in, and Kevin is running the fastest he has ever run.

KEVIN (Screaming): What is going on!!!! GET ME OUT OF HERE!!!!!! OH----OH NO---- (in awe): I can see it! I'm... I'm almost there!

NARRATOR: He reaches the end of the bridge and falls to his knees at the sight of...

KEVIN: The Dangsan Tree! I found it! I found it! It's huge!!

NARRATOR: The tree's branches stretch up higher than any other tree in the forest.

[14:00]

KEVIN: It's beautiful.

NARRATOR: Kevin bows for a moment, then takes out his Harabeoji's (pr. hara-boji's) photo and slowly unfolds it, setting it at the foot of the tree.

KEVIN: Here you are. Now, what did Haelmoni say about the altar?

NARRATOR: As Kevin prepares the offering, the little bright light envelopes the photograph and carries it up higher and higher.

KEVIN: Whoa!! What's going on? I wonder... Hey, firefly! If I climb the tree do you think I can go to the spirit world and see grandpa??

KEVIN: Well, I am already here...

Narrator: Kevin begins his climb, but drops the signal flare on the way up...

KEVIN: Oh no! I hope HALMEONI doesn't get worried!

NARRATOR: Once he's a few feet off the ground he reaches out to grab the light and then...

(A whoosh/glitch/time travel sound mixed with a traditional Korean instrument, like janggu drums and gayageum strings)

KEVIN: OH-MY-GOD WHERE AM I. AM I FLOATING? AM I... ON TOP OF THE TREE? It can't be. This is too high!

[15:24]

(Snacking sounds, smacking)

KEVIN: What's that sound?

Narrator: Floating in the bright light is an old man wearing a thick grey cardigan over his brown suit. He is snacking on songpyeon (pr. sawn-pee-an), half-moon-shaped rice cakes stuffed with sweetened sesame seeds and cooked on pine needles. The very same ones Kevin had brought for the altar.

HARABEOJI(while eating): The sunset from up here is utterly beautiful, isn't it?

KEVIN: Who said that? Wait... is that... Harabeoji!

HARABEOJI: (Swallows) Come say hello! Whoa, you're taller than me now!

KEVIN: Wow, you are... You're real! But aren't you...?

HARABEOJI: Gone? Yes, of course! It's such a blessing we can see each other again.

KEVIN: Is this the afterlife?

[16:20]

HARABEOJI: That is quite accurate, yes, Kevin. We are on top of the Dang-San Tree.

KEVIN: So it WAS the Sacred Tree?

HARABEOJI: Yes!

NARRATOR: Dazzling light and energy surround them as they float in a kind of luminous nature.

HARABEOJI(pleasantly): To what do I owe this visit?

KEVIN (quickly): Grandma! She wanted me to ask you if you're eating well and also to tell you something that she never got to say and she needed a Dangsan tree to tell you, but she couldn't cross the bridge and she was so sad that I left her on the other side of the bridge and came alone!

(HARABEOJI laughs warmly)

HARABEOJI: Now that was a mouthful!

[16:54]

KEVIN: I'm sorry, grandpa, I'm just so excited to see you. I've missed you.

HARABEOJI: I've missed you, too, Kevin. I'm proud of you, coming all the way out here for HALMEONI.

Narrator: Kevin looks at his grandfather's reassuring smile and instantly feels calm.

HARABEOJI: Sooo... what did she want to tell me?

KEVIN: I love you in Korean... Sa-ran... hee...

HARABEOJI:SARANGHAEYO! Oh, that stubborn woman. She didn't want to lose our bet even when I passed.

NARRATOR: Harabeoji (pr. hara-boji) quietly contemplates his reply. Kevin waits... but he has so many questions!

[17:46]

KEVIN: So this is really the tree to the spirit world?

HARABEOJI: Yes!

KEVIN: We are in the spirit world... Right now.

HARABEOJI: Yes. But don't worry, you're not dead.

KEVIN: Nobody is going to believe this...! Oh, I don't have my phone with me.

HARABEOJI: I don't think it would work here, Kevin.

KEVIN: Oh... right. What's it like? Do you ever sleep? Do you get hungry?

HARABEOJI: Great. No. Yes. But that's all I can say. You can't stay here long, Kevin. Let me tell you my message for grandma.

[18:30]

NARRATOR: Just then, the old man whispers something in Kevin's ear.

(A whoosh/glitchy sound and then night sounds from the forest again)

(Fades in Grandma's voice)

HALMEONI(whimpering): Please SACRED Tree, protect him!

JI HOON: Son, you are back!!!

NARRATOR: When Kevin opens his eyes again, he's at the base of the tree, looking up at the sky.

JI HOON: I'm so glad you're okay. When I woke up I knew something was wrong. I saw my car keys were gone and drove over here with Mr.Park. I found HALMEONI at the bridge. She said you'd gone on alone! And then the signal flare... I thought the worst!

HALMEONI:I saw the flare and ran across the bridge as fast as I could. I was so afraid! I'm so glad you're okay!

[19:15]

KEVIN: Appa! HALMEONI! I actually SAW grandpa!

HALMEONI: What?

KEVIN: I told him what you said and he told me to tell you something, HALMEONI. (A pause)

HALMEONI (her voice breaks): He's...

KEVIN: He told me he loves you too, but that technically he lost the bet a long time ago. He said, every time he asked if you were okay, he was saying it in his heart.

[19:40]

HALMEONI (teary eyed): Oh... I... I don't know what to say... How was he??

KEVIN: He looked alright. He was snacking on the Songpyeon honey cakes we made!

Narrator: HALMEONI (pr. HAL-mo-ni) looks at her son and grandson and smiles. Together they place the rest of the offerings on the altar. As the sun rises above the sacred tree, a dazzling light encircles its branches and illuminates the way home.

[20:28]

NARRATOR: This story represents the importance of Sacred Trees in indigenous Korean culture. These trees are usually located outside of villages in Korea, and they are the center for the community's rituals. According to Korean shamanism, the Sacred Tree keeps a connection between the mortal and the spiritual realms.

*NARRATOR: If you want to learn more about Korean tradition and folklore, check out *The Dangsang Tree: Photo Journal of a Vanishing Korean Culture*, by Oh Sang-Jo. And *Korean Folktales: Imps, Ghosts, and Fairies*, by Im Bang and Yi Ryuk. Special thanks to our cultural consultants, David Yi, Dr. Kiona and Ji-Youn Kim (pr. Ji-YUHN Kim), for bringing their Korean experiences to this story.*

NARRATOR: This podcast was produced by Studio Ochenta for TRAX on PRX. Kevin was voiced by Jonathan Kim. Kevin's Dad was voiced by G-Su Paek. HALMEONI (pr. HAL-mo-ni) was voiced by Patty Sang, and Haraboji (pr. HARA-boji) was voiced by June Yoon (pr. June

e-OON).

[21:38]

NARRATOR: The Creative Director and Executive Producer for this series is Lory Martínez, founder of Studio Ochenta. Dr. Kiona is our consulting producer for all things culture. Our Senior Fiction Producer is Maru Lombardo. All original opening songs for this series were composed by Gabriel Dalmasso. Sound design by Maru Lombardo and Luis Raúl López Levi. The Executive Producer for TRAX is Michelle Smawley and our scripts were edited by Nathan Yungerberg.

NARRATOR: Follow us on TikTok & IG @cultureversepod. Transcripts are available at ochentastudio.com/cultureverse.

NARRATOR: And I'm Yara Shahidi, your host. Thanks for listening!

END OF EPISODE