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On Appreciation

One unfortunate truth of life is that the more we give to someone, the more it goes unappreciated. I think this human flaw is difficult to overcome. People are by nature pattern driven animals; we live within daily routines and primarily interact with the same people daily. These patterns are comforting; they bring security in being able to predict how any given day will go, so we actively seek them. However, when we seek patterns, repetition, and predictability too often our lives start to stagnate, and all of these pieces that make up our everyday patterns become a given.

When I wake up in the morning, it’s certain that I will be able to drink a coffee and eat breakfast. I’m never worried that my school won’t be safe to go to. During the day, it’s a given that I will have classes from a great teacher and plenty of food for lunch. When I get home, I know I’ll get a warm home cooked meal and be able to spend time with my family. I can describe with near certainty how any day of my week will go, which is comforting; however, it also means that the access to food, safety, education, and a loving family that I’m lucky enough to have has become my normal. This can lead me to not appreciate the people who provide those things as much as I should. This kind of pattern and routine is somewhat exaggerated for me because I’m a student, but it exists outside that world as well.

In “Please Look After Mom,” Kyung-sook Shin teaches us to recognize this flaw in human nature and learn to appreciate the people in our lives before it’s too late. Shin gives us the perspective of So-Nyo’s children and husband after she goes missing in a train station in Seoul due to cognitive health issues. This book doesn’t really have a traditional plot. In fact, exactly what happened to So-Nyo after she went missing is never revealed. The children do search for her, but mostly in their own minds.

Shin takes us into the memories of So-Nyo’s family. Having just lost her, the kids and husband reflect on all the times they ignored her, fought with her, didn’t say thanks, and refused to reciprocate the care she gave them. They all feel deeply guilty and blame themselves for not truly recognizing So-Nyo’s health problems and not doing anything to help her. They all recall her suffering from migraines, but that had just always been the case, part of their routine, so they never took it seriously. Chi-hon similarly always read her older brother’s letters from college to her mom but never realized this was because she was illiterate. The neglect of So-Nyo from the family is awful, but not unique.

In Shin’s effort to make us realize how we often similarly neglect our own loved ones, she wrote the entire book in the second person. Since the book is also a series of memories and reflections, we get an interesting juxtaposition of personal stories and impersonal writing, which changes how the reader understands the text. Instead of reading someone's inner thoughts, it feels like we are the characters and are being spoken to and condemned by some outside force. It feels as if we are being accused of everything the characters have done. Shin takes the contempt we feel for the characters’ actions, flips it back on us, and forces us to consider ourselves instead of just judging the character.

The lesson of “Please Look After Mom” seems extra relevant right now for my senior class and me. We are about to leave the familiar, go away from our comfortable routines and patterns that have been cemented for years. With this change will come an appreciation for the things and people we took for granted that existed within those patterns. I know I will miss having home cooked family meals most nights, so I will make sure my parents understand how much I appreciate them for that. I know I will miss hundreds more things that I can’t even begin to imagine until I step outside my comfortable patterns, so all I can do is let people know I appreciate what they do, and try whenever I can to reciprocate the care I’ve received.