

## Sea Girl

By Anne Hilty

Heayoung loved nothing better than to play in the sea; after all, she was born there.

The daughter of a *haenyeo*, one of many free-diving women in their coastal village of Gimnyeong, Heayoung had spent nearly every day of her 10 years at the shore, playing with the other village children and pretending to catch sea creatures like their mamas and aunties.

Topshells, *sora*, were easy. Fish, however, were slippery things.

Heayoung's mama had given birth to her whilst on the diving boat far from shore. Diving until childbirth was normal in their village, with its black stone thatched-roof cottages clustered on narrow winding paths, and Heayoung felt more at home in the sea than on land.

Her birth was celebrated because Samsin, goddess of childbirth, had given a girl – she too would become a diver, earning good money for her family and village. She felt quite ordinary, though – short black hair, dark eyes, ready smile, sometimes shy – nothing special.

Her mama was a senior diver, a *sang-gun*. Most of the women in her *jamsu-hoi* collective were mid-level, *jung-gun*. But not Heayoung's mama. She could dive up to 20 meters and stay down for 2 minutes on one breath, emitting that eerie, dolphin-like *sumbisori* whistle as she surfaced.

Heayoung never knew her papa, not really. A fisher like most village men, he didn't return from the sea one stormy day when she was three. He'd often taken care of her and her older brother while Mama was working, Yunju said, but she couldn't remember him.

Many men from their village were missing, in fact. Some were lost at sea like Papa; others died in the war or were executed by military or police in the killing times. Still others had gone away when foreign soldiers ruled Jeju. Heayoung tried not to think about it. Born just after all that, in 1954, she was told by Mama that those events were best left forgotten. But there surely were a lot of women in Gimnyeong.

Sometimes, Mama would go away for awhile, too. She'd travel far across the sea to dive in places called "China" or "Korea" or "Japan" – exotic and mysterious to Heayoung and her friends, who imagined strange people, foods, manners. It would be months before Mama returned, and now Yunju took care of her. He was just 13 though, even if he was big and loud and ordered her about like a king, so some of their *samchun*, village aunties and uncles, would bring them food.

One of Heayoung's favorite dishes was *gingjuk*, porridge made with crabs so tiny that everyone called it "mother's love" because of the care it took to clean them. When a *samchun* gave her this dish, she felt the love of her mama by extension. She also loved *momguk*, the pork and gulfweed soup that she got only once in awhile – when someone in the village butchered their black pig. *Okdom*, the red tilefish with the funny face, was plentiful in Jeju waters and a frequent addition to her meals; dried in the sun to be cooked later, it would keep all winter. In the hot summers she liked nothing better than *mulhoe*, the iced, spicy, raw seafood soup that cooled her. Seaweeds and raw fish often appeared at a diver's table, and 5-grain *japgokbap* was included in every meal.

The *japgokbap* reminded her of her absent mama, too. Every morning when she wasn't away, Mama would set a fresh bowl of water in the kitchen window as a prayer to Jowang, the hearth goddess. And as she made the morning *japgokbap*, Mama would remind Heayoung and Yunju that the 5 grains were a gift from the earth goddess Jacheongbi.

Mama was powerful like their beloved goddesses, Heayoung thought. She and all the divers, especially the top-tiered *sang-gun*. With their large, muscular bodies, and big personalities to match, the *haenyeo* didn't take nonsense from anyone. They were strong, and brave, and knew so much – about the sea, about life – and never ever quit, and Heayoung hoped she would be just like Mama.

To be sure, the sea exacted a price from the divers. *Jamsu-byeong*, diving sickness, gave them chronic headaches, earaches, stomach and low back problems. But they bore it, and continued diving day after day – Mama and others telling her that they felt best when in this watery underworld that was their true home.

When not diving, the women worked in their small fields surrounded by black stone fences, and sometimes Heayoung would be allowed to come along. Ten, twelve women would soon finish the task in the field of one, moving onto another's the following day. They grew fields of garlic, its pungent scent in the air wrinkling Heayoung's nose, and once harvested, they replaced it with large green and white radishes called *mu*. Heayoung loved eating the *bingtteok* that Mama made, long skinny slices of cooked *mu* wrapped in a paper-thin buckwheat crepe.

In a patch next to the house, Mama grew other things: gnarly red sweet potatoes, small green-skinned pumpkins, spinach, mushrooms, bean sprouts. Every fifth day, Heayoung and Mama would go together to the open-air market to sell their harvest. And each springtime, Mama and the other women went into the hills to pick *gosari*, the bracken fern dried and then cooked throughout the year.

Some mornings, Mama would wake Heayoung at dawn to go to the *haesin-dang*. An open-air coastal shrine to the sea gods, enclosed by a black stone fence, such places dotted the island's coastline. There they would pray to the dragon king Yowang and his wife Yowang Halmang for safety and bounty, placing fruit and other offerings on the stone altar. Though she didn't like getting up early, Heayoung found the *haesin-dang* magical and was happy to be included.

At the end of each winter when the second lunar month began, Yeongdeung, goddess of wind and sea, visited Jeju. For 2 weeks, all work ceased for ceremonies and festivities in her honour. Heayoung loved this time each year, its singing and dancing, performances and special foods, and finally, the little straw boats with their gifts that were sent out to sea. The village *simbang*, an elderly shaman as her mother and many grandmothers before her, would spin about in brightly colored robes chanting loudly to the spirits, and Heayoung was entranced.

Just 5 or 6 weeks later, Heayoung's other favorite event would arrive: the *jamsu-gut*. This all-day ceremony and celebration, for divers only, honoured Yowang and Yowang Halmang. Children didn't normally attend but Mama had brought Heayoung for the past 2 years, giving her a glimpse into the sisterhood to which she would someday belong.

One day, Mama informed Heayoung it was time: she must begin learning the divers' work. Already a strong swimmer, Mama showed her how to take deep breaths before she dove and gave her a pair of *joksaenun* to cover her eyes, a small net floating from a hollowed gourd, and a little hand-held hoe – her first *taewak* and *bitchang*. Mama told Heayoung to practice daily in the shallow areas, the *halmang badang* or “grandma sea” reserved for old divers and novices, and above all, to be careful.

There were dangers in the sea, Mama cautioned. Stingrays, jellyfish, poisonous snakes. A cramp from the cold, or from holding her breath too long. Getting cut, or caught. Or being too greedy or distracted – underestimating her need for air and the distance to the surface.

And that was that. Heayoung joined some other girls her age, her *chingu*, each day to develop her skills, as they competed to see who could collect more. *Sora*, or the little *bosal* clams, she could pick from the seabed and drop in her *taewak*; *jeonbok*, those delicious – prized, lucrative – abalone, must be pried from rocks using the *bitchang*. There was no other instruction. She was to learn by doing and, when old

enough to join the divers, by observation and listening to their conversations as they warmed themselves in the *bulteok*, their fire pit meeting place at the water's edge.

Day after day, Heayoung practiced, as the days in her tiny seaside village plodded along in their sameness, the reassuring rhythms marked only by the annual ceremonies and occasional event.

The fateful day blew in on the constant Jeju wind much like any other. Heayoung prayed with her mama for safety and bounty at the *haesin-dang*, as they often did. Mama went out into the deeper waters while Heayoung dove in the shallow *halmang badang* with her *chingu*. At lunchtime Heayoung walked home – Mama could stay in the sea far longer than she – and after eating her lunch of fermented *mu*, cold *japgokbap* leftover from breakfast, and a bit of *okdom*, she lay down for a nap in the summer heat. She slept longer than intended and was awakened when Yunju noisily entered, asking where Mama was and what was for dinner.

It wasn't unusual for Mama to be out all day, between diving and fieldwork; but except when working abroad, she was always home in time to prepare their evening meal. Heayoung walked to the neighboring cottage to ask the diver there for any news. "*Samchun!*" she called out, but her auntie was also absent. Beginning to worry, Heayoung broke into a run toward the sea. Glancing up at Mount Halla, the island's central volcano, as she ran, she prayed to the creator goddess embodied there: Mother Seolmundae, please let everything be all right.

She heard the *haenyeo* before she saw them: an earthy sound between a moan and a wail, clearly indicating despair. As she approached the shore, she saw a group of divers huddled together, still in their wet clothes, which struck her as peculiar. One noticed and came rushing toward Heayoung, grabbing her fiercely in an uncharacteristic embrace without a pause in her keening. "*Samchun?*" Heayoung whispered questioningly, deeply afraid of the woman's reply.

Her mama, a senior and most skilled diver for so many years ... her mama, who regularly prayed to Yowang and Yowang Halmang to keep her safe in the sea ... her mama, who warned Heayoung to be careful as she practiced her diving and who never took risks herself ... her mama, both mama and papa to her children ... her mama ... had drowned.

No one would ever know for certain why it happened. A 3-day funeral ritual was performed by the village *simbang*, with all members of the *jamsu-hoi* in attendance. Heayoung cried and cried against the injustice until, her spirit exhausted, she retreated into their home for many days, the other *haenyeo* bringing food in turn for her and Yunju. She was consoled by nothing.

One crisp autumn morning, Heayoung found herself awake at dawn, compelled to the *haesin-dang* for the first time since that ruinous day.

As she approached the shrine, she suddenly felt her stone heart erupt, spewing anger. She railed against Yowang and Yowang Halmang: How could you take my mama, who was so faithful to you? How could you require yet another sacrifice after my papa? How could you leave Yunju and me so dreadfully alone? Tears of fury poured from her eyes.

Her rage finally spent, she collapsed before the black stone altar and remained prostrate for some time. The wind swirled around her as ever, accompanied by songs of the sea. At last she slowly rose, bowed low in the direction of the altar, and left the *haesin-dang* to sit at water's edge, unmoving.

She thought of her mama, of her village *samchun*, of her *chingu*, of the watery world beneath the sea, of nothingness. She let the Jeju wind blow through her, cleansing her, drying her tears.

The next morning, she rejoined her sisterhood at the shore. Like her beloved mama and all her *haenyeo* sisters, she knew what she must do. It was her turn to provide for her family. No more a sea girl ... she was now a woman of the sea.

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**Footnote:** This work of fiction is based on the centuries-old free-diving tradition of Jeju Island, South Korea, today in danger of extinction and due to receive UNESCO inscription as Intangible Cultural Heritage. The author lived on the island 2010-2015, and is government-appointed as Honorary Ambassador for Jeju Island.