Please Look After Mom Essay Contest

Collection of Selected Essays
Korean Cultural Service NY, Korea Literature Translation Institute, and Knopf Publisher held the Please Look After Mom Essay Contest from April 5 to August 5, 2011. This collection is selected from the submitted essays for the contest.

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Foreword

Woo Sung Lee
Director of Korean Cultural Service NY

Of the many ways in which Americans approach Korean culture, reading translated works of celebrated Korean authors is becoming more available and sought after with the English translation of Kyung-sook Shin’s *Please Look After Mom* (Knopf, 2011). Granted that the market for Korean literature in America has been previously low, the English debut of *Please Look After Mom* is trailblazing a new path for a literary *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) in which other eminent works of Korean literature are projected to being introduced overseas. With the novel already a best seller in South Korea with over a million in record breaking sales and its worldwide distribution to nearly 30 countries in Europe and Asia outside of the United States, *Please Look After Mom* is the literary talk of the town.
To celebrate and further advance this interest in Korean literary works, the Korean Cultural Service NY (KCSNY), Korean Literature Translation Institute, and Knopf Publishers, from April 5th to August 5th 2011, accepted essays in which our applicants have clearly taken an interest in expressing their own creative views on what is means to look after mom. Divided into two categories, applicants in both high school and adult divisions have written about how the novel is a poignant portrayal of what motherhood and being a part of a family as a whole entails. Several participants have also noted that while the author may have introduced a touching depiction of a Korean family’s struggle with loss, longing, sacrifice, and regret, her overarching theme of family transcends to reach universal notions of love and forgiveness.

Our distinguished judges for the essay contest, moreover, have carefully selected our winners and have written their thoughts on the central themes they came across while reading the essays. Professor Emerita of Humanities from Polytechnic Institute of NYU, Wolhee Choe and The Takeaway WNYC New York Public Radio’s Ms. Mythili Rao have each respectively given their perspectives on the applicants’ essays in this collection describing how they arrived at their decisions.

Therefore, it is a great honor for the KCSNY to have these selected essays celebrate and respond to the translated novel in which a uniquely moving story of one Korean family is transcending the boundaries of its Korean local to reaching international notions of family relations and motherhood. We hope that interest in Korean literature further advances beyond this essay contest and sincerely thank both our judges and all essay participants in expanding a literary Hallyu.
Adult Division

Judge Mythili Rao’s Commentary

Winning Essays

Kahyun Park (First Place)
Jamie So (Second Place)
Elena Chang (Third Place)
Annie Lim (Honorable Mention)
Joseph Song (Honorable Mention)
Myung Ji Chae (Honorable Mention)
Juleigh Chin (Honorable Mention)
Chloe Hwang (Honorable Mention)

Editor’s Note
These essays were observed in their original submissions to KCSNY. KCSNY has only made punctuation revisions for typos or omitted articles.
The Winners of the Essay Contest’s Adult Division
by Mythili Rao

“Mom was an entire world to herself,” Kyung-sook Shin writes near the end of Please Look After Mom. It's a sentiment most of the contestants in the adult division of this contest seem to share: A few entries closely consider the novel’s historical and cultural context, literary techniques, and religious imagery, but most focus on motherhood, and specifically, on each writer’s relationship with his or her mother. Reading these essays, I was stirred by the resonance the book had for so many readers.

Selecting winners from a pool of so many intelligent, heart-felt entries was difficult. While it was evident that all of the essayists connected strongly with Please Look After Mom, this division’s winning essays made an especially clear and compelling case for the book’s impact, presenting specific observations and personal insights in prose that was not only polished and well-structured, but also poignant. For many adult readers of Please Look After Mom, the novel provoked a sense of responsibility. The best essays articulated this feeling through powerful personal narratives, drawing sharp parallels between events of the novel and their own experiences.

Ms. Mythili Rao is a freelance book critic for various literary publications such as The New York Times. She is also a news writer and producer at The Takeaway, a live, nationally syndicated morning news show produced by WNYC Radio and Public Radio International in collaboration with The New York Times, BBC World Service, and WGBH Boston.
Kahyun Park’s thoughtful 1st place-winning essay quietly compares the writer’s personal “loss” of her mother (when she leaves for boarding school) to the loss of the adult children of Please Look After Mom. The 2nd place-winning essay by Jamie So explores similar themes. Jamie writes in 2nd-person, artfully echoing the style of the novel as she describes her mother’s unconditional support for her. In her 3rd-place-winning essay, Elena Chang notes that she is writing both “as a response to Please Look After Mom but also as a love letter to my mother.” Elena explains that the novel has brought her closer to understanding the “true pulse” within her family. Likewise, honorable mentions Annie Lim, Joseph Song, Myungji Chae, Juleigh Chin and Chloe (Yeabin) Hwang reflect on the definition of “a mother,” the value of “tough love,” the role of their own mothers, and the universality of Please Look After Mom’s themes.

Overwhelmingly, the essays express gratitude. The writers’ mothers support and protect them; though they work long hours and take on extra jobs, they still find time help their children face new schools, tough exams, loneliness, and disappointment. They envision a better future for their children, and unwaveringly help them achieve it. They set high standards. “No matter how creative or flourishingly I write, what comes out of my pen will never be enough to do my mom any justice,” contestant Frances Jin laments. Still, Please Look After Mom inspired many of the contestants to try to do just that — and the results are deeply moving.
The title *Please Look after Mom* seemed to be a contradiction to me. I was curious why Kyung-sook Shin had titled the book, *Please Look after Mom*. To me, this contrasted the message of the book in which the different characters had constantly regretted “not” looking after their mom and now vowed to better take care of their mom if they were given a second chance upon finding her. To me, the title seemed difficult to comprehend; it seemed to me as though the daughter, the husband, and the other characters that took part in recounting their memories of the mother were again bouncing back the responsibilities of looking after their mother to each other, or to someone else.

In a way, I have lost my own mom in the last five years.

At the young age of fifteen, I started 10th grade at a boarding school in Korea. We had discussed the schooling options, I and my parents, but the final decision was entirely mine. I chose to attend a foreign language high school that would teach a U.S. based high school curriculum in English, at a location two hours from central Seoul, home. Technically, students were allowed to go home for the weekend, yet due to the distance, it wasn’t so easy to get home every weekend for a short two day visit. I remember my first month away from home was very difficult. Although I had moved from country to country and had transferred from school to school before, this time was different. I was in this all alone. The first couple of months, I would pack my suitcase with clothes and a few books before bed on Thursday nights, count the hours until the end of Friday classes, then run down the hill to the parking lot where mom and dad would be waiting for me. Every weekend started off with excitement and ended the same way with me crying through
every Sunday evening dinner, after which my parents would drive me back
to school. The long distance from home and the competitive academic spirit
of the private school was difficult to bear with for me. I wished the weekends
would last longer and that I wouldn’t have to leave home. I seriously consid-
ered transferring schools.

After three months, occupied with studying for midterm exams and en-
gaging in extra-curricular activities, I stopped coming home.

I spent three years of high school in Korea away from home. I have now
spent two years of college in the U.S. away from home. I no longer become
homesick to the extent that I would have to cry myself to sleep each night
and wake up with puffy eyes. I no longer feel a hot tingle in the tip of my
nose when I hear my parents’ voices from the other side of the telephone. I
still have emotional pangs of wistfulness where I miss being my parents’ first
child, their “little girl,” but I also have matured enough to be able to shake the
uneasy feelings off and go back to my daily life.

Now when I come home, I don’t wish for the weekend to never end. I know
that the weekend will end and that I would have to go back to bed in my single
dorm room instead of sleeping in my bed in my bedroom under the same roof
as my family. But what I do feel is the distance that has developed between me
and my mom. It is a kind of distance that is intangible and difficult to explain,
but something that can definitely be felt and thus existing. We no longer live
with each other, thus impossible to be completely aware of what is happening
in each other’s lives. Words over the telephone and the occasional Skype video
chats only go so much as to giving each other updates on life. There are many
things that are now different, the different lifestyles we now lead, and my stay-
ing away from home and family manifests itself bluntly where least expected
when I do not know where the spare towels are in my house.

Venturing out into the real world from the warm protection of mom and
dad’s arms is part of everyone’s growing up experiences. I was scared when I
first left home at fifteen. Everything that my mom had done for me – wak-
ing me up in the morning, giving me food for breakfast, making sure I had
everything for school, being at home when I came home after school, tucking
me into bed, and even the petty scolding to turn off the TV or go study that
I hated so much – I missed, and I had only realized the gravity of my mom’s
presence in my life when I was countless miles away.
Up until I read *Please Look after Mom*, I had only noticed the impact of the separation on me. I was aware of my worries, my homesickness, and my tears. My missing home had stemmed from my needing my mom by my side and my cries had been those of “please look after me.” Although the book describes the impact of the mother’s missing incident on the family members written in first-hand, the book somehow made me think about the other side of “our” story, the impact of the separation on my mom. For the first time, I imagined what it would have been like for her with me suddenly out of her daily life.

The reading experience may be different for each reader. But for me, this book changed everything around. It was no longer “please look after me,” but please look after mom.

We do not find out even at the end of the book whether the mom is ever found. But for me, the book did its part as it is. As author Kyung-sook Shin said when she spoke at Princeton University this past May, her motif of this book was to give the readers a chance to devote the time to thinking about their mothers. If the reader gave at least one thought of his or her mother after reading the book, she would be happy, she said. In this sense, I feel as though I have done the book justice. The book gave me a chance to think of myself, but most importantly, to think of her, my mom. As much as I felt that I was volatile and needed to be taken care of, so did my mom feel her uncertainties with the changes that were happening to her. As much as leaving home was difficult for me, it was also a difficult period for her to see me leave. As much as I had come to miss being her “little girl,” it was difficult for her to accept seeing a “big” girl where her “little girl” used to be.

My mom had asked me what had gotten into me. She said that it seemed as though I was acting out of my way to look out for her and devote spending quality time with her. I knew I should have told her I had read the book. Instead, I told her that I missed her. And that I loved her.
Jamie So
Second Place Award

She always says it’s for your own good. Like the first time you sat down on that cold, hard piano bench, barely tall enough to reach those white and black keys. You were frustrated when the mix of music notes and rhythm on the page made your head hurt and your fingers got tangled up with each other while playing. Still, she sat you down and made you practice over and over, and she praised you when the music came naturally. The same happened when you learned violin and cello. When she suggested that you enter competitions and placement evaluations, still you refused even though she said it was for your own good. When she handed you the meticulously hand written stack of note cards with the times tables written on it, you groaned and complained that most of the other 2nd graders still had problems adding and subtracting. Still she made you sit in your room and memorize them, and when you complained she told you it would help you later on in your math. You don’t realize it until you complete the mad-minute multiplication drills with ease and you see the gold star on your math test.

When she tells you that she and your father have found a new house and a new town to live in, she tells you about how good the school district is and how many opportunities you’ll have there. She can see your hesitation, and your mind is a blur of all the things you have to leave behind. You’ve never lived anywhere else and everything that is familiar to you is in the very town where you grew up. She tells you that it is ultimately your choice and that you can decide whether or not the family moves since you will be the most affected. But when you see your mom’s face, you can see the joy and hope that she feels in moving. You remember that every year for Christmas and her birthday she’s always told your brother and you that all she wanted was a new house. The
house you are living in has its memories, but you know your mother’s dream was to live in a big new house. Despite your uneasiness, you say yes, and she tells you that the change will be a door to more opportunities.

When you choose your classes for your freshmen year at your new high school, your mom encourages you to take the highest levels you can for all your classes, which mostly means the letters “AP” before each course. Except physics. Your counselor looks quizzically at your mother, puzzled as to why she would encourage you to take all these difficult classes except for physics. She turns to you and says “I don’t want you to overwork yourself, do you think you can handle these classes? You don’t have to take AP Physics”. You realize that she might be right, so you agree that you’ll just take honors. As the year goes on and you struggle with the rest of your classes, you’re thankful that you’re not preparing for the AP test, and you breathe a sigh of relief on your last report card of the year when you see you barely passed with an A–. After four years in your new town, you graduate with a high school full of friends and thanks to your education and the opportunities you received from your school, you look forward to years of countless possibilities. She beams proudly and you realize, maybe your mom achieved more than one dream.

When you applied for college, your mom suggested that you visit all the different schools around the country. Even though some were far from home, she said that leaving the state and being more independent would be good for you. When you got accepted into two schools that were across the country, despite the fact that they were expensive state schools, she encouraged you to consider enrolling. But when you got rejected from your dream school, she said that this was a sign that it wasn’t the school for you. When you enrolled into your safety state school and cried because you knew you had worked so much harder to get into your dream schools, she hugged you and told you that staying close to home and saving on tuition money would be for your own good. After college starts, you get the comforts of seeing your parents whenever you want, sleeping in your own bed, and washing your clothes for free at home. While watching your roommate eat the greasy takeout from the campus dining hall, you heat up your mother’s delicious home cooking in your dorm room and are thankful that she’s only a call away.

Even when your skin turns blotchy and breaks out into volcanic landmine pimples from the stress of classes, your mother has a solution and thrusts a
cup of foamy green liquid into your hands. She tells you to drink, and when you take a sip your face distorts as the full force of something called bitter melon strikes your taste buds. She tells you that her green concoction is sure to cure your face, and you cringe as she tells you she’ll be making it for you every morning until your face clears. Although you complain and whine, she says that there is no doubt that she will find a method to clear your skin. “It’s for your own good” you hear as you swallow the contents of the cup. Each morning the whir of the juicing machine tells you that the unpleasant taste of celery and peppers awaits you downstairs, but as you brush your teeth and look in the mirror, the redness and bumps that used to greet you every morning is now subsiding.

When you come back from your month long trip overseas, you can see that she’s missed you. This big house has been empty except for her when your father goes to work. You see her reach up to the cupboard to retrieve a teapot to brew another herbal tea remedy for you, but suddenly she winces in pain and clutches her arm. She tells you that she’s strained her arm again and it seems her body isn’t what it used to be these past few months. You walk over and grab the teapot from the shelf and turn to look into your mother’s eyes, those that have always been filled with joy, pride, and determination for you. You tell her to go take a seat and relax; you’ll take care of preparing the tea. She protests and you simply say, “It’s for your own good, Mom”.
Elena Chang
Third Place Award

“Either a mother and daughter know each other very well, or they are strangers.”

Growing up in the fast-paced, bustling city that is New York City often allows one to miss moments. My day to day conversations with my mother often consisted of the usual, “엄마, 별일 없다?”, followed almost always by, “나나 엄서히 해…” I’d be running to an audition or in the middle of shooting; our conversations were always en-route. In this age of technology, even with texting, our exchanges were strangely limited to four or five words at a time. Also, as a Korean-American in the film and theater world, and not having married traditionally like so many others, I felt more and more estranged from my mother, especially because I grew up around expectations. I began to feel almost like a stranger to my own mother because I felt as if I had disappointed her and, “…it was difficult to talk to her about my life, which had nothing to do with hers” (Shin, 33). Even as an aspiring artist, I often felt a disconnect when it came to articulating the bond between my mother and me. We were joined by blood and yet, I could never quite communicate just how truly close I felt to her in English or Korean.

For the longest time, I simply accepted and hardly questioned or explored, “That Mom is strong. That Mom isn’t fazed by anything. That Mom is the person you want to call whenever you despair about something in this city” (Shin, 18). Upon reading this book, I revisited our history. I was born in America, but the reason I am relatively fluent in Korean is because of my mother, and her devotion to instill in me my Korean roots. She was always so busy working since I was a child, but every night when she’d come home, she’d still manage the energy (even with a smile) to help me with my stud-
ies and of course with Korean and English pronunciations. I learned how to articulate so many things because of my mother, but I never could communicate to her the extent of how much I loved her and appreciated her. I was reminded of these moments through the experiences of Chihon, her younger sister, Hyong-Chul, and eventually the Father when I thought back to how the economic crisis took a toll on my family.

When crisis hit home and my father’s illness set in, I started to see the extent of my mother’s self-sacrifice. I noticed this when I started seeing her less and less, and soon found that she was working additional hours across town. Whenever I would visit home, if she were there, she was often sprawled in bed getting rest that she was so lacking... and yet, she would always manage to get up to greet me and ask if I’d have had anything to eat. It’s very interesting to see such correlation between food, hunger, and motherhood, even within Ms. Shin’s work. Mothers seem to always have a need to feed, whereas children are always hungry. Mothers will continue to feed, even if it means that she will starve.

Korean parents especially are known for enormous amounts of pride. One would think that the pride would wash away upon economic crisis, but the pride is still there. When my mother continued to sacrifice during a difficult time, I could still see a glimmer of pride in her eye.

Oftentimes, I wondered even, “Was Mom unable to say that she was in pain, pushed aside by Father’s illnesses?” (Shin, 222). Regardless, like Hyong-chol, being the oldest daughter, I still have “...ambition to become a success and give Mom a better life” (Shin, 13). I know in my heart that no matter what I do, because I am my mother’s daughter, she has instilled in me a certain level of leadership and determination. I am not as extraordinary like her by any means, but I am her daughter so I hope that I can be the one to one day answer, “I’m fine, and I’ll look after you.”

“...When you thought of her it was as though something got back on track, and you felt re-energized” (Shin, 235). Life is not always easy, and life here in the States exemplifies progress, but still difficulty here and there. I learned this the hard way through various trials and tribulations since college, having lost friends and relatives along the way. Sometimes when things get tiring or I feel hopeless, I take a moment to breathe and think of my mother. I think of why it seems she has been rushing all the life. I think of her having
only moments of stillness in her car driving to work, and I think of her also not shedding a tear in front of her children. I think of her not shedding a tear right away upon her sister’s passing. I remember chastising her, and demanding to know why she would not cry, why she seems to put all her feelings aside for everyone else around her. Most of all, I had always been upset over why I was about the last person to find out about sadness and dismay or overall chaos around the house. I would only hear bad news through 3rd parties, especially when I was away at school. I only discovered that my aunt was dying way beyond her phase of sickness. My mother desperately wanted to protect me, even if it meant that she were to hold all pain.

Kyung-Sook Shin’s work truly resonated in me and I felt touched to finally begin to live through such sentiment from afar. Shin put so beautifully in words the impact of such a Korean matriarch within a family. I hope that more daughters will be able to experience this book and remind themselves to avoid the “...should have tried on that dress” (Shin, 9) moment that Shin so poetically put into writing.

Please Look After Mom, gave me insight and helped bring me closer to my own understanding of Sung Ae Chang, my mother, but more importantly the true pulse within my family. I am writing this essay as a response to Please Look After Mom, but also as a love letter to my mother for all her hard work and dedication to me and my family. I can see what the years have done to her, and sometimes I can catch a tear or two, but I would just like to share the line from Ms. Shin’s book: “Don’t be sad for me. I was happy so many days of my life because I had you.”
Annie Lim
Honorable Mention Award

How would the term “mother” be defined?

It is so much more than the literal, biological definition of “someone who gave birth to you.” That could merely be called the female vessel or X-chromosome donator, but both are cold and emotionless terms. A mother is much more than that. A mother, believe it or not, is far more complicated than science. So who exactly is she? How could anyone truly portray the value of a mother while revealing her complexities as a human being both in and out of relation with this role?

Although such a task would be difficult, Kyung-Sook Shin delivered a seemingly effortless novel entwining four different voices to fully show all facets of a mother who goes missing one day at Seoul Station. She points out that a mother can also be a wife, a sister, a daughter, and a grandmother with many hidden feelings and cautiously kept secrets. She explores this fascinating character of Park So-nyo who first takes on a surprising role as a missing person and then the inevitable role as a dearly beloved.

The whole time reading the book, it is impossible not to think about your own mother. At the end of the book, it is impossible to stifle the urge to cry, not merely from how poignant it is, but from how relatable it is. You cry mostly from empathy, from how the book brings out an innate understanding so deep it is hard to explain in words, yet here is my sincere attempt:

A mother can really be defined by the effect she has on those around her. While the most important and central part of a functioning family, she is also the most taken for granted. This is easy to do because a mother is so selfless and loving that in some ways, she is almost willing it; she is the gentle cause and that is the inevitable effect. This is an important theme that repeats
throughout the story even as different narrators take turns revealing their relationship with the missing person.

The way the author explores these intricate relationships felt very personal to me because I could relate to everyone’s experiences despite my singular role as a daughter just entering her twenties. I am neither a son nor a husband, but I can understand them all. Their voices reached out to me, especially Hyong-chol’s and Chi-hon’s. We are similar because we are children who love our mothers. We were given so many opportunities through her hard work and dedication so that we could attain better lives void of all the hardships she had to endure at the same age.

We know this and we feel forever grateful, yet there are times when we just feel too tired or lazy to “deal with mom.” My mother would not even be asking me to do anything difficult or tiring like chores. She would just be asking me to explain something to her because she cannot understand English very well, but I would articulate very curtly and impatiently. Why? Because I was “busy” doing something like chatting with friends or watching a program on television. Because I just did not feel like helping her at the moment because it took forever and I had no time or patience, even though she had all the time and patience for me whether it was my weakest moment, my most powerful moment, or anything in between. At least the elder daughter in the novel had the patience to read and write for her illiterate mother as a little girl. The troubling part is that as she grew older, she began to grow distant from her mother. That really makes me sad and concerned because it is such a gradual and natural occurrence that it almost seems inevitable. If I am like this now, how much worse would I be in the future when I am actually busy with a career and my own family?

At the same time, when I show her attitude or lash out in frustration, I immediately feel sorry and apologize. She readily accepts my apologies and I promise myself that I would never do it again, although of course I do. I also promise myself that I would quickly become successful so she could live comfortably. She is undoubtedly a powerful and important person to bring out such strong emotions such as guilt and a desire to make her happy.

However, a mother is not omnipotent. That is what we would like think and believe, but it is simply not true. A mother also depends on her children for help and support. She may try to hide it and we may pretend we do not
see her weaknesses, but we cannot just let her fend for herself. Next time she asks me to explain something, I will have to do it willingly, patiently, and nicely. Maybe if I correct my behavior early on, I will not stray from my mother in the future when I am preoccupied with the exact same role. This last part makes me think about how strange it is that my mother had her own mother.

She had also been a daughter and I believe this is an important aspect that many people do not consider. Kyung-Sook Shin, however, evidently did because she put a couple of scenes of Park So-nyo with her mother. One scene was when a young Park So-nyo asked her mother if she really had to get married and the two of them ended up crying together because they did not want to separate. Another scene was at the end of her narration when she reunites with her mother in the afterlife, symbolizing a cycle as she goes from a mother back to a daughter.

My mother's story is similar in some ways. She had been separated from my maternal grandmother for over twenty years, which is longer than even my years of existence. However, they were not separated merely because of marriage, but because my mother had moved from South Korea to America. When she moved here, she became so busy working to provide the family with a sufficient amount of money that she had no cash or time to spare and no opportunity to visit her mother. When I was younger, I wished that I could make a lot of money somehow and someway so that I could send her to visit her family in Korea. However, I was too young, and eventually my grandmother passed away.

I could only understand a portion of what my mother was feeling at that sad news. I could understand by imagining how it would feel to be separated from my mother for even half the time she was separated from her mother. She probably never stopped hoping that a chance would come for her to see her mother again. It must have been heartbreaking when she found out that it would no longer be possible.

Since I could not do anything for her in the past, I will definitely work hard to make her happier in the future. I will try my best to return all of the favors that she has done for me, even though I already know it is an impossible task because the debt is infinite. Nevertheless, I will try and I will shower her endlessly with my daughterly love because my mother is my best friend.
and she is worth it.

A mother:

“The precious person who gave you meaningful life and further nurtured and cherished that life for all eternity.

No matter what, a mother thinks you deserve it.
No matter what, a mother will always love you.”
As a child, my parents had high expectations for me. When I grew up they wanted me to be someone highly respected such as a doctor or lawyer. They even considered me becoming a pastor, because of our highly religious background. Due to these high expectations I always needed to do the best in everything, especially when it came to school. Unfortunately, I was not the very best student and sometimes would bring home Cs and maybe even Ds. Though, to some those may be acceptable grades, it was not acceptable to my parents. Whenever I would bring home a grade like that, I would timidly present the marked up paper to my parents who would then get very upset at me. First would come the harsh scolding and then the usual spanking. Afterward, I would be sent to my room in tears, and I would get angry, but not at how poorly I did, but rather at my parents’ reaction. As I sat there in my room I would rub my sore bum and curse under my breath. My mind would begin to think about everything that just happened, and during those few hours of anger, I began to believe that my parents only cared about my grades. Everything they did for me was only so that I would do well in school and therefore they could show me off to family and friends. They were doing all of this just so they can look good, and people would say that they were good parents. It has been several years since all this has happened and obviously I was wrong. Back then while I thought such hateful thoughts, I was completely blind to the tough love they were actually showing me. In the book Please Look After Mom by Kyung-sook Shin the characters took Mom for granted and like them I forgot all the sacrifices my parents made for me and
how they longed for me to have a much better life than they could have ever dreamed of. As human beings, we all make this mistake; we take our loved ones for granted, forgetting everything they have ever done for us. We never fully appreciate their love and kindness until they are gone from our lives.

For most people the person that they take for granted the most is probably their moms. This is true because it is impossible not to. Our mothers show so much love and kindness that it is impossible to pay them back in any sort of way. They are our caretakers and they naturally want to help us for as long as they possibly can. For example, there is a minor character in the book that is helping the family find Mom by making prints of the flyers. Now, this character only wore pure cotton clothes, which his mom sewed due to his allergies. While printing the flyers, “He says that when he opened her [his mom’s] closet after she passed away he found stacks of cotton clothes that would last him for the rest of his life” (Shin 60). This man’s mom took care of her child by making his clothes for him every day, and even after her death she still supplied him with all these garments that he could wear. Later in the book, we hear Mom give her perspective. She states, “Mom [referring to Mom’s mom] looks at my foot, the strap of the blue plastic sandal digging into it. The bone is visible through the wound in my foot. Mom’s face crumples in sorrow… Mom puts her hands under my armpits as if she’s holding a child who has just died. She takes the blue plastic sandals off my feet and pulls my feet into her lap” (Shin 212). This quote is actually explaining that Mom has passed away, but what is more interesting is her re-encounter with her mom up in heaven. Because of all the trials that Mom must have gone through in her life, she must be very hurt and tired. Fortunately, when she finally sees her mom again, she begins to heal. Just like how the man, who could only wear cotton, had a mother who was took care of him even after her death, Mom’s mother was supporting her and helping her in heaven. As human beings we often do not realize the lengths our moms are willing to go to help us. Even after their deaths they continue to take care of us. Due to this lack of full understanding, it is impossible to comprehend our mother’s love and therefore we unfortunately have no choice but to take it for granted.

Likewise, there are also other reasons that people may take their loved ones for granted, without even realizing it. For example, when an individual lives with someone who shows them great kindness every day, that same
love and support begins to be taken for granted; and therefore, he or she sometimes forgets to appreciate that love. An example of this would be when Mom’s husband cheated on her and when the mistress tried to cook a lunch for Hyong-chol he would refuse to eat it. When Mom discovered this she, “...led him to the hill behind the school. She pulled up the legs of his pants, to reveal his smooth calves, grabbed a switch and hit them. ‘Why aren’t you eating?’... Mom’s thrashing was harsh.... ‘Are you going to take your lunch? Are you?’ [She scolded.] ‘No!’ [Hyong-chol responded]... Mom’s whipping became swifter... ‘Even now?’ [She asked.] The redness bloomed into blood on his calves. ‘Even now!’ he yelled” (Shin 83). In this scene Hyong-chol is showing his loyalty to Mom. Even as he is getting beat by her he refuses to betray her by eating his father’s mistress’s food, but as he gets older this loyalty seems to slightly fade away. On the day that Mom went missing, “Hyong-chol had meant to pick them [his parents] up and drop them off at his brother’s but once he was at work he felt a chill coming on and had a headache... Instead of going to Seoul Station, Hyong-chol went to a sauna near work. As he sweated in the sauna... Father was getting on the train without Mom” (Shin 81). Contrary to the loyalty he showed when he was younger, Hyong-chol was making excuses rather than helping his parents. He felt a little sick and so instead of picking up his loved ones at the station he decided to go to a sauna. These two separate scenes happened years apart and during those years Hyong-chol must have grown complacent with Mom’s love and because of this his loyalty to her and Father must have slightly faded. As an adult who grew up soaked in his mother’s kindness he forgot to return that favor to her. Unfortunately Hyong-chol isn’t the only one guilty of this. People in general have a tendency to take any continual love they receive for granted because it has become a regular and sometimes a forgotten part of their lives.

Just like the rest of the world and the characters of this book, I have taken my parents for granted. It is true that they had very high expectations of me and they were very harsh in order for me to meet those expectations, but for most of my life I did not understand that they were doing all of this for my future. I did not actually see the fruits of their sacrifices and hard shows in the right direction until college. There, my parents were not around to push me to try harder; instead I was pushing myself. My parents’ dream of my success has become my own and if it were not for them, I would not be where
I am today. I am doing very well in college and even have made it onto the Dean's list here at Rutgers University. I am now grateful for their sacrifices and love for me and I would not have it any other way. I will never take them for granted again.
Myung Ji Chae
Honorable Mention Award

A Letter from 13 Hours Away

Dear Mom,

It’s been a long time since I wrote a letter to you. My last letter was in the Parents day when I was in middle school. Although the letter was full of clichés saying ‘thank you for your care and love’, you really appreciated it. Watching your overwhelmed emotion, I was embarrassed and wanted to take back that insincere letter. Now, I’m 20, who live out of the nest, writing the first letter to you sincerely.

Once, you asked me for something, and when I had done it, you were so thankful to me. Then, I was little upset and told you, “Mom, it’s nothing. Why are you so thankful for this piece of cake since I ask you for so many things?” With smile, you just said, “Still I appreciate you.”

Mom, recently I read a book by Shin, Kyung-Sook called Please Look after Mom and I couldn’t stop thinking about that conversation we made. Although the Mother in the book was older than you, her love toward her children was same as your love toward me. She gave her everything to the children just like you.

Since I was a baby, you couldn’t move an inch from me. When you came back from your work, teaching English to middle schoolers, you gave me a piggyback while you were doing house chores. Until I turned 11, leaving home for a summer camp in the US, I wasn’t able to sleep without you. Therefore, every night I called and bothered you that I couldn’t sleep at the camp.
Until I moved to abroad when I was 17, the place your hands can never reach, I never realized how much I depended on you.

Just like I realized your care and love after leaving the nest, Chi-hon, one of the daughters in the book, realized her mother’s sacrifices and love after her mother’s absence. I tried to picture how the world would look like if you were missing. Mom, I can’t even think about it. It’s too horrible to imagine. Although it was just a story, I felt so bad for those children. The Mother of the book was a symbol of Korean mothers. She didn’t care about her appearance, her health or even her life in order to keep up her family. As reading the book, I found out that you were not different from her.

Our relationship was much deeper than other mother-and-daughter’s one. As we had spent time so attached to each other for a long time, we shared everything. Except a little moment of my adolescence, I told you everything about myself, such as a boy I liked, a group of girls I hated and a teacher I admired. Sometimes my friends didn’t understand me, but I strongly believed you’re the one who could understand me the most. However, there was a huge secret while I thought there was none between us.

When I entered high school, my two older brothers were having military service and I started to live in a school dormitory. Then you and father’s relationship got worse. It had been years since the relationship was unstable and finally you left home and stayed at grandmother’s house. At that time, I didn’t know the exact situation, but I accepted your decision. Coincidentally, I quit high school in that summer. Normally, dad, who is a typical Korean man, should have said something to stop me, but could not. He knew that it was too risky to drop high school in Korea; however, the situation made him to say no word to me. Many of our relatives, even possibly dad, believed that my decision was made all of a sudden because of the shock.

On the other hand, you knew the reason why I quit high school. The school where neglected art subjects, the parents who only focused on the result and the students who didn’t have a dream, how much we detested the way of education in our society! You always taught me that I was not a scoring machine but a human. Your sympathy toward your students encouraged me to be different. Your words opened my eyes to the world I had never dreamed of. In the next summer, I passed the Korean GED and graduated high school one year earlier than my friends. However, we weren’t able to be fully happy. During those
days, you had been telling me the pain in your stomach and it turned out to be a uterine fibroid. A doctor said it was a common female disease, however, you let it grow too big so that he needed to take out your uterus.

As I turned in 17 in December, you hospitalized for your surgery. Right before your surgery, you told me a life secret that a whole family was keeping from me. My brothers were half-brothers. In other words, you didn’t give a birth to them. As I heard what you said, I stared at you. You were checking my reaction with your nervous eyes. Surprisingly, I didn’t react at all. It didn’t mean that I knew it before, but as if it was a perfect time to know, I was just glad that you told me the truth. Then, your frozen face got relaxed and told me the whole story. Later, you confessed that you were worried about a shock that I would get. Obviously, the uncovered truth definitely changed my history what I had known before, but the present, nothing changed. As I told you that night, “My brothers are still my brothers and you are still their mother.” I was amazed and kept telling myself that how I could never notice it before. At that moment, I concluded that my life just got more dramatic than before. That’s all.

Soon after I moved to New York for study, you got divorced with father. Also, you quit your career as a teacher. Mom, New York is a dream city which is filled with a glamorous life. Music, art, fashion and food, everything is the world best. While I’m enjoying the capital of the world, you are living in Gangwondo, the countryside of Korea. Sometimes, I suddenly feel so sad to be here without you. Until now, you have spent your life only for me. Moreover, you quit your job for a break but still you would need to earn money again for my life in abroad as dad never helped financially. Once we were talking about our financial situation because you were sending your retirement allowance, I broke down in tears saying, “I’m spending your money like water. I’m eating your life!” Yet, you firmly told me, “Don’t worry about what you can’t change. Just think about what you can do.” Mom, you opened my eyes again. Now, I’m trying hard to find what I can do, how I can be your pride.

As I was reading the book, I discovered the Mom was also a woman who wanted to depend on someone and a human who had a goal to achieve: Reading Chi-hon’s books. Then I thought, ‘what about my mom?’ Not as my mom, but what kind of person are you? You had always been a great teacher. Fellow teachers used to call you “Korean Hippocrates”, that you were a teach-
er curing students’ heart. For those students who couldn’t afford a school trip, you paid it secretly. You made a music band for students who only knew how to study. You liked to spend an extra time to listen your students’ story. Therefore, it’s not surprising to see that your students visit you after more than 10 years. Because you were an admired teacher, naturally I learned to respect other teachers during my school life.

A month ago, since I won’t visit Korea this summer, you asked me whether you should visit NY, instead. However, we both knew that we needed to save money for my tuition so I told you not to punish yourself to fly 13 hours just to see me. You chuckled and said, “That’s right, you’re all grown-up.” Suddenly, the word “grown-up” stung my heart. When I was a child, you told me, “Once children grow up, they don’t want to hangout with parents.” At that time, I was quite offended and told you that I wouldn’t be like that. Now, I’m 13 hours far from you, saying that you don’t need to visit me, I feel sorrow. Mom, I’m not an adult at all. I still need your nagging, care and help.

Unlike Chi-Hon’s sister, who lost her chance to tell her mom, I’m glad that “I can still tell you that I love all the things you did, that I love you, who were able to do all of that, that I love your life, which many people never know. That I respect you.”

With all my love,
Your daughter, Myung Ji
Juleigh Chin
Honorable Mention Award

Yin and Yang: contrary forces which are intertwined and interdependent on one another. The spectrum of opposites which seem so distant eventually transcends so that they become one and the same.

A mother’s role. It goes back to the beginning of time and transcends across generations and cultural divides. People in this world may not be able to agree on politics or religion, but every person can feel the impact of their mother. Whether it abounds in respect, brandished in love, or burgeoning with despair, a mother bears her children and leaves a mark unlike anything else in this world.

Please Look After Mom by Shin Kyung Sook exemplifies these 2 themes intricately and weaves the story for the reader with ease and emotional connection.

As a daughter myself, I can relate to and feel the remorse of Hyong-chol and Chi-Hon, as they not only search for their mother, but as they tolerate and submit to her country village ways throughout their lives. Though minimally, they fulfill their culturally expected filial duty from the time they were young and even as it interferes with their own personal situations. The children are ridden with guilt as they remember their mom and make their personal vows to do better, if she returns, and in the meantime is overwrought with guilt and sorrow.

As a mother myself, I can relate to So-Nyo’s self-sacrificing and altruistic nature. Her duty is providing for her family to the point of being invisible to them all. The family does not see, understand, appreciate, absorb, or value all that their mom does for them.
Because I can relate to the children’s selfish ways and the mother’s selfless ways, I can feel the duality of the yin and yang. I can feel the ebb and flow of Ms. Shin’s writings as there is overlap and intersection of mother and child, sanity and lunacy, love and disdain, life and death.

We all do it. We all vow that we’ll treat our parents better. We all hope that our children will take better care of us. We don’t realize the moment that we leave our immature childhood behind us and move towards a life full of obligation and responsibility. We cannot grasp the infinite span of when life turns into death; or when reality turns into memory, which eventually fades into obscurity.

*Please Look After Mom* is my story. It’s everyman’s story. I am Hyong-Chul. I am Chi-Hon. I am So-Nyo. I am even the other siblings. I am the husband. I am the pharmacist. I am even the boyfriend. It is haunting how we can all relate to every character in the novel.

Rest in peace mom. Your work is done.
Chloe Hwang
Honorable Mention Award

And Now a Few Words About My Mom

The goose that lays the golden eggs. That’s what I have been calling my mom. Providing me with everything I ask for, I can’t demand her for more than she gives me every now and then. I can’t complain for any paucity or compare her with other moms. I can’t comment on the way she lives because she says she ‘lays her golden eggs’ only for me.

I thank Kyung-sook Shin for jogging my memory and reminding me the feeling I had forgotten. As I read Please Look After Mom, I became the daughters, son, and husband looking for their Mom lost in Seoul. The littlest words, sentences, and phrases scratched my heart as if my mom was lost, and cares weighed heavily upon me. Tears didn’t only come from sadness, but from guilt and regret. Like many other readers, I questioned myself, “Do I know my mom?”

One definite answer I can give is: If I had known, I wouldn’t have hurt her. Just like Mom in the novel, my mom has been calling herself a kitchen maid. She always says, “Cooking is my one and only talent.” She has been insisting me to become a more educated and talented woman than herself. Quite shamefully, I need to confess how I was reluctant to indicate my mom’s highest level of education as “High School” on family surveys. I would rather lie, fill in “Unknown,” and drag myself away from the reality in order to fit into the social norm. I am ashamed of my past incapable of loving her as the way she is. I am guilty of being selfish and turning against my mom who is always faithful to me.
The year I turned 13, my egocentricity intensified as we immigrated to the United States. I blamed everything on the period of puberty and stress resulting from changes I was adapting to. A teenager who was under her mom’s shade for the past decade thought she had become an adult under a free American sky. My shallow English skill turned into an awfully selfish weapon. I walked at my own pace, just like Mom’s husband in the crowded train station.

Coffee with cream and sugar, onion rings, meat-sauce spaghetti, pecan pies... To get such ordinary things she loves, she needed me. Wherever she wanted to go, she had to ask and persuade me to go with her. Being an average, rebellious teenager, I often showed signs of nuisance, refused, and thought, ‘Why can’t she do it for herself and stop bothering me?’ I was an arrogant brat. But eventually, I ended up dragging myself outside, not because I knew it’s the natural, righteous thing to do, but because I felt bad for her.

With our hands held, we would walk to the nearest café, supermarket, restaurants, or wherever we felt like going as long as we knew our way back home. It felt like time was frozen and we weren’t chased by anything. We neither had nor needed cell phones because we were together twenty-four-seven. All we needed was a pocket-sized electronic dictionary that helped me be my mom’s voice. Ah, only if I can turn the clock backward, I would appreciate every second of the tranquility with her. Retrospectively speaking, it was the happiest moments of my life.

Soon after and until now, our lives became a complete inversion – busy, tight, and off-balance – as I started attending school and my mom started working. We never had time to hold hands and walk together. We rarely talked face-to-face and a thick wall resulted from the lack of communication. If I had known my mom, I wouldn’t have let the wall hinder our relationship. I was stupid to believe she was happy working and living her life the way she was. In reality, she was biting the bullet in order to make me happy living my life.

Neither did I know that she was in need of her mom. No wonder I was stunned to see her collapsing over a phone call back in 2009. Waves of despair swept through me as I heard my mom sobbing and mumbling, “My mom died.” The words shattered my heart into a thousand pieces, which rigidly held itself hearing, “Our grandmother passed away.” At the same moment, I realized the power of “Mom” and recognized her as a weak entity. It was since
then that I got the greatest phobia and nightmares of her not coming back from grocery stores, getting kidnapped by a stranger, or becoming deadly sick. I had no choice but to learn how precious things are fragile and lost easily.

Now that I know way too much about the sacrifices she made, I wish I can turn the clock backward. Yet being a good, loving daughter is like a New Year’s resolution, which you spend hours planning and forget the day after. For all daughters and sons, Shin’s *Please Look After Mom* does an extraordinary job kidnapping their moms and teaching how moms can be ill at their hearts, just like themselves and any others.

In 2011, here I am in my 20’s, in a college dorm. Although a whole lot of things had changed, my mom still calls me a “Little puppy.” She still stands where she has been since 20 years ago, supporting and cheering me no matter what. Reading *Please Look After Mom*, I was able to face the reality – her wrinkles, white hairs, scars, and the days I took her for granted – even though it was painful. As a time of difficulty is the opportunity to grow, I once again made a promise to myself that I won’t ever lose her.

At last, I hope it’s not too late to counteract all my childish misdeeds and express how much I admire, respect, and thank you.

I love you mom.
High School Division

Judge Wolhee Choe’s Commentary

Winning Essays

Artem Osherov (First Place)
Claire Lee (Second Place)
William Xiang Chen (Third Place)
Nicole Bagnarol (Honorable Mention)
Shadac Boakyey-Yiadam (Honorable Mention)
You Jin Park (Honorable Mention)
Maria Hwang (Honorable Mention)
Derrick Yoo (Honorable Mention)

Editor’s Note
These essays were observed in their original submissions to KCSNY. KCSNY has only made punctuation revisions for typos or omitted articles.
The Winners of the Essay Contest’s High School Division
by Wolhee Choe

In the high school contestant category, the balance between emotional and intellectual responses to Kyung-sook Shin’s novel, Please Look After Mom, is more than slightly tilted towards the emotional, with a few exceptions. That is not surprising when we consider Socratic wisdom which dictates that one loves what one lacks: Mom goes missing one week at the beginning of the novel, and then she’s still missing after nine months at the end. The possible sudden disappearance of any Mom (or wife for that matter) is at the core of most of the essays as the characters’ ordeals in the novel awaken hitherto unarticulated love for Mom. The contestants seem to have transferred the characters’ experiences into their own recognition of Mom’s love, with direct and simple language, separating Mom as a person from the self. There is an emotional force in most of these essays coming from strong identification with the plights of Shin’s characters.

The winning writers identify, more specifically, with the novel’s awakened selves for their recognition of Mom’s suffering humanity beyond her love of her children and caring for them. Their awakening, which comes so belatedly, has several components for our writers to explore in their selves: guilt over

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their neglect and ignorance about Mom, knowledge of her separate humanity, and belated recognition of their fundamental love for Mom. All four play a role in self-examination, with enough detachment to shape their essays. As a result, their deeply felt essays resemble the belated self-awareness of the characters in the novel.

William Chen (The Third Prize) is a case in point. His language is plain and to the point, and he includes a fine summary of what the four characters undergo emotionally, relating them to his own emotional response to the book.

Claire Lee (The Second Prize) creates a vignette, with a sense of humor, about her own sudden awakening to her Mom’s love. The novel’s presence in the essay is oblique, but insinuates urgency; the novel teaches her to be attentive, reflective, appreciative, and mature about Mom and her love for her.

The First Prize goes to Artem Osherov, whose grasp of the narrative structure of the novel is expressed in his resonant critical essay. It combines beautifully his emotional and intellectual responses to the book, interweaving analyses of the scenes that straddle traditional agrarian and modern urban living in Korea, which complicates Mom’s struggle to protect and educate her children.
Artem Osherov
First Place Award

A simple novel with a complex story – Kyung-sook Shin’s Please Look After Mom – epitomizes the challenges presented with motherhood while embracing the generational shift to modern, city life and the gradual decline of the traditional, rural lifestyle in South Korea. The story quickly unfolds, and before the characters are introduced, the driving conflict has been stated: “It’s been one week since Mom is missing” (p.1). On a trip to visit their grandchildren and also celebrate father’s birthday with their children in Seoul, Mom is lost on the subway platform as father gets on the train and unintentionally leaves her behind. In a successful effort to make the adventure emotionally moving, Shin divides the story into four parts, encompassing the point of view of four family members, and demonstrating how they are impacted in more than one way by her disappearance. In Please Look After Mom, Shin’s masterful mix of the theme – never lose sight of those who care about you the most – guides the audience on the emotional rollercoaster that the family endures and make this novel one of the most powerful family-oriented stories available.

By focusing on different family members, Shin depicts how Mom’s disappearance causes each individual to re-evaluate his/her personal relationship with “Mom.” So-Nyo’s eldest daughter, Chi-hon, remembers an experience she had with Mom before she went missing, where she had discovered Mom lying on the wooden platform in the doorless shed of their old home in Chongup, and learned that Mom had suffered for some time from chronic headaches that left her in a semi-paralyzed state. Chi-hon realizes that since she didn’t even know that her mom suffered from these headaches, she could no longer say she knew Mom. This memory is important in the story because
it directly follows Chi-hon’s statement that she does not wish to be treated as a guest when she visits her mother, but rather as a daughter. Chi-hon understands how much she owes her mother, recalling the time at a bookstore where So-Nyo told her to pick any book she wanted, being interested in her daughter’s passion for reading and writing. This point is quite meaningful, since the one thing So-Nyo has been embarrassed about is her inability to read and write, yet she took the time to ensure that all her children received a good education, and was proud when Chi-hon became a writer. So-Nyo was not given the opportunity to get an education in her youth, and while raising her five children, was forced to work in the fields of the countryside. Her illiteracy had gone practically unnoticed by her children, and remains essential to the plot, as it helps form the barrier between Mom’s life and the lives of her children.

The second part of the story focuses on the oldest son, Hyong-chol’s reflections on his experiences with Mom after her disappearance, as well as the search for Mom in Seoul. Hyong-chol and Chi-hon remark on how much work Mom had done to clean the windows and remove the doors to repast them every Full Moon Harvest and question why nobody offered help. They begin to understand the difficulty of the labor that commanded Mom’s life, and how inconsiderate they had been to aid her efforts—something that the reader should become aware of in his/her own life. Shin is seemingly scolding Mom’s children one by one as she has them realize how much they owed their mom, and could not repay since she had gone missing. Hyong-chol becomes cognizant of the fact that “Mom’s disappearance was triggering events in his memory; moments… he thought he’d forgotten about” (p.98). Such is often the case in life, as people do not usually grasp the significance of a certain event until they are forced to do so by an even more important event that takes place later on.

There is an entire section that focuses on reprimanding “father” for his neglect in Mom’s times of need. As he reenters his empty house in Chongup, he begins to see how he had mistreated his wife when she had been sick or when she had asked him to walk slower. He discovers that So-Nyo had been donating three-fourths of the money their children had sent to them each month to an orphanage in Namsandong. He learns that an attendant had been reading Chi-hon’s book to his wife an hour at a time. The principle
that his wife had been too ashamed of her illiteracy to ask him to read their daughter’s book for her leaves him startled. In an attempt to demonstrate that he had loved his wife, he calls Chi-hon and tells her that Mom had read her book, letting her know how proud Mom had been of her daughter’s writing. In the last line of this section, Shin informs So-Nyo’s husband that “even if everyone in the world forgets, your daughter will remember. That your wife truly loved the world, and that you loved her” (p.164). The author uses these lines to provide a sort of closure to “father’s” remorse and self-hatred for his rude treatment of his wife. She wants to show that no matter what, he had always loved “Mom.”

The final section of the novel is told from Mom’s point of view. She states that she is halfway to being a ghost, when she observes the actions of her youngest daughter and visits her empty house in Chongup. Mom seemingly “passed the torch” of motherhood to her youngest daughter, who is busy caring for her three children in Seoul. She is disappointed by the emptiness of the house she had spent so much of her life in, and comments how a house reflects the personality of those living within it, and that now that it is empty, it is falling apart as well. It is heartbreaking to think that “Mom” had spent so much of her life living in a small house in a rural village. Those of us who get the chance to travel and see the world are lucky for this opportunity, and Shin uses Mom as an excellent example of somebody who never had the option of traveling.

The conclusion that Shin provides is very satisfying, even though Mom is never actually found. The story ends with each of the family members realizing how much they owed Mom for her love and support. The purchase of the Rosewood Rosary in Vatican City by Chi-hon is symbolic of the love she has for her mom and the importance of a promise she had made before her disappearance. Inside, Chi-hon most likely knows at this point that she will never see her mom again, and yet she makes this purchase, both out of respect and as a small token to show she loves her mom, no matter where she may be. The reader is left with this message to “please look after Mom.” It is a call to us as readers to love the ones who love us most, who care for us no matter what, who stay by our side through thick and thin… our moms.
Claire Lee
Second Place Award

One day during the school year, I stood up working and studying into the early hours of the next day.
Standing in my school uniform of a collared shirt and pleated plaid kilt with my school backpack in one hand, I found her on the living room sofa, head lolled back to rest on the sofa cushion, Korean drama still playing on her computer screen. I had no idea that my mom, a woman always exhausted and tired from her long, draining days at work as a social worker, had refused to go to sleep until I had finished studying.
I couldn’t help but feel guilty that I was the source of her lack of sleep.

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Although Please Look After Mom is a work of fiction, I couldn’t help imagining my mom in Mom’s place; instead of Park So-nyo, she was Ahn Kyung-hyun in my mind, as if it were my own mom who had gone missing that day at the Seoul Station Subway. As I continued to read further and further into the book, I began to feel a nagging in the back of my mind, pulling and my heartstrings and taunting me with the whispers of “what if my mom gets lost one day?”

While reading this novel, I imagined all of the things I’d wronged my mom with in the past, most of them trivial, yet they stood out the most.

Forgetting to turn off the bathroom lights. Carelessly ignoring her helpful comments on managing struggling friendships. Telling her to stop acting like a crazed Asian mom whenever she visited me at school on Parents Visiting
Day. Not bothering to put the dishes into the sink after dinner. Asking her, or rather, yelling at her, to put my dirty laundry in the wash. All of those seemingly insignificant, daily commonplace matters.

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It seems strange to me that although in the novel, all of Mom’s loving actions are all towards her firstborn, her eldest son, it is her eldest daughter, who suffers the most guilt and remorse for her careless and inconsiderate behavior to Mom, who throws herself into the desperate search for Mom. Even though Mom’s firstborn loves her very much and also feels regretful for disappointing Mom in her dream that he would become a prosecutor, it is ironic that her eldest daughter, the one whom Mom scolded so often for being disobedient, seems to endure the most pain and guilt.

They never realized or appreciated the sacrifices that Mom made for her children or how much of a driving force she was in their family until she was lost.

As a daughter, I was able to feel that guilt of Mom’s eldest daughter, Chihon. Her vast amount of regret and guilt latched itself onto my mind and conscience, reminding me of my own failures of treating my mom well. However, being an only child, I was also able to feel the guilt of both Mom’s firstborn and eldest daughter.

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“Wow, Jisoo, you’ve been very considerate lately,” my mom said as I held open the apartment door for her.

“My lazy daughter rushing ahead of me and opening the door for me, carrying the grocery bags without me asking her to!” she was silent for a few moments.

“Maybe you should read Please Look After Mom more often,” she joked.

I looked down at my hands, upset by the fact that my mom regarded such a trivial act with gratitude. I wasn’t upset at her, but at myself. How could I have been so selfish and inconsiderate to her? What she meant as a light joke
struck me hard in my conscience; the wave of guilt that I felt from the book only rose higher as she said those words; I resolved to become a better daughter, more considerate, more caring, and more thoughtful.

Shin Kyung-sook’s novel *Please Look After Mom* has made me realize that realizations of regrets from the past don’t matter. Rather, one can decide to leave no regrets in the present.
William Xiang Chen
Third Place Award

What does your mom mean to you? Is she the friend that will always be there when others come and go? Does she represent comfort? Is she the epitome of what it means to be home, to have a sense of belonging? To me, my mom means someone who’s given up her whole life in China in hopes of giving her children a better one; she represents a strong woman who’s always put others before herself, she is the only one in the world who can make an empty house feel like home. Sadly, I didn’t recognize how significant my mom has been in my life until now. Always taking her for granted, I was mean and ungrateful towards my mom, a bratty kid who felt entitled to everything and anything. It was not until after I read the novel Please Look After Mom that I realized although my mom may be irritating at times, at the end of the day, I need to let her know that I love her.

In the novel Please Look After Mom by author Kyung-Sook Shin, a mother, Park So-nyo, is left behind accidentally by her husband at a subway station in Seoul, lost among the masses of people in an attempt to visit her children. In a swift series of events, she vanishes and is reported as missing. In the aftermath of her disappearance, the family feels the heartbreak of losing the one person who has always given them everything and never accepted anything in return. As events unfold, four narrations of anger, bemusement, heartbreak, and loss appear. Each member of the family begins to realize in their own way that it didn’t matter whom their mother was, it mattered who they remembered she was. In their memory, she was an unappreciated, hard working and courageous woman who revolved her life around her children. Settling in the rural countryside, Park So-nyo had always dreamt of a better life for her children, believing that they would one day become a huge success in the big
city. To her son, she meant the one woman who always pushed him to not just be good, but extraordinary. From always saving him a bowl of ramen noodles when his siblings got none to sleeping next to him in a cold tiny apartment in the city just to bring him food for the night, she always knew the best was to come for her son. To her daughters, she was the one who although at times seemed to play favoritism amongst her children, never ceased to let it be known how much she loved them. Even though she could neither read nor write, her passion and everlasting love for her children was undeniable. For she would ask someone who was literate to read to her from her daughter’s book, smiling deep down in amazement thinking, “Wow, that’s my daughter.” To her husband, she was a loyal wife who never complained and hid her many issues to avoid her husband from worrying. She accepted him for whom he was and loved him like a good wife should.

As each family member comes to accept the disappearance of their mother, they start to understand how selfish they all were, and what they would have given just to see their mother one last time. Memories begin to unfold throughout each chapter from different perspectives, providing stories of the pain and hardships that their mother has had to endure in keeping her family safe and together. Park So-nyo in the words of her children and husband was an admirable and commendable woman who embodied the quintessence of motherhood, but more importantly, of the strong and eternal love a mother and wife has between her children and husband that will never be broken despite any circumstance. For this family, the mother that they loved may be invisible to anyone else, but will always be in their hearts forever.

There are the books that make us laugh, cry, happy; there are the books whose message is so strong and touching, that it can change a person’s life forever. Please Look After Mom did just that for me. Through the perspectives and the intimate details of each scene, I feel as if I was involved in the story. I was so aware of each and every emotion that the characters felt and experienced those feelings on what seemed to be a very realistic level. At times, I found it hard to continue and kept crying because so many of the emotions that the children felt for their missing mom connected so strongly with mine. I’ve never been keen on showing love and affection for my mom, and all these feelings buried deep down suddenly unraveled as reading each page became absolutely heartbreaking. Moms are the most undervalued and unappreciated
people in this world and they are the ones who in some way shape us to be the people that we are today. *Please Look After Mom* pays tribute to the parents who are never thanked, and for that, I want to thank one in particular.

Thank you Yi-Yong Jiang. Thank you for never allowing me to lose sight of what's important, for making me go to sleep when I should, for not letting me go hang out late with my friends until I was older because you were right, I would have probably done exactly what you said I would have done. Thank you for supporting every sport, every hobby that I took on even though you thought they were a waste of time, for always picking up after me and taking blame for my actions. You were the one who on your birthday saw that your tiramisu cake was only cut into five pieces and six people were there, would state that you never liked cake to begin with anyway. For all these tiny gestures that no one’s ever noticed or appreciated, I can finally see clearly all that you’ve sacrificed for me. Thank you for always allowing me to think, that I am better than I believe, tougher than I reckon, and wiser than I think.
Nicole Bagnarol
Honorable Mention Award

A Steady Word in a World Unknown: Mom

Kyung-sook Shin’s, *Please Look After Mom* gave me back my childhood voice: the voice that screamed a joyful, “Mommy!” when I thought the trip to the grocery store lasted an eternity, the voice that begged Mom not to leave as she sung “I’m leaving on a jet plane…” and giggled at my worry before telling me it was just a song and the voice that yelled “Good Night!” too many times to make sure Mom heard me.

I had lost this voice while trying to find myself during those dreaded adolescent years. Now, I’m sixteen and hardly do we ever *really* talk, but I think this book brought me closer to my Mom. It’s strange, yet amazing, how a book can coax out emotions you didn’t even know you had.

I opened to the dedication page, as usual, and let my eyes linger there for a moment. “O love, so long as you can love.” – Franz Liszt. *Why do anything else?*, I thought. Unknowingly, I read the entire premise of the novel several times before turning to part one.

“It’s been one week since Mom went missing.” (pg.3)

Once again, I let my eyes scan this line over and over, but they couldn’t move on in their usual manner. Then, tears welled up in my eyes as if to signal me to stop and think. And so, I did – I thought about my mother. The mother that had driven me to the class I now waited to begin. She selflessly gave me her time to save me from the “horrors” (as she put it) of taking the train into
Manhattan. Yet during those 45 minutes of deft shifts of the steering wheel, I hadn’t looked at her once. I hadn’t answered her in anything more than a monosyllable in an angered tone.

At that moment, I wanted so badly to take back those 45 minutes of selfishness and say or ask something real.

Soon, my eyes found solace in the future and realized I am capable of changing my actions. I continued reading, assuming my place as the daughter of a missing mother named Park So-nyo. This first section was told in second person through Chi-hon’s (Mom’s eldest daughter) experiences. Flyers were distributed, a reward was promised and the city of Seoul was scoured but there were only memories left in Mom’s name as the search continued.

Every moment offered the chance to call upon some memory of Mom as if merely thought could make her re-appear. Regret crept up from the countless instances Mom’s opinion was ignored – even regarded with annoyance. Selfish actions left an empty feeling where pride used to be. Mom had been everything, the good and the bad, so why was it only the bad that consumed all thoughts?

The pang of helplessness never left, but time faded its vigor for So-nyo’s family. That was when So-nyo came alive; her love, spirit and resilience revealed a woman with enough beauty to make her flaws invisible.

As I read, I became aware – not only of Park So-nyo’s brilliance (despite her illiteracy) – but of my own mother as well. I began to attribute the strength of the character to my Mom. I would watch my mother toil over preparing dinner without serving herself almost everyday and thought back to Chi-hon’s question,

“Mom, do you like being in the kitchen?” (pg.56)

But whenever we feel questions are needless and Mom is surely too strong to think about how she feels, we should refer to the definition of “Mom” Kyung-sook Shin provides.

“The word “Mom” is familiar and it hides a plea: Please look after me. Please stop yelling at me and stroke my head; please be on my side, whether I’m right or wrong. [...] When you call out “Mom,” you want to believe that she’s healthy. That Mom is strong. That Mom isn’t fazed by anything.” (pg.18)
We all want to believe these things more than anything. We hope that calling “Mom!” will somehow make up for misunderstandings; we cling to its connotation, the one steady meaning in a world unknown. Wondering how a three letter word can restore a delicate balance, I read on.

The section of Ms. Shin’s novel that struck me as the most grief-ridden and hauntingly raw was Park So-nyo’s husband’s reaction; a formerly tough man, unafraid of sleeping on the streets, weeps over his wife’s disappearance. Through his eyes, their life together seemed unfortunate; his habits contributed to a good deal of their isolation from one another. More specifically, his habit of walking in front of his wife was said to have caused his life to veer “off track […] during all those years of marriage […]” (pg.138) Not once did he bother to look back the day his wife went missing in the crowded city of Seoul.

As I read well into the novel, striking similarities between all of Park So-nyo’s family members became apparent: each family member carried the burden of their ignorance by not treating Mom’s illnesses when it was possible, each developed a way of coping with Mom’s disappearance by introspection, but most importantly, each realized how much love Mom had to offer. Ms. Shin highlights this everlasting pool of love the day Hong Tae-hee, comes to Park So-nyo’s house to find Mom is missing. Tae-hee speaks with her husband instead; we discover that Mom had been volunteering at an orphanage and donating money regularly.

The fourth section of Please Look After Mom titled “Another Woman” proved to be the most thought provoking account. Told through Park So-nyo’s voice (reincarnated as a bird), I felt as if I was reading sprinkles of my own mother’s thoughts.

“Life is sometimes amazingly fragile, but some lives are frighteningly strong.” (pg.193)

Immediately, I thought of my mother’s voice reminding me of how strong I am because of my persistence to hear her out when no one else would give her their time. But really, I should have been the one to recognize her fortitude during trying times.

Whether we realize it or not, mothers possess a sophisticated level of un-
nderstanding; they know that bearing through difficult times often strengthens bonds. This does not mean that they are immune to life, however.

Park So-nyo touches upon her many struggles, such as the death of her brother-in-law, Kyun, who was also her best friend, her miscarriage and the devastation of losing one of her babies, and her frustration with her husband’s attitude. Not once does she dwell on these misfortunes, thus her gratefulness looking back upon life is a sobering reminder of how we should all try and live our lives.

I believe the author’s use of “Mom” goes far beyond its basic meaning, and is used to represent the person who has given up a large portion of their life to see us grow, whether it may be a grandparent, father, aunt etc. In this way, Please Look After Mom is a touching novel almost everyone can relate to and learn from. For me, I became aware of how meaningful every moment with my Mom really is.
You don’t know what you have until it’s gone. Many people do not think much about the true meaning of this phrase. However, to the members of a small family in Korea, this infamous saying means everything as it reshapes each of their lives.

Please Look After Mom begins with regretful daughter Chi-hon, a busy, somewhat crude young writer who recalls neglecting Mom in her last years of life. For example, Chi-hon called home one evening (a rare occurrence) and asked Mom if she had purchased a new doghouse. Mom replied, “I’m going to, I’ll do it soon.” A satisfying answer to most outraged Chi-hon however, because this was the fourth time Mom had given this simplistic response. Chi-hon began screaming at Mom, calling her a terrible country person and questioning Mom’s morality. Even when Mom yelled at Chi-hon for doubting her integrity and hung up on her for the first time in their lives, Chi-hon was still disappointed in the way Mom was handling the dog. In fact, Chi-hon was “annoyed at her mom for being so insensitive.”

Chi-hon also disregards Mom’s questions and opinions. For instance, when Mom would ask Chi-hon a question about her career, Chi-hon would ask curtly, “Why do you want to know?” If Mom asked Chi-hon why she was so busy, Chi-hon brushed her off. If Mom asked Chi-hon why she had to go somewhere or do something, Chi-hon would reply tersely, “Because I have to.” When Mom asked Chi-hon to stop taking planes because they were dangerous, Chi-hon ignored her and boarded them anyway. Chi-hon simply concluded that it was just plain difficult to talk and listen to Mom, believing their lives did not intertwine in any way.

Too often do we question the morality of others instead of taking an intro-
spective turn and questioning ourselves. If Chi-hon had looked into herself for just a minute, she could have seen how much she had hurt the person who had cared for her for years. Too often do we rearrange our priorities to fit our schedules, often putting the most important things last. Instead of calling Mom back to apologize for yelling, Chi-hon continued to sulk about the dog and put off calling Mom to the end of her list. Too often do we divulge ourselves in our work that we fail to establish a strong bond with the people that have gotten us to where we are. Having never gone to school and “living in darkness her entire life,” Mom made sure Chi-hon got an education and encouraged Chi-hon to read. Too often do we disregard the comments of our motivators and are thus filled with regret and disdain, often when it is too late.

The story then settles on disgruntled son Hyong-chol, a hardworking man who believes he has disappointed Mom. When Hyong-chol was a child, his father brought home another woman, causing Mom to leave. This woman packed lunches for Hyong-chol and his siblings every day, but Hyong-chol refused to eat. When Mom finally showed up at Hyong-chol’s school, she whipped him for not eating, claiming, “It didn’t matter who cooked the food.” However, Hyong-chol still would not eat. He even offered to do odd jobs around the house to get Mom to come home. Feeling this was his last option, Hyong-chol promised he would be a prosecutor when he got older. This promise caught Mom’s attention, for afterwards she agreed to return home. Ever since that encounter, Mom pushed Hyong-chol to strive to do his best. When Mom forced the other children to work outside, she allowed Hyong-chol to stay home and study, believing he would be a prosecutor.

Eventually, Hyong-chol graduated from college, but did not become a prosecutor. Mom didn’t even smile when the neighbors congratulated her on Hyong-chol’s employment at a top corporation. For the rest of her life, Mom felt that Hyong-chol’s failure to become a prosecutor was her fault. “It’s all my fault. I’m sorry Hyong-chol,” she’d say, her eyes filled with tears.

Sometimes we feel that the goals we set in life pertain to us and us alone. However, we couldn’t have gotten to where we are without the encouragement and support of our loved ones. When we don’t accomplish our goals, brushing them off as simple losses, we fail to realize the hurt we cause our motivators to experience. Hyong-chol thought that being a prosecutor was a childish dream that could never be achieved. When Hyong-chol didn’t become a prosecutor,
he regarded his failure as insignificant. But after Mom went missing, Hyong-chol realized that he had shattered her aspirations also. He felt remorseful and apologetic as many of us would feel if we demolished the dreams of a loved one. “I’m sorry, Mom, I didn’t keep my promise.”

The story then focuses on Father, Mom’s selfish, uncaring husband who feels quite ashamed in the way he treated his wife in her last years. The only time Father ever thought about Mom was to ignore her, yell at her or ask her to do something. Father even left home with another woman at one point in his life, claiming to be bored with his town. When Mom had headaches that kept her dizzy and unable to walk straight, Father actually told her to look where she was going. When Mom had a lump in her breast and was examined, Father never went back to get the results. To him, Mom was just his children’s mother.

Father remorsefully blames his speedy gait as the reason why Mom went missing. Since they were married, Father has always walked fast and in front of Mom expecting her to be behind him. Sometimes Father would turn whole corners without even checking if Mom was following him. At Seoul Station, Father never turned back to check if Mom was there and boarded the train without realizing his wife did not get on. “The moment that he had to confirm that he’d left his wife at Seoul Station, that he’d boarded the train and traveled one stop away, he turned around and realized that his life had been irreparably damaged.”

Many times we become so preoccupied with our own lives that we never notice the walking wounded all around us. Father never thought he had to take care of Mom even when her headaches restricted her everyday activities. Sometimes Mom couldn’t follow the plot of a drama she watched every day or find her way home even when sitting by a familiar road in town. Father just assumed that Mom’s ailments were common at their age and that Mom was just at that stage in life. It was only after Mom went missing that Father realized his apathetic attitude towards his wife’s condition.

Kyung-Sook Shin’s *Please Look After Mom* not only teaches us aspects of Korean culture, but also the importance of appreciating a loved one before it’s too late. Because whether it’s a death or move, we all have a symbolic train station in our lives; a place or situation in which we may lose our loved ones…possibly forever.
You Jin Park
Honorable Mention Award

Same Theme, Different Portrayal

Countless categories of man-to-man relationships were and still are being used as themes of many famous novels. Thousands of renowned authors are able to utilize common relationships like love or friendship into something more complicating and profound. Emily Bronte earned lasting fame through Wuthering Heights by portraying an intense and even abnormally insane love that eventually kills both Heathcliff and Catherine. Jane Austen, on the other hand, depicts a love relationship so complicating and hesitant yet pure and gentle between Darcy and Elizabeth in her masterpiece Pride and Prejudice. Likewise other themes like mother’s love and sacrifice has been used in wide range of famous literatures. Shin Kyung-sook’s highly popular novel Please Look After Mom is one of the literatures that masterfully presents maternal sacrifice. The theme of maternal sacrifice, however, has been used and applied by Kim Dong-hwa, the author of the poetic series of cartoon books Red Bicycle. Although they used the same theme in their well-known work, Ms. Shin and Mr. Kim portrayed maternal sacrifice from a very different angle. Ms. Shin expresses maternal sacrifice and love through sadness, guilt and heart-wrenching regret but Mr. Kim associates happiness and hope with the same theme.

The most important feeling Ms. Shin use in her novel is guilt and penitence. After So-nyo, the mother, goes missing in the busy Seoul train station the husband, the son, Hyong-chul, the daughter, Chi-hon, are emotionally crushed and crippled with ineffable guilt. The individual character's guilt grows worse when they began to discover that Mother was keeping two fatal
secrets away from her family: her illiteracy and her cancer. The husband, son and daughter all had plenty of chances to realize the two secrets the mother tried to keep hidden forever but they mainly ignored or simply didn’t perceive those secrets because they were so busy with their own affairs. The Mother also expresses guilt throughout her entire life typical by expressing her regret for not being able to support her children more and offer more help for them. Most of her regrets and guilts are focused towards her eldest son, Hyong-chul who wasn’t able to become a prosecutor because the Mother requested him look after and educate Chi-hon in fear that her daughter will become illiterate as well. The sense of guilt is not only provoked through the story alone. Ms. Shin also wants the readers to reflect any mistreatments they committed towards their mother by using the pronoun ‘you’ when the husband or the daughter narrates. This seemingly immeasurable depth of guilt and regret from, and even the mother’s death, complete Ms. Shin’s masterpiece.

Mr. Kim, on the other hand, blends maternal sacrifice with bright emotions such as happiness and hope. Mr. Kim’s Red Bicycle consists of short episodes of daily life events in a countryside called ‘Ya Hwa Ri’. The simple drawing of Mr. Kim’s cartoon reflects the simple yet peaceful life of every resident in Ya Hwa Ri. Just like Please Look After Mom, Red Bicycle contains stories about maternal sacrifice, especially in the Third Book of the Red Bicycle (out of four books): Mother. The mothers in the Third Book all display simple and common but touching ways of expressing their love towards their family: a mother eagerly waiting for hours in front of bus stations to greet her children and grandchildren, a mother who gladly strains her weakened body to cook their children’s favorite dish, a mother who buys pizza for her picky grandchildren without hesitation even though pizzas in countryside costs a ransom for her. But the biggest difference between Ms. Shin’s novel and Mr. Kim’s is that, unlike the husband and children of So-nyo, the family members of the mothers in Mr. Kim’s novel cares for the mother as much the mother cares for them. Whatever the mother does for her family never goes unnoticed. The husband who receives a hand-made scarf from his wife shows his gratitude by buying a pair of red shoes for his wife. The children always try to earn more money for their parents while hiding the economic burden they deal with in their city life. Grandchildren comforting their grandfather who lives alone his wife passed away. There are many hardships that the mother
and other family members in the cartoon face but they all eventually endures the ordeals together thus deepening the love they have for each other. Mr. Kim shines a light of hope rather than depression and sadness for the hardships that the family members have to undergo.

The two authors, who dealt with the exact same theme presents a complete opposite tone, mood and ending in their novel. Ms. Shin presents maternal sacrifice with tragic regret and ends with one as well. Mr. Kim displays maternal sacrifice in the cartoon with melodramatic hope and happiness. Both have developed their unique style of maternal sacrifice and managed to earn their well-deserved fame. Such polar depiction of a single theme might sound confusing and unrealistic for some people but it is also what makes us, avid readers, enjoy the book even more.
Maria Hwang
Honorable Mention Award

A novel called Please Look After Mom by Kyung-Sook Shin, beginning with “It’s been a week since mom went missing,” is about a family’s tragic memory of their aged mother’s disappearance on her way to Seoul for a family reunion on her birthday. The missing mom, Park So-nyo, was born in an isolated mountain village and lost her father when she was three years old and was married at a young age of seventeen right after the end of the Korean War. Although she was a complete illiterate, she had lived as an obedient wife and a devoted mother, who never had time for herself but only for her family. This novel represents a story of one’s family’s confession and regret only after their mother’s disappearance and a symbol of all mothers in the country living a ubiquitous life.

The book is divided into four chapters and an epilogue called “Rosewood Rosary.” In chapter 1, “Nobody Knows,” the author frequently uses a word “You” to describe mom. From the point when father let go of mom’s hand in the crowd at Seoul subway station, “‘You’ realize you’d become a stranger as ‘you’ watched Mom try to conceal her messy everyday life” (Shin 17). “You” confesses that “you” regret not having enough time for mom and daughter because although “you” knew that Mom wanted to talk to “you” just like any other mothers and daughters, but “you” made many excuses not to have a time to meet and talk with Mom. Also, “you” perceives that ‘You’ were the one who had moved away and left your mom’s side” (Shin 21). “You” wanted Mom to be “the person ‘you’ want to call whenever you despair about something in this city” (Shin 18). “You” finds “yourself” very selfish.

In chapter 2, “I’m Sorry, Hyong-chol”, the author describes Mom felt so sorry for her eldest son, Hyong-chol, as she could not support him properly when he was growing up. He was always Mom’s pride and joy among her sons
and daughters as he was a decent child and excellent student at school. However, he had to work anywhere after graduating high school due to his family’s poor economic situation and thus gave up his dream to go to a law school to be a federal prosecutor. The poor Mom was also sorry for asking him to take care of his youngest sister.

In chapter 3, “I’m Home,” “you” is husband and the author shows a husband’s belated regret about his obedient wife. “The moment when you had to confirm that you’d left your wife at Seoul station, that you’d boarded the train and traveled one stop away, the moment that you turned around, accidentally hitting the shoulder of the person next to you, you realized that your life had been irreparably damaged” (Shin 138). Father is regretful of treating his wife just like a tree, which doesn’t change its location as long as it gets mown or gets pulled out.

In chapter 4, “Another Woman,” Shaped like “the bird”, Mom visits her second daughter’s house. As Mom sees her weary daughter raising three daughters, Mom says, “Lie down, put your head on my lap for a little while. Rest a bit. Don’t be sad for me. I was happy for so many days of my life because I had you’” (Shin 186). “You” goes back to hometown in a long time and sees Mom “scrambling onto the platform and cradled your mom’s tortured face on your lap” (Shin 21). “You” asks self, “How could she be left alone in this state?” (Shin 21). Mom is not only “your” mother, but also one’s daughter. It shows how mothers are empty shell and giving everything to her family. It shows maternal love and sacrifice. The bird is Mom’s spirit. The visits to her second daughter’s house, her forever first love’s house, her husband’s, her children’s elder aunt’s, and her hometown were her last farewell.

In epilogue, “Rosewood Rosary,” “You” goes to a seminar in Italy. “You” remembers Mom’s wish of bringing a rosewood rosary from the smallest country. Holding the rosewood rosary “you” looks at the Pietà at St. Peter’s Basilica. “The woman who was denied her motherhood still gave her lap to her son’s body” (Shin 235). It was Holy Mother. St. Peter’s Basilica’s the Pietà is as if mom is standing behind you. “You” leaves with “Please, please look after mom” (Shin 237).

The quote “It’s been nine months since Mom went missing” leaves with Author’s wish for Mom’s reappearance. Although not lost but forgotten Mom’s swollen feet with blue plastic sandal’s “You”, the author suggests to readers that you are not late to find them, but you are just lost.
Derrick Yoo
Honorable Mention Award

Please Look After Mom is a book written by Kyung-Sook Shin. There are characters that are family members. The book takes place in modern day Korea. Beyond the relatively simple story line in this novel, the deeper meaning of emotional struggles present within the family is portrayed. This novel was appealing to me from the beginning, the emotions of the text drawing anxiety and excitement. The hints of emotion are more than just on paper; they were within the novel as a whole.

It really was a great idea for the author to change the points of view. This showed how different members of the family reacted to the situation and how they felt after losing a family member. The differences are very interesting to read and compare since each character’s relationship with the mother is all different. Because of their diverse personalities, the story is a really sad setting, considering the thought of losing a mother and trying to continue life without one poses difficulties. Although this does not justify blaming other family members for the missing mother, it is understandable since an important part of everyday life is missing. Losing a mother is almost like the world turning upside down completely. There is one less person to support the individual and she was probably their closest friend.

The book’s emotional meaning has had an effect on me, reminding me that I should be grateful for everything my family has done for me and how much effort they spend to make sure I am happy and comfortable. My family has always been the closest and the most understanding people I know and they are always there to help me. This reminds me to also think of a way to think differently about mothers. For example, in the novel, they are questioning what their mother was like before she had turned into a parent to care for.
them, and I wonder myself what my parents were like before I was born.

The book strives to plumb some deep and essential truths about motherhood, but the realizations that shatter these characters’ apathy may strike readers as somewhat less profound. This is a frequently repeated theme throughout the whole book. This is also like a truth more than just a theme of a story. It is more like a meaningful message to help you think. Memories of the mother probably helped the characters realize more about how things could have been different for the family and how they could have lived differently while their mother was still living. Additionally thinking more about the mother might have made it much harder for the family as it made them miss her even more and these family experiences add to the theme of suffering. This trouble portrays to the audience the pain that results in such a loss.

These themes all add up to the family and the present in the book. They are all very confused and I believe, are unsure of how to react to the situation. This results in the problems that pop up. They are all the obstacles they have to face. This part of the novel is the most enjoyable for me. Reading about the suffering makes me think and feel how they feel at the moment. I would not have reacted any differently from any of the characters. They take long measures to try and find her and this is what I would’ve have done as well.

In conclusion, the book has an overall really deep meaning on top of an interesting story line. The themes are all essential to making a successful novel such as, Please Look After Mom. The family suffers a lot from the effects of the loss of her mother and it is a different way of thinking of parents. I enjoyed reading this book and it was a good way to spend my time.
Please Look After Mom
Kyung-sook Shin (Alfred A. Knopf, Spring 2011)

“Shin’s prose, intimate, and hauntingly spare, powerfully conveys grief’s bewildering immediacy.
. . . And yet this book isn’t as interested in emotional manipulation as it is in the invisible chasms that open up between people who know one another best. . . .
A raw tribute to the mysteries of motherhood.”