AUBERGINE

BY JULIA CHO

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DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
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The New York City premiere of AUBERGINE was produced by Playwrights Horizons, Inc. (Tim Sanford, Artistic Director; Leslie Marcus, Managing Director), on August 20, 2016. It was directed by Kate Whoriskey; the scenic design was by Derek McLane; the costume design was by Jennifer Moeller; the lighting design was by Peter Kaczorowski; the sound design was by M.L. Dogg; and the production stage manager was Cole P. Bonenberger. The cast was as follows:

DIANE/HOSPITAL WORKER ..... Jessica Love
RAY ..... Tim Kang
RAY'S FATHER ..... Stephen Park
LUCIEN ..... Michael Potts
CORNELIA ..... Sue Jean Kim
UNCLE ..... Joseph Steven Yang

CHARACTERS

DIANE: 40. American.

RAY: 38. Korean-American. Born in America.

RAY'S FATHER: Late 60s. Born in Korea, lived in America for almost four decades.

LUCIEN: 40s. A naturalized citizen who was once a refugee.

CORNELIA: 28. Korean-American. Born in Korea, raised mostly in America.

STRANGER/UNCLE: Late 50s. Korean.

HOSPITAL WORKER: American.

VOICE: Can be played by the same actor who plays Diane.

PLACE

Mostly in a house in the suburbs of a large city.

TIME

Now.

Korean translations provided by Hansol Jung.

AUBERGINE

ACT ONE

1

Diane.

DIANE. My husband, Mark, is what you might call a "foodie." For a while he was a "chowhound" and he would make us drive all over looking for taco stands—and I'm not talking the fancy taco trucks that are all trendy right now—I'm talking some guy on a corner at two A.M. frying head cheese in an aluminum tray over a hotplate.

But then, somewhere along the way, he became a "foodie." Because what happened was, Mark, who'd never had any real prospects—I mean, he majored in philosophy for God's sake—came into some money. Well, a lot of money. And so he—I guess we, because by then we were married—became something close to rich.

He became a food tourist. We didn't go to San Francisco; we'd go to Yountville. We'd go to Portland because some guy was doing incredible things with pheasant. I mean. We went to El Bulli before it closed *three times*. Who goes to El Bulli *three times*? Do you know how bad that road is?

But this was Mark's passion. And he was not alone. Everywhere we went, in every restaurant we ate in, we'd see them: couples like us, well kept. Who had a bit more money than they knew what to do with. People well versed in sous vide and molecular gastronomy, who traded tips on where to get cheese made from unpasteurized milk and which artisanal butchers made the best prosciutto.

Maybe, the fact was we were just hungry. We were hungry for something that tasted really good. And then when we had that, we were hungry for something that tasted great. And on and on it went until we had to have something exquisite, something we'd never had before; we wanted, we demanded, the sublime on a platter. And we ate everything set before us. If some chef had plated John the Baptist's head, I'm sure we would've eaten that too.

So after some time of this…gastronomic gallivanting, I get a call from my parents. What they do is they both get on, so it's like they tag-team you. And my mom says, your father has something to tell you. And my dad tells me he has cancer. And that it's not looking good. They're going to send him into surgery right away and they want me to be there before he goes in. I say, of course, and Mark and I get on the first plane out.

I come home and find my dad cleaning out the garage. That's the kind of guy my dad is. He's part of that generation, you know the one. They're frugal, they're hardworking. They're better people, basically, than us.

And after he cleans out the garage, we go inside and my mom makes dinner. We eat, quietly. None of us know what to say. Well, my dad tells us to have a kid. And part of me is thinking, that's kind of low, to use this as an opportunity, but how can I refuse him? I say, yeah, Dad. We will.

Eventually, we go to sleep. We sleep in my old room, upstairs. And then I wake up, sometime in the middle of the night, because I smell something. Not smoke, not fire. I smell…hot butter, frying in a pan. And this smell pulls me out of my bed, out of my room, down the stairs and into the kitchen. Where I find my father, cooking.

He's taking a small loaf of Italian bread that he's sliced in half, and laying it down on the browned butter. So the bread is now half toasting, half frying. And in another pan, he's got slices of pastrami—not cooking, but just browning till they're nice and hot. He sees me come down and doesn't say a word. I don't either. I just sit down and watch him.

He used to make these sandwiches when I was a kid. Where he worked, there was a sandwich place that made these hot pastrami sandwiches. And it closed down or something, and he loved these sandwiches so much, he figured out how to make them himself. He went to every grocery store looking for the right bread, the right meat. Because it was a very simple sandwich. It only had the two ingredients. And so they both had to be perfect.

When the bread is done, he puts it on a plate and layers on heaps of pastrami. He makes the sandwich and sets it before me. He looks at me, I look at him, and the sandwich sits there between us like a contract, like a letter. Addressed only to me.

And I eat it: an explosion of hot, buttery bread and meat, crispy on the edges, the pepperiness of the pastrami edge sharp in contrast to the golden, almost fried, crumb. A perfect savoriness of salt and fat and the bread crust shatters a bit in my mouth.

It is…delicious. It is…the best thing I have ever eaten in my entire life.

Now. I don't know about memory. It occurs to me as I tell the story that people aren't allowed to eat the night before they go into surgery, are they? But I remember it so clearly. The kitchen. The smell. I feel like I could look down and see the crumbs on my chest.

The next day, he went into surgery. And he came out of it okay. But the following chemo killed his taste buds. He was never really able to enjoy food again. His remission lasted three years. And I remember, after he died, cleaning out the fridge for my mom. It was full of potatoes and frozen vegetables. That was all he ate at the end.

Mark and I did end up having a kid. And we stopped being tourists for food. Eating changed for us. We ate at home and we ate simply. That old life didn't make sense anymore.

But every now and then, I do feel that old stirring. That old hunger. But what I want is.

The memory overwhelms her.

What I want is a restaurant that could give me Los Angeles, 1982.

Essence of hot buttered bread and pastrami. I am eight years old and my father is young. And he, just like me, is never going to die. We're going to eat sandwiches together forever. We were hungry before but now we are full. And I will never eat anything so good again.

2

A hospital. A dim corner in an empty hallway. Muffled noises in the background. The occasional beep or shriek of a machine.

Ray sits with a hospital worker. They speak in hushed tones.

Ray does not know the worker's name and, after this conversation, he will never see the worker again.

WORKER. He's comfortable. Not in pain. These are good things. But we may have reached a plateau. His condition, it hasn't worsened necessarily, but it hasn't improved. At this point what might be best for him, for your family, is to be at home.

RAY. Family.

WORKER. He might do better, be more responsive. Without a doubt he'd be more comfortable.

RAY. What if he needs more treatment?

WORKER. He'll continue to get just as much care as he would here—but at home. There will be nurses, aids—you'll have the full complement of resources we can provide.

RAY. But what if I, what if he needs—more?

WORKER. Then we'll bring him right back here. It's not a one-way street. He can go home and you can see how it goes; if he needs more medical help, you can bring him back to the hospital.

RAY. Does that happen? Do people go home and then come back? Do they get better?

WORKER. Anything can happen. But it's not for us to know. All we

can do is look at what's happening right now and do our best. We'll send him home with his IV, his medications, his catheter, anything he could possibly need. Everything in his room we'll send to your home, the exact same equipment. A visiting nurse will come every day; there'll always be a nurse on call. Any questions, any issues, you just call, twenty-four-seven. Someone will always be there.

RAY. That sounds…reasonable. I mean, it'd be nicer to be home. I bet he'd like it, I mean.

WORKER. Most people do.

RAY. How long will he be home do you think?

WORKER. I don't know. No one does. But quite often it's longer than it would be here.

RAY. Well, that sounds…good.

WORKER. Do you feel you understand everything we've discussed?

RAY. Yes.

WORKER. And are you comfortable with your decision to bring him home?

Ray looks down for a long moment. The worker squeezes his hand.

You're doing a wonderful job.

That little bit of kindness almost rends Ray's heart. Not because it feels true but because he wants it to be.

RAY. Okay.
Okay.

WORKER. Good. Now. There are some papers to fill out…

The worker turns away.

This is a permission form; you sign here, here, and here. This is for insurance. Sign and date here. Initial here. This is a pamphlet about the visiting nurse service. Important numbers are here…

As the worker talks, there's a shift. The hospital becomes a dining room.

Ray signs and signs and signs.

Two people wheel in a hospital bed. An old man lies on it, eyes closed, motionless. This is Ray's father.

AUBERGINE
by Julia Cho

4M, 2W

A man shares a bowl of berries, and a young woman falls in love. A world away, a mother prepares a bowl of soup to keep her son from leaving home. And a son cooks a meal for his dying father to say everything that words can't. In this poignant and lyrical play, the making of a perfect meal is an expression more precise than language, and the medium through which life gradually reveals itself.

"…sensitive… deeply sympathetic… AUBERGINE [has] a perceptive sense of the invisible barriers that mysteriously spring up between people, and the equally mysterious impulses that bind them together. It has a cleareyed focus on the sometimes ugly details of impending mortality…" **—The New York Times**

"The language is lovely, the dramatic structure is impressive… [A] sense of melancholy is beautifully evoked in a sequence of scenes in which parents and children bond—or clash—over meals, a dramatic confirmation that food is, indeed, the fundamental symbol of familial love." **—Variety**

"Cho is a precise writer and a lyrical one. …[the] scenes are skillful and affecting, cruel and kind. …elegantly written… quietly profound… What had seemed a play about food and appetite is ultimately a play about death and loss and the compensations that help us to bear it—love, care, a brick of instant ramen."
—The Guardian (US)

"…AUBERGINE delivers a moving meditation on love, loss, and the emotional power of food. …[The play] sensitively explores its emotionally fraught situations while infusing them with cathartic humor. …AUBERGINE…has a deeply felt emotionality… Anyone who's ever shared a quiet late-night meal with a loved one, especially one who's no longer here, will find much to relate to."
—The Hollywood Reporter

Also by Julia Cho
99 HISTORIES
THE ARCHITECTURE OF LOSS
THE PIANO TEACHER
and others

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