

Stronger Together

Written by

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Based on the GENWA case

EXT. MARIPOSA-NABI COMMUNITY GARDEN - KOREATOWN, L.A. - EARLY MORNING

A CERAMIC BOWL holds the remnants of a storm that had passed the previous night. We see the reflection of palm trees against a cloudless sky. A breath of wind creates ripples in the rainwater and distorts the image.

Nearby, a spindly TOMATO PLANT shivers in the light breeze, shaking free a few bright droplets that had collected on its leaves. An ANT climbs down the spine of the plant and onto the damp soil of the garden.

We follow the ant past the daffodils, over fallen petals, and around a puddle. Finally, the ant disappears into a crevice. Home sweet home.

The garden belongs to the humans during the day. It belongs to the elderly resting on its benches, and it belongs to the children playing tag on its premises. But this early in the morning, the garden belongs to the sparrows pecking at the dirt, the sly cat slinking past the fence, and the ants marching back to their home.

The sound of cars on a nearby highway washes over the quiet industry of the garden like the muffled roar of a distant shore. Closer to the garden, an IMPATIENT DRIVER rounds the corner, then starts slamming his car horn. Over and over and over --

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. JIEUN'S HOME - BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

JIEUN (20s) opens her eyes. An alarm sounds from the phone at her bedside. From a distance, the sound of a car horn. For a moment, she closes her eyes again, chases after the feeling of sleep. Failing this, Jieun kicks off her blanket and slides off her bed.

BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Jieun brushes her teeth, spits, rinses. Splashes cold water over her face. Looks back up at the mirror, wet strands of hair sticking to the sides of her face, snaking down her neck. She looks like someone who barely escaped drowning.

That's enough staring for now. Jieun is brisk, her motions mindless, practiced. Towel, moisturizer, and a generous dollop of sunscreen spread over her face. A hint of makeup. Done.

KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Jieun takes out a tub of leftover rice from the refrigerator, scoops out a serving, and heats it up in the microwave. While she waits, she also grabs some side dishes from the fridge. They're running low on kimchi, so she writes a note on some scrap paper and sticks it onto the door of a cupboard. She signs the note with a heart. Her mom will see it later when she wakes up.

AT THE FRONT DOOR - MOMENTS LATER

Jieun's cutting it close, especially since she plans on taking the bus to work. She *needs* to get to work on time. Nevertheless, after she grabs her keys, shoves her feet into her sneakers, and shoves her apron into her bag, Jieun slows down to carefully turn the creaking doorknob, carefully open the creaking front door, and carefully close it behind her. Mom deserves her sleep.

EXT. JIEUN'S HOME - OUTSIDE THE FRONT DOOR - STILL EARLY MORNING

It's a bit chilly outside. A jacket would be really nice, even though the cold, damp air will dissipate by noon.

But Jieun barely hesitates as she locks the front door. She has places to go.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. ALEJANDRO'S HOME - OUTSIDE THE FRONT DOOR - EARLY MORNING

It's a bit chilly outside, but ALEJANDRO (40s) feels comfortable enough wearing his jacket. The air has certainly warmed since he left the house the previous night.

Alejandro fishes his keys out from his inner jacket pocket and unlocks the front door. It's been a been a long night.

INT. ALEJANDRO'S HOME - KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

ALEJANDRO'S MOTHER (60s) is making pupusas. She's scooping up the meaty filling, enclosing it with masa, and setting the pupusa on the frying pan. There's already a few pupusas sizzling.

ALEJANDRO'S MOTHER

(in Spanish)

Good morning, how did work go? I have some (dessert or fruit) in the plastic bag by the door, they're for Beatriz's family. Her son helped fix the leak in our sink the other day.

ALEJANDRO

(slightly confused, too tired to be indignant)

Mom, didn't I tell you that I would take care of that leak?

ALEJANDRO'S MOTHER

(patiently)

Yes, but you said that over two weeks ago.

(pause)

Anyways, there's still some time before these pupusas are ready. Go bring the (dessert or fruit) over to Beatriz's place, and I'll have the food ready for you and Karla by the time you come back.

ALEJANDRO

(sheepish, heading back out)

Alright, mom.

CUT TO:

INT. ALEJANDRO'S BEDROOM - ALEJANDRO'S HOME - LATER THAT MORNING

Alejandro closes his bedroom curtains, sets his alarm, and falls onto his bed with a groan.

He's asleep within minutes.

SMASH CUT TO:

STILL IN ALEJANDRO'S BEDROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

Alejandro's alarm goes off. His eyes snap open. He lets out a loud groan. Time to get back on the daily grind.

BATHROOM - ALEJANDRO'S HOME - MOMENTS LATER

Alejandro brushes his teeth, splashes his face with water, shaves his face, washes his face again, grabs the towel, done. The same drill as always. It's mechanical at this point.

KITCHEN - ALEJANDRO'S HOME - MOMENTS LATER

He waits for the microwave to heat up the left-over pupusas.

AT THE FRONT DOOR - MOMENTS LATER

ALEJANDRO
(calling)
I'm heading out. Tell Karla
goodnight for me.

ALEJANDRO'S MOTHER (O.S.)
(elsewhere in the house)
Alright, take care!

Alejandro steps out of the house and locks the door behind him.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - MEATFRESH KBBQ - EARLY EVENING

Alejandro's waiting to pick up a hefty plate of assorted raw meats. Other servers move in and out of the kitchen. It's showtime.

MANAGER (O.S.)
(leering, making an
innuendo)
Looks like you've got some
sumptuous meat on your hands,
Jieun. Make sure you don't let any
of those juices go to waste.

Alejandro turns to look at the manager, who is standing right behind Jieun. The manager's mouth is close to her ear.

Jieun is marinating raw meat. She continues to massage the meat in the sauce. Her jaw is tight, her lips turned in a slight grimace. She doesn't give the manager a response; he doesn't expect one anyways. She focuses on her work.

Alejandro takes a deep breath. He hates seeing this.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

I know I can always count on you
take good care of the meat.

The manager walks out of the kitchen.

Jieun's breathing harder. She closes her eyes for a moment,
drops her head, one last deep breath in, then she's back to
marinating the meats again.

Alejandro walks over to Jieun. She tenses up as she hears
footsteps approaching from behind her, then relaxes when she
sees that it's Alejandro.

ALEJANDRO

(looks around and lowers
his voice)

Jieun.

She already knows what he's going to say. He's going offer
his sympathy, ask her if she's fine, and she'll tell him that
she's okay. She appreciates the gesture, but it's still a
waste of their time.

JIEUN

(shaking her head)

I need to work. I need this job.

ALEJANDRO

(insistent)

We can figure something out.

Jieun is still shaking her head. It's not a big deal, she
doesn't want to make a big deal out of this. She doesn't want
to waste their time.

ALEJANDRO (CONT'D)

Let's talk at the garden tomorrow?

But she also hates working with the manager. She hates his
breath against her ear, his hands on her body.

JIEUN

(slight pause)

Okay. 4 o'clock?

ALEJANDRO

Works for me.

Alejandro's plate is ready. It weighs heavy on his wrist as
he carries it out the kitchen doors and up to the guests'
table.

Alejandro seems to glide across the floor, efficient, ready to top off a glass of water or clear a plate from the table; his knees are aching, but he hides it well.

Back behind the kitchen doors, out of sight from the guests, Jieun continues to marinate raw meat.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE FROM BLACK.

EXT. MARIPOSA-NABI COMMUNITY GARDEN - KOREATOWN - DAY

Small CHILDREN run about in the gardens, young mothers gather around sprouting TOMATO PLANTS, harvesting the plumpest on the vine and weeding the vegetation beneath. A group of TEENAGERS are planting seeds in a plot nearby. Jieun waits on a bench, wearing matching sweats, the gardeners eye her disapprovingly.

ALEJANDRO (O.S.)
Jieun! Sorry I'm late.

Alejandro walks over to the bench next to Jieun. The gardeners turn back to their planting.

ALEJANDRO (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
(sitting down)
I had to pick Karla up from her friend's house.

JIEUN
That's alright.

Alejandro reaches into his bag and pulls a warm stack of PUPUSAS wrapped in foil.

ALEJANDRO
Would you like a pupusa? My mother made them.

Alejandro hands Jieun a warm pupusa and she accepts gratefully.

JIEUN
(smiling warmly)
Thank you, I love pupusas. I wanted to talk about the incident at work. I'm tired of the manager treating me this way. And who knows how many women at MeatFresh he's harassing.

ALEJANDRO

(becoming serious)

I'm glad you decided to reach out. It's disgusting to see the way he treats you, and I know I would never want to see my Karla in that situation.

Alejandro pauses, considering what to say next.

ALEJANDRO (CONT'D)

So, what would you want to do? File a report with HR? (pause)

(angrily)

OR, I can speak to him *directly* if he ever tries to pull that shit again.

JIEUN

No, no. You know he's close with Marcus from HR. He'd never take my case seriously. And I don't want to risk you losing your job. I know you have a lot to lose.

ALEJANDRO

You're right... the only other thing that comes to mind is this center - workers' center - that my cousin Ricardo used to visit when he had trouble at work. They're called "KIWA" and all I know is that they help out workers when their rights are being violated.

JIEUN

(brightening up)

If your cousin worked with them maybe they can help. I think it's worth a shot. Do you know how to contact them?

ALEJANDRO

Yeah, I'll give Ricardo a call and find out. I remember they did a home visit first before taking on the case. Hopefully, we'll get to meet with them in a few days.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. JIEUN'S HOME - KITCHEN - EARLY MORNING

Days have passed and a closer look reveals Jieun's kitchen is well loved and worn in. Jars of ferments line the counters, a container of gochujang sits beside a crowded stovetop, and piles of bills are stacked on the kitchen table. Jieun stands by the microwave warming up two portions of kimchi-jjigae.

JIEUN

I'm nervous. What if they can't help us or they don't take me seriously. I'll have wasted everyone's time, especially yours.

Jieun walks over to the table with two piping hot bowls of the stew. She places one in front of Alejandro and keeps one bowl for herself, sitting down, a worried expression paints her face.

ALEJANDRO

It won't be a waste of time. They'll take the case, I know it. Sexual harassment is illegal and you deserve a safe workplace.

Alejandro begins to quietly slurp the stew.

JIEUN

I sure hope so. You know, he did it again this week. He got so close and said the most awful things... I even saw him getting too friendly with the hostess Sook-hee. This has to stop.

Alejandro gives Jieun a sympathetic look. Suddenly, a loud KNOCK at the door.

JIEUN (CONT'D)

That must be them.

Jieun hurriedly clears the half-empty bowls and opens the door, revealing KIWA agent DIEGO (30), a tall man with long dark hair and of Mexican origin. Diego is a warm and comforting presence.

DIEGO

Hi, you must be Jieun.

Diego extends his hand. The two shake, and Jieun motions him inside.

DIEGO (CONT'D)

I'm Diego, it's nice to meet you. I see here you wanted to discuss potentially open up a harassment case against your manager at MeatFresh. I'm so sorry you're going through that. Why don't you tell me what's going on.

JIEUN

Of course. For the last few months my manager has been making inappropriate remarks while getting ... uncomfortably close. He also does this to some of the other female employees.

DIEGO

I see. That's definitely intolerable and cause for concern. Are there any witnesses to this at work?

ALEJANDRO

Yes. I've seen it happen, and offered to step in, but Jieun felt more comfortable approaching KIWA.

DIEGO

(jotting down notes)
I'll put you down as a primary witness. We do have a few other routine questions we typically ask on our home visits, if that's alright.

JIEUN

Sure.

DIEGO

Are you being compensated for all of your hours? Including overtime... time that you had to wait for someone to cover your shift, anything like that? And do you allotted breaks during your shift?

Alejandro and Jieun look at each other quizzically.

JIEUN

I guess I'd never thought of that. I've got my paystub here, if it helps.

Jieun picks up a freshly opened envelope from the top of the stack on the kitchen table.

DIEGO

Are you a full time worker? And do you remember working overtime during that pay period?

JIEUN

Yeah, I'm supposed to be full time. A lot of times, after we clock out of our shifts, the manager asks some of the servers to stay behind and help clean up. I guess we all do it without thinking about it.

DIEGO

It says here you're only being paid for 35 hours of work, when clearly it should be 40 or more.

ALEJANDRO

What? What does that mean? What can we do.

DIEGO

Likely, that both of you and many of your co-workers are victims of wage theft. We see this happen all the time with restaurant and retail workers in Koreatown, and we work with these people all of the time. If you'd like, we can look into making this a full investigation.

JIEUN

Isn't that risky? I don't want anyone to lose their job.

DIEGO

It definitely can be. People sometimes lose their jobs and may face attempted retribution from employers.

Jieun and Alejandro grow worried. Diego pauses and considers.

DIEGO (CONT'D)

But we always do our best to protect our clients until we have enough information to make a case in court. It's risky, but the alternative is continued injustice.

Jieun and Alejandro mull this over. They are nervous but increasingly energized.

JIEUN
(with conviction)
I think we should do it.

DIEGO
Great. We'll be in touch soon.

FADE TO BLACK.

FROM BLACK.

INT. KITCHEN - MEATFRESH KBBQ - EVENING

It's peak dining hours. Nimble bodies are scrambling in and out of the kitchen while the sound of sizzling meat and chatter fills the air. Jieun has a large plate of assorted meat in her grasp, making her way out of the kitchen when she suddenly hears a loud crash from behind her. She turns back to see a plate of meat spilled on the floor and Sook-hee staring at the mess with her mouth agape. The manager peers over Sook-hee's shoulder looking enraged.

MANAGER
Are you crazy!? Do you know how
much money's worth of meat you just
put to waste right now?

He forcefully grabs Sook-hee by the wrist, making her fall to the floor.

MANAGER (CONT'D)
You're staying behind to sweep the
floors tonight. Now clean this shit
up.

Jieun scans the kitchen to see everyone helplessly watching the scene in silence like stunned deer in headlights. She clenches her fist. She never wants to feel this defeated again.

KITCHEN - MEATFRESH KBBQ - MOMENTS LATER

The illuminated open sign flickers off. Everyone begins to clock out after a long evening shift. Sook-hee is about to enter her hours when Jieun taps her on the shoulder.

JIEUN
Are you leaving?

SOOK-HEE

No I was asked to stay behind and sweep the floors. Why?

JIEUN

Then you shouldn't clock out yet. How about I help you finish up here?

Jieun maintains a friendly smile, Sook-hee appears flustered.

SOOK-HEE

But we always clock out as soon as the doors close, right? And, yeah I guess I could use the help today, thanks.

JIEUN

Well, the manager has been making us stay after we clock out to clean, but that's still time we should be getting paid for. We're all victims of wage theft, not to mention all the other horrible conditions we put up with...are you okay by the way? I saw what happened earlier.

Maria (40s) joins Jieun and Sook-hee's conversation with a worried expression.

MARIA

I'm sorry you had to go through that Sook-hee.

Sook-hee stares down at the floor, idly shuffling her feet as she emits a heavy sigh.

SOOK-HEE

Yeah, I've learned to deal with it I guess.

There's sincerity in Jieun's gaze as she carefully furthers the conversation.

JIEUN

I understand how you feel, but if all of us band together, I really believe we can stop all of this mistreatment. Alejandro and I are planning to start an investigation with a worker center called KIWA to expose the exploitation that occurs here.

(MORE)

JIEUN (CONT'D)

The more support we gain from fellow employees, the better. If you're comfortable sharing your experiences, I think you both would be a great help to the investigation.

Sook-hee twiddles her fingers and appears to be deep in thought. Maria's expression turns grim.

SOOK-HEE

I don't know...of course I want to help, but it sounds risky.

MARIA

I need this job. I can't risk losing it...not with three kids to feed. I'm sorry... but I wish you both the best.

Maria quickly gathers the rest of her belongings and exits. Jieun turns to Sook-hee who appears to still be contemplating.

JIEUN

If we get more coworkers on board, we'll gain power in numbers. KIWA also strives to protect the workers the best they can and has the history to prove it. Anyways...

Jieun reaches for her wallet in her back pocket, pulls out Diego's business card, and hands it to Sook-hee.

JIEUN (CONT'D)

If you need time to think about it, you can find more information about KIWA on this card. I have faith that we can power through this with solidarity and I'm planning on onboarding as many of us as possible.

Jieun makes her way towards the broom in the corner of the kitchen, trying to lighten the mood with a wide grin.

JIEUN (CONT'D)

Just give it some thought. Now let's get this over with.

Sook-hee smiles as she feels a newfound feeling of support.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. KITCHEN - MEATFRESH KBBQ - EVENING

(inaudible dialogue)

As he clocks out, Alejandro talks with another EMPLOYEE (male, 30s), bringing up the topic of wage theft at this restaurant. The other employee's face is grim and resigned. He shakes his head and turns away.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - MEATFRESH KBBQ - AFTERNOON

(inaudible dialogue)

Jieun is working next to an EMPLOYEE (female, 50s) who is preparing salad. Jieun listens attentively to her concerns and brings up the idea of taking part in the investigation. The other employee considers the idea, and is curious to learn more about KIWA.

CUT TO:

EXT. COMMUNITY GARDEN - KOREATOWN, L.A. - MORNING

(inaudible dialogue)

Alejandro is meeting with a small group of other employees from Koreatown. They voice their concerns about the risks of participating in an investigation, the possible repercussions they may face from restaurant management, but Alejandro speaks up and encourages the others to fight against the injustices that they face.

CUT TO:

INT. JIEUN'S HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING

(inaudible dialogue)

Jieun talks with ~~Sook-hee~~ about their progress with the investigation. They are both anxious but hopeful, and hug before parting.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE FROM BLACK.

INT. KIWA OFFICE - AFTERNOON - SEVERAL WEEKS LATER

A group of MeatFresh KBBQ employees are chatting around a table in the KIWA office. The bright sunlight trickles through the wide windows surrounding the room, vividly illuminating the light green walls. Diego enters the room.

DIEGO

Hello everyone, thank you for coming!

KIWA REP takes a seat and offers a friendly smile to the group.

DIEGO (CONT'D)

As many of you know, things are looking up for our case. Thanks to the help of Jieun and Alejandro, we were able to gather evidence of the numerous violations through our conversations with you all. Wage theft, sexual harassment, unpaid tips, the list goes on. And now all of these injustices will be heard in court!

The group of workers exchange smiles with one another and cheer at the good news.

DIEGO (CONT'D)

None of this would have been possible without all of you mustering the courage to advocate for yourselves and each other. The battle is far from over, but we're making progress slowly but surely. There's unbelievable power in solidarity, so let's keep on working together to seek the justice you all deserve.

FADE TO BLACK.

TEXT ON BLACK SCREEN

The California labor commissioner's office cited MeatFresh KBBQ for wage theft and other violations, charging over \$2 million dollars in fines.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN.

The penalties are currently under appeal. KIWA's wage worker support program is offering financial support to the workers during this trying time.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN.

To learn more about KIWA and the wage theft crisis in Los Angeles, visit KIWA.org.

ENDING CREDITS

Written by: Sarah Derris, Irene Qiao, and Mia Chang.