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### Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

A Temporary Place

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Margaret Thach

December 2013

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## Part I

“What if we broke up and I move out and you take the dog?”

I surprised myself when I finally said the words. It was a night in December and the boyfriend had just picked me up from the Reno-Tahoe International Airport. It took 45 minutes to get home. Neither one of us said anything on the dark drive. Just silent, winding turns down narrow roads carved into the sides of Mount Rose. I just kept pushing the idea of a breakup further down the road. I hoped if I pushed it far and long enough, I would eventually get to where I was headed and forget about the heavy load, except I didn't know where I was headed and the load just kept getting heavier and heavier.

It was like I couldn't keep the words from falling out of my mouth. They wanted to come out. We were in the living room, where it was cold and the lighting was dim. We were having the same conversation that seemed to surface every five or six months. I wanted to know where our relationship stood and what our future was. I wondered if the marriage and family I saw in my future were the same he saw in his.

His answers never assuaged my anxiety. He listened to me but countered with an argument that usually ended the conversation. “Just focus on yourself, Maggie. Figure out what you want to do and we'll figure out the other stuff later.” I never got used to my opinions and worries being resolved and dismissed by just one statement.

I couldn't focus on my career or myself because I didn't know what would make me happy. I just knew that I wasn't. So I turned my focus on the relationship, trying to turn it into something that made me feel secure and safe, like how it was in the beginning. It wasn't enough just to be together. I wanted every aspect of my life stacked in neat rows, so organized and cataloged so that I knew where everything was. This was my idea of security.

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There were many things that attracted me to the boyfriend but maybe the biggest reason I fell in love with him was because he made me feel taken care of. Not in a monetary way, although it was his condo I was living in rent-free when I moved in with him. It was that he was 12 years older than me. He had traveled the world and lived all over the country. He had his life figured out and I trusted him. I liked to let him take the lead, to teach me things like skiing and rock climbing and mountain biking. He knew things I didn't and I let myself fall into the role of wide-eyed student, allowing myself to be molded any way he wanted.

There were times when he tried to teach me how to swim. I never learned as a kid. My problem was that I wasn't comfortable in the water. My idea of treading water was waving my arms frantically and kicking my legs so hard until my body became unbearably heavy. The idea of floating was as absurd to me as the idea of flying, but I felt more in control in a swimming pool, where I could see the bottom.

One day when we were out on the lake, I jumped in the water and regretted my decision as soon as I went under. *Why am I not at the surface yet? How deep did I jump?* I opened my eyes and it was dark in every direction. I panicked. I couldn't see the bottom. My legs moved wildly in no particular direction. I was just hoping the motion would propel me above the water faster. As soon as my head popped up, I saw the boyfriend on the boat.

"Please, please throw me the life jacket." My arms were thrashing around in the water, as if I was throwing punches to ward off an attacker.

"Nope. I'm not gonna do it," he said. "You can swim here."

I had experienced this before. He used this kind of logic in rock climbing and skiing, when all of a sudden, I would be gripped with dread about being up so high. Even if I were pleading, even if I was on the brink of tears, he would push me to go all the way to the top. I would yell and get upset, but in the moment, my fear of disappointing him was stronger than my fear of heights. I wanted him to be proud of me.

I bursted through the surface and my feet searched for something solid to sustain me. I could breathe again but I wasn't relieved. It felt as if something in the water was after me and I was only barely eluding it. I was breathing harder. I pleaded again.

"Please, I don't want to do this." My arms were getting tired. "Throw me the life jacket."

"Nope," he said calmly.

"I'm serious. I need it. Please, just throw it to me."

He finally did. And when I got back on the boat, I felt he was disappointed I needed the life jacket at all. In that moment, I didn't live up to be the woman I thought he wanted to

be with. I wasn't an outdoors expert who could go on adventures with him. I was an anchor he had to drag around.

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I needed to know what our future was. I was looking for any inkling of certainty because I rearranged my life to be him, just him — no family, no friends, no job. And while he didn't force me to give all those things up, I wanted some acknowledgement for making those sacrifices. After five and a half years together, all I wanted was a something solid, something substantial to hold on to.

Back on the couch in the cold living room, he told me he wanted to be with me for a long time, but still, he was unsure about marriage. I heard these words so many times before. That's when I felt like I exited my body, floated toward the ceiling and watched the scene of our relationship ending. I never thought I would have the courage to end it.

Since I met him two months after I graduated college, I fell in love, we maintained a long-distance relationship and then I moved to another state to be with him. I gave up my job in Utah as a newspaper sports reporter. Now, it is clear, I gave up a part of myself, too.

He didn't say anything after my suggestion to break up. He went to the bedroom and lied on the bed with his face away from me. I went to him. Everything in my body wanted to comfort him, but how could I when it was me who was hurting him? I draped myself across his shoulders, but I still couldn't see his face.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I never thought you would say those words to me.”

I still loved him. Or had love for him. I didn't know how to quite use the word “love” and rightly represent what I felt toward him. I still wanted him to be happy. I wanted us both to be happy but for the first time in our relationship, I faced the fact that it might not be with each other.

I rubbed his neck and his back and noticed how his body was so still, almost lifeless. In that quiet moment, I didn't want to acknowledge there was another reason for the breakup. I didn't want him to know I met someone who helped me say what I had been thinking about for so long.

I wanted to get away, and in all that consuming silence in that dark room, there was nothing else to do but close my eyes and let myself go to sleep. My guilty conscience was momentarily resolved with his uncertainty about marriage.

I woke up not sure if everything said the night before was like every other disagreement we had about the future, where we each said our piece and we carried on as if we never had the conversation. But this time was different. I knew when I turned around and found him staring at the ceiling. It was dark and frigid in the bedroom.

“Did you meet someone else?”

His eyes had not moved from the spot on the ceiling. It was all happening too fast. I wasn't ready to tell him everything yet. I wanted to make sense of it first. I wished I could have said, “No.” I wished I could take back the words I had uttered the night before. I wanted to rewind back, just one day. Then, I could have avoided all of this and



the conflict and struggle would just be in my head and I would have time to figure it out. Instead, all the messy stuff was on the outside, a destructive mass that was throbbing and pounding in the middle of our cold bedroom. I wasn't ready to face it, but I did.

"Yeah, I met someone..." I said slowly.

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"This never happened. This never happened. This never happened," I whispered in between kisses with Mike, my eyes still closed.

"You don't have to keep reminding me," Mike said. "I know."

"I'm not saying it to remind you. I'm saying it to remind myself."

I couldn't believe I let myself get here, let the growing crush I had on Mike turn into something uncontrollable. My hands traced the outline of a slighter frame. My fingertips grazed the fullness of a thicker beard. It was unfamiliar but comfortable. In that instant, I felt more than the weight of Mike's body on top of mine.

I met Mike at grad school. People told me graduate school would be a life-changing decision. I didn't realize how true that statement would be. Being in grad school didn't just make me want to change my life. It made me want to leave it entirely.

Mike was living an adventurous life teaching English literature in South Korea. My low-residency program required me to attend two 10-day retreats a year. I started grad school a few months earlier in September but I hadn't taken it seriously until I got to residency in December. Being there was like being in an impenetrable cocoon where I was surrounded with people who were interested in what I had to say. I felt like what I said

mattered. There was an electrifying feeling I hadn't felt since last being in the newsroom almost two years before, where anything was possible.

I was on my grad school high when Mike and I first kissed. My attraction to him snuck up on me. Our interactions were just friendly at first. I liked talking to him. When we talked, I became the only other person in the room with him. Everybody else around us might as well have been furniture. I felt his gaze in my eyes. Mike asked me questions. He asked for my opinion. I felt seen and wanted with him, two very dangerous things when you're already involved with someone else.

I tried to justify our kiss in my head. Surely, all those years of being a loyal and faithful girlfriend got me one instance of indiscretion. I thought, *This is just a passing thing, a small crush that I'll quell with this one innocent kiss and can move on from and never think about again.*

There was also a dark side to my reasoning. At the time, I didn't want to recognize all the ugly feelings building up inside me from the relationship. With the boyfriend, it felt like I was doing most of the compromising. I felt resentment and bitterness and an equal measure of insecurity and angst. That combination made me the most scared and unstable I had ever felt, like being at the top of the tallest and steepest black diamond ski run on the mountain. Here was my chance to let all of that go. Revenge wasn't my intention when I crossed the line with Mike, but I also felt it wasn't completely unjustified either.

With Mike, I was sinking under something so fluid and strong, drowning in a different way. I let it wash over me. The kiss with Mike wasn't just a kiss because there was passion. There was wanting. There were restrained urges.

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Now, the boyfriend was sitting up in bed.

“You met someone?”

I heard the hurt in his voice. That was far worse than anything he could have said. The dark, silent sadness in the room changed as he darted toward the door. I wanted to bury my face in my hands or pull the covers over my head.

“So what happened? Did you have sex with him, Maggie?”

“No, no. I would never do that to you.”

“Then what did you do?”

I couldn't speak. All I heard was that destructive mass in the room, beating louder.

“What did you do, Maggie?”

“We kissed.”

“You kissed him? Does this guy know you have a boyfriend? That we've been living together for two, three years.”

I couldn't speak. I couldn't bring myself to tell him what happened but in my head, I acknowledged that I became what I never thought I'd be — a cheater. A deceiver. A liar. I didn't think I could be capable of those things. Maybe I had been a deceiver long before the kiss with Mike. Maybe I was deceiving myself into thinking things would work in

Nevada, that I could find my place in someone else's life. I looked around the room, searching for words. Nothing. I could feel my eyelids stretch over my pupils. Blink — that's all I could do.

“Well, I guess that says it all,” he said. “You can move out any time you want.”

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In the years after I left my position as a journalist and floated from job to job — as a U.S Census field worker, as a kindergarten assistant at a Boys and Girls Club, as a freelance travel guide fact checker, as a front desk girl at a climbing gym — I felt I lost myself. “Us” was all I had and I held on tightly to that. Being the loyal girlfriend became the biggest part of my identity. Everything else had fallen away. I was building a life around the relationship and without that, I had no blueprint to follow.

Toward the end of our living arrangement, there was a tiny voice asking me things I wasn't ready to acknowledge. It moved all over but I felt it most strongly at the bottom of my stomach. The voice was tender and soft but the words were sharp. *He's too old for you. His life is already figured out. He doesn't want to get married. Do you fit in his life? What about your life? What are you doing here?* These were the words that were always there, even if I didn't want to hear them. They had broken down and became some kind of vapor that always loomed in the corner of my brain. I let them form back into something comprehensible when I met Mike.

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I knew the longer I stayed at the condo, the harder the breakup would be. I moved out the next day and was living with a friend, but still in the same small town. Everywhere I went, I thought about the ex-boyfriend. I thought about him when I went to Raley's, the only grocery store in town, or when I drove by the school he used to teach at. I tried to keep a normal routine of going to work, making dinner and going to sleep, but I always ended up in a dark place in my head by the end of the night. It might have been enough to make me go back but when I finally listened to that voice at my core, it became the gospel I followed faithfully. *This isn't your life. Your life is somewhere else.*

But was my life somewhere with Mike? I thought about him every day since last seeing him at residency. I wanted to be with him, to not think about consequences and just go where he was.

The ex-boyfriend and I met at a bar. I learned after I got there this was his last attempt to change my mind. He knew how futile the meeting was after I kept referring to us in the past tense. No words seemed meaningful enough to say out loud. The truth was there in the silence. I watched him finish his beer and he walked me outside. His steps matched mine, slow and reluctant. I couldn't get in my car with this unsettling reticence between us. *What if this is the last time we talk to each other?* I finally blurted something out.

"This is something I need to do."

"I understand. Just promise me one thing, Maggie."

"Yeah. Anything."

"I know what's really going on here. I'm not stupid."

My stomach was a knot, and his words twisted it even tighter.

“Just promise me you’re doing this for yourself.”

“Of course, yes,” I said. “I’m doing this for me.”

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I never had plans to teach abroad or to travel. Nothing about Korea interested me before. I hated kimchi. But I started having irrational thoughts about moving to South Korea, about living in a big city, about traveling around Asia, about being close to Mike. I couldn’t ignore that voice or feeling, which was both sharp and heavy. It was a familiar voice. It was nudging me, urging me to just close my eyes and jump. Maybe in order to find what made me feel safe and secure, I needed to take a risk.

I wanted to get in touch with Mike immediately, but I didn’t want to scare him away. I was a person who broke off a long relationship and was willing to leave my current life and move around the world for him. I sounded crazy. But one day not long after the breakup, I found this email: “It was a sunny morning here when I woke up and I thought of you.” It was from Mike.

Since that email, we talked every day. We sent each other YouTube videos of Game 6 of the 1998 NBA Finals between the Chicago Bulls and the Utah Jazz, my favorite team growing up, or of funny old ESPN commercials. He sent me a video called, “Sh\*t Korean Girls Say,” with the message, “Just so you’re ready for it.” I sent him links to my favorite magazine articles. We were the same age, so he understood my references to “Saved By the Bell” and “Boy Meets World.” When we video chatted, he made me feel like we

were in the same room. He was patient with me, listening intently to the roundabout way I usually tell stories. He laughed at my jokes. I felt at ease with Mike.

But I also cried a lot. I cried in my car on my way to work. I cried in the shower. I cried until I was tired. I cried almost every night I was in the same small town. I had to pull myself out of that dark place each morning and I walked into work like a zombie every day. I didn't know how long I could keep it up. I made up my mind. I was going to South Korea to be an English teacher. I didn't care how hard it was — I was going to find a way to get there. It was the most resolve I had had in a long time.

Talking to Mike kept me looking forward. His emails got me through the month of January. The one good thing about waking up was getting a message from him. One day it would be a message wishing me luck in my women's league volleyball game that night. Another day, it would be an email countering my argument that the Utah Jazz's Karl Malone was the best power forward of all time. The best ones were just one-line emails saying he missed me.

My plan was to spend a few weeks at my parents' house and then I would move to South Korea for a year, two years, maybe three. I didn't know, but for once, I didn't need to know the answer. Before I left town, though, there was one person I knew I couldn't leave without saying goodbye to.

We had our last goodbye on Valentine's Day. The ex-boyfriend and I met at a near-empty Starbucks. He told me things I needed to hear. He told me he was sorry for not giving me what I needed. I didn't let him finish.

“No, no, it was me, too,” I countered, my guilt not wanting him to take all the blame. Of course, I had my own shortcomings. I was insecure, I was unsure, I was anxious. All of this contributed to the end of “Us.” Maybe we could have made it if those things weren’t weighing me down. I couldn’t look into his blue eyes for too long before tears came to my brown ones. I looked down to hide my crying. He grabbed my hand.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

We stood in the parking lot under a street lamp, the light revealing just how naked the trees were. It felt as cold to me as any winter day I had experienced while living there, even though it was mid-February. We looked at each other, forcing smiles to cover up the reality of knowing this was really the end. *The end*, the end.

“We never liked Valentine’s Day anyway, right?” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

I wrapped my arms around his waist under his opened green Patagonia jacket and hugged him. As I buried my face into his neck, I wondered if I was making the right decision. I wondered if I could take this risk to move halfway around the world with so many uncertainties swirling in my head. Then, in my most confident and assured voice, I told myself, “Just let go.”

There was so much I tried to control in this relationship. I obsessed over making things fit and was consumed with anxiety when they didn’t. I told myself I wouldn’t do that anymore. I wouldn’t go to South Korea with a set of goals or a checklist. Even though the possibility of being with Mike started me on this journey, I had to be bold enough to go at



it alone. Maybe I decided to take the leap because of Mike, but I had to realize he might not be able to catch me. I had to trust that I would catch myself.

“I don’t want to let you go,” the ex-boyfriend said.

I knew this was the last time we would be this close and I pulled him in tight until I could feel his heart through the jackets between us. I did feel his heart, but I felt mine, too, and it was telling me something. That voice at my core was clear. I took his face in my hands — like I had done so many times before — kissed him and then, I let go.

## Part II

### Chapter 1

There are four worthless fruit trees in my parents’ backyard. The nectarines are too small and sour. The persimmons are chalky and give you cottonmouth when you bite into them. The lemons are juiceless, just pulp. The cherry trees produce cherries that aren’t even worth the effort it takes to dodge around the hard seeds in the middle. My dad says the trees are a waste of space, that they should get rid of them and plant vegetables there instead. His tomatoes, bell peppers and eggplants have flourished in the garden.

But my mom disagrees. The trees aren’t yet mature. She says they need to be trained and pruned. She says how she will shape the trees by removing dead and broken limbs. And how she’ll water them every morning and make sure no insects or little critters bother them too much. The trees need to be nurtured and above all, the trees need time to get used to the soil, let their roots really settle into the earth. My mom knew when she got

these trees that they would take time. She doesn't mind because these trees mean more to her than just the fruit their branches will eventually bear.

The fruit trees are special because of the ground they're growing in. This dirt, this land, belongs to my mom. It's the only house she has owned since she moved to the United States from Vietnam almost three decades ago. Rented houses could no longer hold the dreams she's had since she stepped foot onto U.S. soil. What she wanted was a home and for as long as those trees stand, she will have reminders —living and thriving ones — that her dream didn't end when she fled her country.

At 56 and 65, my mom and dad have found their place in the world. I want that, too. I want to be settled and yet, I'm too scared and unsure to lay down the kind of roots my parents have. I just want to find a place that feels comfortable, and I realize it is not at my parents' house.

I have just moved in with them and I don't know what the next month or week or day will bring. My life is in limbo. And the worst part is there is not much I can do to help my situation. I am stuck, agonizing and second-guessing.

I am waiting for a notarized piece of paper to come in the mail that will help me take one step closer to teaching English in South Korea. I have been offered a job in Mok-dong, a suburb southwest of Seoul, but I won't be able to take it unless I have a notarized college degree from the notary public of the State of California in Sacramento. With that, I will be able to send my papers to Sam, the director of the school, and he will submit them so I can get a visa issuance number. That's the number I need to get a work visa.

The job starts in two weeks, at the beginning of March. After two and half months spent searching for a job, sending out applications, getting an FBI background check and requesting college transcripts, I know there's not much left in the process. I know I'm right there at the end — I just need to push a little longer.

But I'm not sure if the paperwork will be done in time for me to take the job. I think about what I will do if this job falls through and I have to wait until June, the next big hiring period. I don't think I can wait that long. I have to leave. I need to leave. I need to get as far away as I can from my former life. Being so close is just a reminder that the life I once envisioned is gone.

My last relationship, those five and a half years, is now an eerily silent room overflowing with memories and questions needing to be sorted out and sifted through. Whenever I get drawn into it, I feel the space around me closing in. I don't know where to start to organize this mess. Before long, I feel the imminent crush upon me. The tall stacks of memories are tipped and will engulf me like an impending wave. There is only enough time for me to run toward the door, pull it shut and walk away slowly, afraid to disturb the equilibrium that keeps all those messy feelings behind that door. It is filled to capacity. A mere room cannot contain all the conflicting feelings I have.

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I have only been at my parents' house for a few days and I already know that I will not be able to last here until June. My restlessness about South Korea has made my tolerance for my parents' idiosyncrasies harder to bear. In the morning when my dad brushes his

teeth, he makes the sound of a bulimic trying to throw up when there's nothing left. When he makes his coffee, his every movement is accompanied with a labored grunt, as if 50-pound weights were tethered to each of his legs. My parents argue passionately over the thermostat and what temperature it should be set at, over how to water the eggplants and cucumbers in the backyard, over how the laundry should be sorted.

On this morning, I find a pot of water bubbling on the stove. My dad just left the house to pick up something at the pharmacy. I run after him. He is about to get in his car.

“Dad, is that your water on the stove?” I ask him in Vietnamese.

“Huh, what?”

“Your water,” I say. “Did you boil water?”

“Oh, turn it off,” he tells me plainly, as if I'm the forgetful one. Then he goes toward the kitchen. I follow him and he proceeds to show me how to turn off the stove.

“See? Like that.”

I just roll my eyes.

Minutes later, when he comes back from the pharmacy, he walks past me in the living room and into the kitchen. He starts yelling.

“Oh, my God,” he yells out to my mom. “Come out here and look what you did.”

If I didn't understand Vietnamese, it would have just sounded like an avalanche of pots and pans had fallen out of one of the top cabinets, a cacophony of chaotic and piercing sounds.

My mom was warming sticky rice in a pot. Like my dad, she forgot to turn off the stove. There is a layer of burnt rice at the bottom of the pot.

“See what you did. If I hadn’t come along, this whole house would have burned down.” My dad lingers over my mom as she scoops out the remaining rice. He’s waiting for her response, waiting for his rare opportunity to point out one of her shortcomings, for once. But she stays quiet and this only infuriates him. When he’s yelling, it’s like he can’t control his arms and the movements that punctuate every syllable coming out of his mouth. From the living room, it looks like he’s delivering an impassioned speech.

There is a constant power struggle in my parents’ house. Their bickering is a never-ending carousel, always circling around the same argument. My mom’s argument is based on logic. My dad’s argument is based on how loud he can yell. They can both drive me crazy but there is something about my dad’s yelling that completely unhinges me — the way he hovers over potential disputes like a vulture and swoops in when he thinks he’s found a tiny advantage over my mom. I’ve started to recognize that vindictive alertness in him, the one that’s always looking for some kind of verbal altercation. Maybe it’s his only way to be heard.

I can hear my mom’s flat feet shuffle in and out of the kitchen and my dad getting louder, trying to get her attention.

“Dad, you forgot to turn off the water this morning,” I yell out from the couch, trying to show him he isn’t the only one who can be loud. “You’re not perfect. You forgot, too.”

“You stay out of this,” my dad yells back.

“But don’t yell at mom if you’ve done the same thing.”

This is the relationship I have with my father — my dad says something nonsensical to my mom, I yell at my dad for being a hypocrite, he yells at me to stay out of it and I try to express the full extent of my frustration with my limited Vietnamese. Then, all three of us yell at each other to shut up and all of us walk away feeling utterly exhausted and hopeless. Anger, frustration and guilt — it seems those are the pillars that hold up the relationship I have with my dad.

“Both of you stop yelling. The stove is off,” my mom says.

“Who knows what would happen to this house if I hadn’t have come into the kitchen.”

“Dad, come on. You did the same thing.”

“This is between me and your mom.” He slaps the ceramic tile countertop in unison with his statement. “You don’t need to say anything.”

“Dad,” I say, my tone giving in to the anger inside of me. I want to curse. I want to scream. I want to make my dad feel small with my big voice. But I stop myself. I’m more like him than I realize. Except that this time, I don’t yell back. I stand up and walk out the front door. I need to turn this frustration into energy, or else it will sit like a black coal at the bottom of my stomach, just waiting for another spark to ignite it.

I go on a run with my sister, who is in town for the President’s Day weekend. I try to match Goldy step for step but my attempt to keep up with her pace is laughable. She is a runner. She has been since high school. Her stride is smooth and graceful. Her feet don’t come crashing down on the cement, like mine do. When her feet hit the pavement, it

looks like each one of her strides is propelled by a hidden spring in the sidewalk. Her back is straight, her upper body completely still except for her arms, which are bent at 90 degrees and pump in a measured and even pace. She runs because she enjoys the challenge of mastering those small movements. I am not in control when I'm running. My breaths are out of synch. My arms dangle pathetically by my sides. There are tiny explosions in my shoes with every step — the violent crash of the weight of my body against the pavement.

It seems I am trying to catch up to Goldy in other ways. She is only here for the holiday and will soon go back to her life in San Diego, back to a life where she has a job that is both enjoyable and challenging, where she lives with her boyfriend and has a close-knit group of friends. She will go back to a life that, as her older sister, I don't want to admit I envy. Sometimes, I wish I had what she has. What I want of hers more than anything is her sense of security. There are no mysteries about her future. She always knows what's coming next and she takes everything in stride.

Toward the end of our run, my dad yells out that a letter has arrived from the State of California. I sprint the last 50 meters to my parents' house.

"This is it. This is it," I tell Goldy. "This is the only thing that has gone wrong in this whole process and finally, it's going to be over."

I rip the envelope open and unfold the letter. My eyes scan over the piece of paper in my hands, looking for a golden seal that indicates my diploma has been notarized. Instead, I read because my papers are not properly fastened, they have not been processed as

requested. I realize I should have stapled the documents instead of paper clipping them, something to do with verifying that all the papers are actually one whole document. A part of me wants to laugh at how stupid and ridiculous this reason is. Another part of me wants to cry.

I have memorized the calendar and know how many days I have left until the job in Mok-dong starts. Fourteen days. This sets me back another day. My sister comforts me, telling me at least I can drive the ninety minutes up to Sacramento and hand deliver my diploma to get what I need.

During the job-searching process, I have scoured message boards and blogs about how complicated it can be to teach in South Korea. I have a rough idea of how long each step takes. I know even if I overnight my papers to Sam, it might take a week to get a visa issuance number and another week to get my work visa. I think about the time difference between California and South Korea. I want to call Mike.

Every time I talk to him, I have to remind myself, "I'm doing this for me. I'm doing this for me. I'm doing this for me." I try to keep myself from imagining a future with Mike but I have to admit that knowing he'll be there in South Korea keeps me going when I want to give up. When getting the paperwork done in time seems impossible, kernels of doubt find their way into the quiet corners of my mind. The thing that keeps me up late at night is, "I've taken this big risk, the biggest of my life, and all for what? If the paperwork isn't done in time, everything I have done will be for nothing."

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The nice thing about being home is burning incense. I never do it when I'm living by myself but when I'm at my parents' house, my mom asks me to burn incense in front of the ancestral altar. My mom has made a place for the altars in the room that is supposed to be a den in every other cookie-cutter house in this neighborhood. There is one to both sets of deceased grandparents, my maternal great-grandmother and one to the Buddha and the Good Fortune Buddha, the one with the big, jolly belly that everyone confuses for the actual Buddha. We burn incense in the morning before my dad wakes up and after my brother has left for the day, so the house is quiet and the light flooding the altar room is inviting. My mom says my Ba` Ngoai, her mother, will help me if I ask for it.

Burning incense wasn't always so comforting for me. When I was a little girl, I was nervous about burning incense because I thought I was doing it wrong. I never knew what to say or how to say it. It seemed more authentic to say the prayer in Vietnamese but I could express myself better in English. At least when I went over to my friends' houses for dinner and their fathers said grace, I had an idea of how everyone else prayed.

“Dear Heavenly Father....Thank you for this food we are about to receive...”

Or I saw on television how kids prayed while kneeling at the side of their beds.

“As I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep...”

I could imitate this kind of praying. But there is no saying grace or praying beside your bed in Buddhism. I never heard my parents pray. We didn't go to temple regularly so I couldn't observe how other people prayed.

I didn't know what I could ask for. Could I ask for a pony? A unicorn? A million dollars? I wasn't sure and it felt like the orange speck making its way down the incense stick was actually a timer. I had to figure out what to pray for before the incense was done burning. As I got older, my mom told me I could ask for anything — whatever was on my mind.

I feel conflicted to pray for what seems insignificant when the things I should be really asking for are acceptance and tolerance and inner-peace. But on this day, I cannot accept my current situation, being caught in limbo like this. I'm too close to teaching in South Korea for this job to fall through. I ask my grandmother to help me. The incense sticks between my fingers feel flimsy. The smoke slowly escapes from each stick. I always say things in threes, something I started doing when I was a kid because I didn't know what else to say.

“Ba` ngoai, please help me get this job in Korea. Please help me get this job in Korea. Please help me get this job in Korea.”

I open my eyes and look at my grandmother's picture for a moment before I stick the incense in the holder. I let the smoke make its way around me. I tell myself I won't let any more questions fill my brain. I will just have faith that Ba` Ngoai will help me get to Korea.

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It is Friday and there is only a weekend before the Mok-dong job starts. I emailed Sam on Wednesday to see about my visa issuance number. He replied later that day.

“We haven’t heard of anything yet. It usually takes about a week. If I hear something, I will let you know asap. Thanks.”

I am surprised by his casual tone. Does he know how urgent this is? He must. I don’t even have a week. Then, I remember my promise to my grandmother. *I won’t ask questions. I won’t ask questions. I won’t ask questions.*

At around 7 p.m., my phone rings. It’s a long number so I know it’s from out of the country. I am sitting on my mom’s queen-size bed and turn down the volume on the television, although this only makes the Cambodian karaoke music my dad is playing in the kitchen louder.

“Dad, turn it down,” I yell out before answering the phone. My dad grunts back and the sounds from the kitchen get fainter.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Maggie. This is Sam.”

“Hi Sam. How are you?”

“I’m good. I’m good. Have you bought your plane ticket yet? I need to know when you’re arriving.”

“You told me not to get one until you contacted me.”

“Uh....I didn’t contact you yet?” he laughs nervously. “Well, I need you to get a ticket. You need to be here on Sunday because school starts on Monday.”

For as long as I was worrying, I am astonished at how fast this is all happening. This means I’m really going. I’m really going to live in South Korea.

“Alright. Call me back in an hour. I’ll have a ticket by then.”

I hang up the phone and walk past the two massive suitcases that have been packed and sitting in the corner of my mom’s room for the last two weeks. I have to yell over a Cambodian pop version of Britney Spears’ ‘Toxic’ to tell my dad I am going to the Starbucks near their house for Internet access.

The Priceline website is already bookmarked on my laptop. I click to buy a nonstop flight on Korean Air for \$827.60. My flight is for the next day at 11:35 a.m. out of San Francisco. When I close my laptop, I realize I’ll be halfway around the world in two days.

My parents have a system and their own way of interacting with each other, even if that’s arguing and yelling. As relieved as I am to be leaving, I suspect my dad is just as eager to see me go. There is a delicate balance of how my parents’ household works and my presence throws off that equilibrium. My dad doesn’t even complain when I tell him I need to be at the airport early, even though he hardly ever gets up before the hour hand hits double digits.

The next morning, my parents, my brother and I get in the car at 6:30 a.m. and we plan to be at the airport by 8 a.m. I love that we’re leaving early. It makes me feel like I can slip out without anybody ever noticing I’m even gone. Life will go on here. It makes the gravity of leaving everything I know a little less heavy. I’ve done enough crying. I don’t want to cry when I get on the plane.

My dad finds a place to pull over in the drop-off zone. He’s not supposed to park there but he leaves the engine running and my mom helps me bring my two large suitcases

inside. I see him from where I'm standing in line to check in at the Korean Air kiosk. I am relieved when I see my gigantic bags go down the conveyor belt and the agent hands me my ticket. I see my dad, who is pacing back and forth on the curb, waiting for my mom.

"Mom, you should go. I got my ticket."

"You got everything?" "Make sure you check everything," my mom says in Vietnamese. It's what she always says when I'm about to go away. It's what she said when I moved away to college and every time I went back to Utah or Nevada after a visit home. It's her way of saying "I love you" without actually saying it.

"Yes, Mom, I have everything," I say, putting my arm around her shoulders. She has supported me throughout this whole process. She has never doubted me. She trusts I'm doing the right thing for myself. I feel a tingle in my nose, which makes me know tears are coming. I hold back my tears and put my other arm around my mom.

"I love you, Mom," I say. "I'll call you as soon as I get there."

My mom nods.

"OK, we'll wait for your call."

I watch her walk toward my dad. As soon as she gets into the car and I see the car drive off, I walk toward my gate.

After a couple of hours, it's time to board the plane. My seat is in one of the back rows and I settle into the middle seat. I have my laptop and brought a few books to read but as

soon as I sit down, all I want to do is close my eyes. When I wake up, I'll be in Seoul, ready to start my new life.

## Chapter 2

It seems I have always been looking for a feeling of belonging, a sense that a place was truly mine. I don't know exactly when was the first moment I felt I didn't belong but I know that it's a nagging presence that has found its way into my life in every place I have lived.

Maybe it started when I was in the second grade and one of my white classmates asked me what I was, what I *really* was and I could have answered Asian or Vietnamese or Cambodian or American. Whatever my answer was, it meant I was left out somewhere else.

Some of my earliest memories of this feeling happened when my parents dragged my siblings and me to drinking parties. Most children from immigrant Vietnamese families know what this is. Drinking parties were when the grown-ups got together and let the kids hide away in one of the bedrooms and play video games or watch movies while the men ate and drank Budweisers and the women gathered in the living room to sing karaoke tunes. My dad was really good at these drinking parties, always one of the last men drinking at the end of the night.

In the beginning, it used to be we were the odd family out because we were not related to the other families. My mom and dad were the only ones from their families to settle in the United States. So at these parties, all the cousins would go into the other room while

my siblings and I played Cat's Cradle with a tied-up shoestring in the living room. And then it suddenly became obvious that my sister and I were a lot darker than the other kids, since we took after our dad, who was ethnically Cambodian. My brother had the complexion of my mother, who was born and raised in Vietnam.

Maybe I'm being too cynical. Maybe the other kids didn't notice my sister and I looked any differently than they did. Maybe they had no concept of discrimination or what it meant to be prejudiced. So perhaps the real reason they shunned us at those drinking parties was because my brother had cerebral palsy. Ghandy didn't talk. He didn't walk. He wore diapers — he still does to this day — and he drooled everywhere he crawled. I once saw a group of boys jump over a particular spot on the carpet near my brother. After listening to them for a while, I realized they were jumping over drool that had trickled from Ghandy's chin.

"Eww, that's nasty," one of the boys said. "Don't touch it."

I kept listening.

"Don't touch that retarded kid. If you touch him, you'll be retarded, too."

After they were done dodging my brother's drool, they ran back to one of the bedrooms and shut the door.

Still, Ghandy didn't know the difference. He sat perched on his knees, lifted his body and bounced up and down, not letting his bottom touch the ground, as if he were dancing to music only he could hear. He was content. I wondered if my sister was thinking the same question I was. *Why couldn't we be like the other families?*

This searching feeling stayed with me when I moved to Salt Lake City, Utah. I moved there after college to take a job as a sports reporter at the city's largest newspaper. The feeling stuck around when I couldn't relate to girls who were married and had two kids by the time they were 24. Mormonism ruled the cultural landscape there and starting families at a young age was a norm I could never wrap my head around. They were all nice enough but I was a not-so-sure Buddhist who was indecisive about my stance on religion and spirituality. It was easier to just avoid it all.

After that, there was the move to a small mountain town in Nevada for the boyfriend. He loved to hunt and ski and mountain bike and camp. I thought I could learn to love those things, too, and then I realized I only did those things because I loved him. The realization struck me when I was paralyzed at the top of a steep mountain run and was unable to point my skis downward. The boyfriend was at the bottom, trying to convince me to trust him and just go toward him. I kept my skis perpendicular to the mountain, bending my knees and gripping the poles so tight I could feel the muscles in my back tighten. I dug the edge of the ski into the powdery snow with each step, telling myself I would only turn them when the slope flattened out. The mountain town was not my place.

This out of place feeling has been with me for as long as the question, "Who am I?" Because of this, identity and place are two things that are intertwined in my mind. My understanding has always been that when I find my place in the world will be when I find out who I am.



I don't know what makes me think I'll find my place nearly 6,000 miles from home, but something about teaching in South Korea is calling me. Going to see Mike feels right and I realize I'll be seeing him in just a few hours.

I arrived at the Incheon International airport at 6 p.m. on Sunday. I have gone through customs and picked up my suitcases at the baggage claim. I plop them on top of a baggage cart, get behind it and put all my weight into pushing the cart toward the arrival hall in the main terminal. When the double doors open, it reminds me of when I used to come back to the Salt Lake City airport from a long weekend with the boyfriend. Masses of people were waiting for their sons or friends or future husbands to return from their two-year missions. There were balloons and flowers and signs that read, "Welcome back Elder."

There are none of those things here but the buzz about the crowd is similar. I scan the sea of Asian faces that inexplicably seem familiar and yet, I don't know who or what I'm looking for exactly.

"Are you Maggie?" I hear behind me. I see a skinny man with long straight bangs that are swept to the side.

"Yes, are you Sam?"

"No, I'm Seongin. I help Sam with the school," he says. "I'm sorry he couldn't come to pick you up."

Seongin comes around the divider rope to help me with my suitcases and he leads us to his car. When he turns on the ignition, the clock comes on and I see it is already 7 p.m.

Although I'm dying to call Mike, I'm a little nervous, too. I don't know what's going to happen when we see each other. I don't know if Mike will need to go back home because he has to go to work. I don't know if he'll spend the night. After months of emails, video chatting and phone calls, I know we are more than friends but we haven't verbalized anything. Mostly, I'm afraid to jinx anything. But there is also a part of me that feels guilty for having such strong feelings for someone else so fast. I know my reasons for not saying anything but I don't know what Mike's reasons are for staying in this limbo between friendship and something more. I'll find out shortly.

"How long will it take to get to Mok-dong?" I ask.

"It's about an hour and fifteen minutes," Seongin says.

I feel relieved and nervous at the same time. The ride will give me enough time to compose myself. I will be seeing Mike for the first time since residency in December three months ago. More questions run through my head. *Will we have the same spark we had then? Will I still feel that magnetic pull toward him? Will my hands get clammy when I try to hold his hand?* And then I realize, we've never held hands. I try to make small talk to get my mind off of it.

I turn to Seongin, who is waiting to pay the airport parking fee. There are about three cars in front of us.

"I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Seongin," he says. "But I have an American name, too."

"OK. What's your American name?"

“When I studied in Canada with Sam, I really liked the band Korn.”

“Korn?” I ask. “Like the band, the one with a ‘K’.”

“Yes, I’m not proud of this.”

I laugh and it’s the first time I’ve done anything but be nervous and anxious in the last 24 hours.

“I really, really liked this band so I chose the American name ‘Jonathan,’ after the lead singer.”

“I like ‘Jonathan.’ That’s a good name.”

“I hate it. I need a new one.”

“You can just give yourself a new name?”

“Not your Korean name but you can change your American name. People do it all the time. You don’t like your name, you change it.”

I’ve never thought about how you could completely change your name, something that seems to be such a big part of who you are, to morph to fit who you evolve into. That’s what Seongin wants to do — find a name that suits him better. It’s not such a radical idea. It makes sense. After all, we shed something about ourselves every day. Every hour, even. It is estimated that a person has roughly 1.6 trillion skin cells. Of those cells, between 30,000 and 40,000 of them fall off every hour. Our skin is constantly in a state of change and regeneration. Skin cells that become too weathered fall away to make room for new ones. It’s like our bodies are always producing a blank slate. In this sense, we start fresh

every day, always on the cusp of another beginning. “Jonathan” had just become too weathered for Seongin.

I know that feeling, to want to shed something that no longer fits you. Like Seongin, I have a name in my first language and an American name. My Vietnamese name is *Trung*, a name for a boy or a girl. It means middle. Then there’s my American name, the name that appears on my birth certificate. My parents gave me this to keep people from butchering *Trung* and to remind me that I am, above all else, American.

I was named after Margaret Thatcher, the former prime minister of Britain. My dad idolized Ronald Reagan and when he found out I was a girl, instead of naming me ‘Ronald,’ he named me after Reagan’s friend and greatest political ally.

My naming started a trend in my family — all of my siblings were named after world leaders. My sister was named after Golda Meir, the first female Israeli prime minister and my brother was named after Mahatma Gandhi, the man who led India to independence from British rule. My parents wanted all of us to have strong names, for the names to have some weight.

But my name felt like an anchor. *Margaret* felt old to me, as old as the prime minister herself. It felt serious and cold like it didn’t belong to me. The combination of the “M” and “R” and “G” never settled in my ears. The sounds of those letters were like little rocks grinding against each other. No matter how worn down they became, they never fit together.

I should have felt honored to be named *Margaret*. The person I was named after was a respected woman around the world. *Margaret* was the name of queens and saints. It meant “child of light” or “pearl.” It really was a beautiful name and yet, I hated it.

The summer I turned 15, my mom wanted me to decide what career I wanted. She didn’t want me to waste time in college bouncing between majors. She sent me to the library to do research. Instead of looking into prospective jobs, I got distracted by the names dictionary. I looked up *Margaret* and all of its possible nicknames. Names like *Margarita*, *Greta*, *Rita*, *Madge*, *Marge*, *Margie*, and *Marjorie* were just as bad as *Margaret*. Then I saw *Maggie*.

“Maggie,” I whispered to myself. I let the vibration of the sound float around my head.

“Maggie,” I paused again.

“Maggie.”

The sound was soft and fluid as the name left my lips, almost weightless.

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“What’s your last name?” I ask Seongin.

“Kim.”

“OK. What are some of your hobbies? What do you like to do?”

He keeps his eyes on the road and lists off his hobbies. I look at his outfit, how pressed his pants are, how coordinated his outfit is. He has a sense of humor. Seongin seems like a sensitive soul.

“I got it,” I say, interrupting him.

“OK. What is it?”

“Wesley. Wesley Kim.”

He looks at me, curves his mouth slightly and nods slowly.

“Wesley Kim’,” he says to himself. “I think I like it.”

“Just try it out,” I say. “See if it fits. If you don’t like it, we can change it again next week.”

The roads have been clear since leaving the airport. I know there is probably about 45 minutes until we get to Mok-dong.

“Wesley, can I use your phone?” I say. “I told my friend I was going to call him when I landed.”

“Oh, you have a friend here?”

“Kind of,” I say, still a little uncomfortable with what I should call Mike.

“Where does he live?” Wesley asks.

“He lives in Bundang.”

“That’s really far. He must be a really good *friend*.”

*Did Wesley just put an emphasis on ‘friend’?* I’m so embarrassed. It feels like Wesley just looked into my head and now can see all the things I want to do with Mike when I see him — run to him, hug him, kiss him for as long as I want.

“Yeah, he’s a good friend. He’s going to help me get settled,” I say, as innocently as possible.

“Riiigghhhttt,” Wesley says, as he gives me an unconvincing nod.

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“Mok” means tree. Before this area was developed by the government to cater to the growing population of Seoul, the open land was used for raising horses. Still, the region is full of trees. Although, right now, as Wesley is pulling up to what will be my home for the next year, I don’t see any trees, only a dense forest of towering buildings.

We arrive at my Officetel, a five-story building nestled between the main road and a grocery store. Wesley and I carry the suitcases up a flight of stairs and squeeze into an elevator that feels like a coffin. We are stuck on the ground floor for a moment, trying to make space for ourselves after pushing in the suitcases. Wesley pushes the button to get to the fourth floor. We pull my suitcases out into the dark hallway and he punches in the code to the lock on room 403, opens the door and turns on the light. He takes off his shoes in the tile area before he steps foot onto the hardwood floors.

“Here, let me show you how everything works.”

I blink my eyes quickly three times, making sure what I’m seeing is really there. I let out a nervous laugh, as if I’m not sure if someone is making a joke. *This is my apartment?* The Officetel is tinier than my dorm room was in college. I set my two suitcases down and it takes up half of the floor space in the apartment. There is a small kitchenette with one burner and a bathroom with no designated showering area — the whole bathroom is the showering area. A microwave, what I soon learn is quite the luxury, is sitting on top of a small refrigerator, which is next to the closet. There is a twin bed that sits under the one window in the place.

There are three other teachers at Sterling who live in this building and all of them live on the second floor. Wesley takes me down there to introduce me to them.

Only two of them are at home — Geneva and Sabina. They both have been here for weeks and have gone through training and observed classes. They actually know where the school is. I'm the last teacher to arrive. It's a quick and awkward introduction. This is better anyway. I have to clean up before Mike comes.

After Wesley leaves, I put sheets on my bed and hang up some clothes. I take out the piece of paper that I wrote on while I was in Wesley's car.

"Meet at Mok-dong Station," it says.

I'm not sure where Mok-dong Station is so I head downstairs to the second floor to ask Sabina.

"Oh, it's really close," she says. "You just walk down the main street and it's where the road splits into two. You can't miss it."

I thank her for the directions and tell her I'll see her tomorrow.

I walk outside and the air practically snaps as it hits my face. It's March but the winter still lingers. I can see trees now and buds decorate the delicate cherry blossom branches. Neon signs advertising PC rooms and karaoke rooms blink fast above me. It vaguely reminds me of being in Vietnam when I was 17, but not quite. It doesn't smell the same. It smells salty and like wet pavement. I walk past restaurants that look more like pet stores — there are walls of tanks in front of each one greeting customers. The fish inside these tanks swim around in tense circles, as if they know that they are just one customer



away from being scooped up and whisked away to the kitchen. I stop to take a closer look at a fish I've never seen before. At first I think these fish are dead but they are at the bottom of the tank. They have fins on either sides of it so it looks like it's already being served up on a plate. In another tank, I see tiny octopuses the size of my hand trying to climb out of the sides.

*I'm in Korea.* These three words resonating in my head are absurd. I'm still in shock that I made this happen. I'm surprised by the fearlessness that brought me to Korea, but I can't ignore the source of this courage. A part of me can't believe I'm here and another part of me can't believe that I did it again, I moved and changed my life for a guy. *What makes me think this time will be different?* I don't know, but it's too late to turn around now.

I walk past three crowded coffee shops to get to the station. Even though it's Sunday night, the streets are still bustling with people, taxis still dodging pedestrians, and cars honking obnoxiously on every street corner. When I get to the station, I walk down the escalator. I can hear the clicking sound of my boots as they hit each step. It seems like the escalator is never-ending. When I get to the bottom, I raise my eyes and am not ready for the onslaught of people moving around me. I think about what will make Mike stand out to me — his green eyes, his beard, his wispy brown hair. I don't need to look for long. We practically brush shoulders when I hear, "Maggie!"

"Hi," I say, not believing Mike is actually standing in front of me. "I almost walked right past you."

It wasn't quite the reunion I had been imagining. Our first meeting since residency was so sudden, like unexpectedly running into an old acquaintance at the grocery store. But that doesn't matter. He is here. He is in front of me. I can actually touch him and I don't have to imagine anymore. I slip my arm through his arm and put my hand in his pocket, where we hold hands for the first time.

Mike's reaction to my apartment is the same one I had.

"Well, this is Korea," he says.

We both take off our shoes in the tiled area. There aren't many places to sit so I take a seat on my bed. Mike is standing in the middle of the room. He is just a few inches taller than me but he looks like a giant in this studio apartment. I look down because for the first time since I left San Francisco, there is a quiet moment in my head. I feel shy. I feel vulnerable. When I look up and open my mouth to let words come up, Mike is already walking toward me. He bends down and kisses me.

I have the answer to all my questions. Nothing has changed between us and this time, our kisses come with no guilt. There's no reason for secrecy. There's just Mike and me, and the ocean that was once between us is gone.

### Chapter 3

I am one of eight foreign teachers at Sterling. It's a small school on the eighth floor in one of the many high-rise buildings in Mok-dong. There is a dentist's office on the sixth floor and a bank on the fourth. E-Mart, a Costco-like grocery chain, is in the basement. Sterling is not so different than any of the other hagwons, or after-school English

programs, in this city. Mok-dong is known for their top-notch schools and the notoriously overbearing moms who send their children to those schools. Because of this, Mok-dong is home to a lot of wealthy families who can afford to have their kids learn English at such a young age.

In the morning, the school is a kindergarten and pre-K. In the afternoon, we turn into an after-school program and teach elementary-aged students. I teach the high level kindergarteners — second-year seven-year-olds, which means they have been at the school since they were five. There are first-year seven-year-olds, six-year-olds and five-year-olds. When the kindergartners go home, I teach third-graders.

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It is Edward's birthday today. I didn't know it was his birthday. If I did, I would have decorated my classroom. I have only been teaching for two weeks and the walls are still pretty bare, only speckled by a few of my students' drawings.

The rest of the class takes their seat around the long oval table in my classroom and waits for Bella, my Korean co-teacher, to bring in Edward's chocolate cake. I don't want to admit it but of my eight students, Edward is my favorite. There is something irresistibly cute about all of my students — I'm convinced Korean kids are the cutest kids in the world — but I can't resist Edward's golf-ball cheeks, his precise bowl cut and his tiny spectacles.

Edward didn't even know it was his birthday until his mom told him this morning. In America, we are taught that our birthdays are all about us. It's the one day of the year

where we are allowed to be selfish, to expect gifts and to be celebrated for our uniqueness. In Korea, turning a year older is a group activity. Kids born in the same year turn older at the same time, at Seollal or Lunar New Year. A baby is one when it is born and if the baby is born before Seollal, he or she would be considered two years old by the Lunar New Year, even though the baby might actually be only a few months old.

None of my students know when their birthday is. Last week, I tried to do an activity about their birthdays and none of them had an exact date.

“You guys don’t know when your birthday is?”

Millie, one of the three girls, puts her index finger to her lip and looked up at the ceiling and then blurted out, “Maggie Teacher, my birthday is when it is a little bit cold.”

The idea that a baby is a year old when it is born is a concept I am vaguely familiar with. When I was young, my dad would always say I was older than I actually was and I assumed that he forgot what year I was born in. I learn this is common among many Eastern Asian cultures.

I learn two more things with Edward’s birthday — that he is the oldest student in the morning classes and that my seven-year-olds aren’t really seven. Some are actually five about to turn six.

Bella lights the candles on Edward’s chocolate cake and the class sings ‘Happy Birthday’ before Edward blows out his candles in one huff. The kids clap and squirm around in their chairs, waiting for Bella to put a piece of cake in each of their bowls. After eating their cake, the kids line up at the whiteboard to take a picture. Without any

prompting, they put their arms around each other and lift a peace sign up to their dimpled cheeks. They tilt their heads slightly and lift the corners of their mouths and part their lips to display perfect rows of baby teeth. These kids know how to take pictures.

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For the first time since my first couple years in journalism, I remember what it feels like to enjoy my job. It's a stunning revelation, since I was convinced in college that teaching would be the most boring and uneventful job. Nothing about teaching appealed to me then. It was a thankless, mundane job that eventually turned people into robots.

But being a kindergarten teacher has been a fun challenge so far. I'm thinking about art projects, fun ways to teach contractions, and homework packets. I brace myself every morning I walk into the building because there have been times when the Korean staff tells me there is a birthday party or a cooking class that day and my whole schedule changes.

When the weekend comes, my days are filled with Mike. I take the subway to his apartment. I didn't even get lost on the first trip out there. It has been freeing to not have a car, to step onto a subway and throw myself in a book or sleep between transfers. Mike shows me where to eat and where to go to meet other foreign teachers. I meet new people every week.

The everyday pace here is fast. It's like I've been dropped on a treadmill at high speed but to my surprise, I haven't stumbled. My feet knew what to do and my stride fell into place. It feels invigorating to keep up.

It is a 15-minute walk from my Officetel to Sterling. Only three weeks into this job, and I'm already arriving late to school. This morning is no different. I let my hair out from the braid I put it in before I went to sleep. I swipe some mascara onto my eyelashes and hurry out the door. My feet shuffle past the same restaurants with tanks and coffee shops I passed when I met Mike that first night. It has been cold since I came to Korea but today, the breeze is warm and it is swirling through the branches of the cherry blossom trees that line the main road. It's the beginning of April and the buds on the branches have turned into white and pink flowers that from a distance, look like tufts of cotton candy in the trees. I walk under a canopy of branches that rain pale pink petals. The breeze keeps the petals suspended for a moment before they litter the dirty sidewalks.

I feel like I am in a snow globe that has just been flipped right side up. I forget about being late as the petals float around me. Everything around me has slowed down. In this brief still moment, I realize I've had no time to wallow in the uncertainty about my future and myself. When I was back in Tahoe, I hated myself for not knowing answers about what I was going to do next in my career or about what was going to happen with the boyfriend. This was clearly a result of my ineptitude, of my indecisiveness and my lack of assertiveness. *What is wrong with me?* I used to ask myself all the time. I was living this vivid dream I had once, where I was running on a track and I saw where and how fast I needed to go. But my legs would not move. They stayed fixed in mid-run and my mind was frantic, seeing all my competitors rush by, their glides so smooth and natural.

The wind lifts my thick hair off my shoulders. The light at this time in the morning makes even the sidewalk glow. I want to put my arms out and feel them cut through the warm breeze, the way Julie Andrews extended her arms as she ran through the Austrian hills in “The Sound of Music.” I remind myself I’m not in a movie. *But it’s just so beautiful.* I don’t need to spin in circles with my arms extended as exquisite, ethereal petals fall around me. But this is the first time in a long time that I feel like I’m not an outsider just watching my life. I’m actually living it.

#### Chapter 4

I have gained a few titles here in South Korea. I am Maggie Teacher. I am a Writer. I am Mike’s Girlfriend. Moving into these roles has been seamless, like they have just been waiting for me to come into them. These titles give me the stability I have been looking for since I stopped being The Sports Reporter. They give me structure. They give me purpose. They give me an identity.

But on the streets of Mok-dong, my role isn’t so defined. When I step outside of Sterling, it’s as if my face becomes a blank slate. I am just one small current in a swift moving river — I’m completely insignificant to the flow. I am not a revered native English speaker, like I am during the day at Sterling. I am nothing. To the other people on the street, I look like every other Asian girl walking through Mok-dong. I blend in until eventually, it’s like I’m not even there. I like the dichotomy of having a very specific role at my school but becoming anonymous as soon as I step out of the building. A lifetime of

feeling like an outsider has taught me to take comfort in being invisible and I'm glad that finding something more secure hasn't meant giving up this solace.

Walking to and from school are the best times for people watching. In the mornings, sometimes I see a group of ajusshis — older Korean men — in barbecue restaurants, shoes off and leaning on an upturned knee. Green bottles of soju line the edge of the table. On this street, it seems morning isn't the start of a new day, just a continuation of the night before.

Other mornings, I see ajusshis and ajummas, the female counterpart, collect trash and separate recyclables. They go around my neighborhood in groups of three or four. I've seen men about the same age as my father pulling massive rickshaws, their spines curved like a question mark. I've been taught to have the kind of reverence for the elderly that makes me get out of my seat on the subway, even if there are other seats, or to abstain from lifting rice to my mouth until the oldest one at the table has had the first bite. What should I do when I see a fragile, wrinkled man struggling to navigate his heavy load through the street? *Do I get out of the way? Do I offer to give a hand? Would that be insulting?* I've seen an ajumma wearing mismatched athletic shoes and pushing a sooty baby stroller that has been reincarnated into a dolly for cans and cardboard boxes. My mom's face comes to my mind and I imagine the sadness she would have if, after the life she'd been through, she had to resign to the fact that she had to collect trash to get by in her remaining years. War, displacement, loneliness, longing — were the lives of these ajummas really that much different from my mom's?



After work in the evenings, I see a younger crowd heading to dinner. The women are walking dolls. Every girl I walk by looks like they have just stepped out of the fashion advertisements that decorate the walls in the subway stations. Their skin looks like shiny silk — smooth and translucent. I see every type of girl on the sidewalks of Mok-dong: feminine, girly, preppy, professional, hipster, punk, and then combinations of any of the following styles. No matter the style, the girls are all petite. Some have legs that look so thin and fragile I expect their bones to snap if they were to trip in their five-inch heels. The men are just as meticulous with their fashion. Their shoes are polished. Their hair is styled. There is a sharp, ironed crease running down the middle of each pant leg. Their attention to detail rivals that of any woman who has passed me.

I stare at people as if they can't see me. I feel I can do this because I'm not a part of this world, their world. I don't wear five-inch heels. I don't have beautiful, milky skin. My clothes don't look straight from the runway. I get lost in the noise when I walk down the streets — the continuous honking, the music blasting from the karaoke rooms, the endless indecipherable chatter floating around me. I don't understand any of it. Because of this, I feel unseeable, like the frequency of the atoms that make up my person has been turned down. I move without anybody noticing. I have no one to impress. There is no pretending. When I smile, it's genuine — it's not to put on the impression that I'm having fun or I am content. The smile is for me.

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The best and worst thing about being in Korea is you're never alone. Even in my tiny studio, it feels like there is someone always around. I feel it when I hear garbled voices through my paltry walls or when I happen to look out the window and I see two smokers hanging out of their apartment windows in the next building. They're so close, I feel I can reach out and light their cigarettes for them. And it doesn't matter how late I am out. The neon sign lights never turn off; the streets are never empty. All this constant frenzy is distracting and I welcome the distraction because it keeps me from going to that eerily silent room in my head.

Mike and I have a routine. We video chat during the week and I take the subway as soon as school gets out on Friday for an hour and a half to visit him for the weekend. But on this weekend, Mike has come to Mok-dong. On Saturday night, we watched old episodes of "The Cosby Show" on YouTube. We cooked dinner and it took hours because I only have one burner. This morning, we decide to take a walk before he heads home later this afternoon. We walk down the main road, but in the opposite direction of Sterling. I haven't explored Mok-dong at all. I don't know where we're headed. Most of our conversation has to do with how I don't want the weekend to end and that I want him to stay.

"I know, Maggie. But I have stuff I want to do. I want to read. I want to write. I have to prepare for class. You'll see me next week."

“You’re right,” I say, trying to hide my disappointment. I don’t know what I wanted him to say. Maybe that he’ll wait to go home so he can spend as much time with me as possible. “I should write, too. I’ll walk you to the station.”

We head back to my studio and Mike grabs his things. Before we get onto the main road, Mike stops me. The sun is in my eyes so I can’t really see him but I’m holding his hand and know he’s looking at me.

“I love you, Maggie.”

“You do?” I move to where I can clearly see his face. “Wha... What?”

“I wanted to say it earlier. I’ve known this for awhile,” Mike says. “But I didn’t want to say it over video chat.”

“You love me?” I ask again, all of a sudden remembering the last time someone said that to me.

“Yeah, I love you.”

Everything about my relationship with Mike has been based on a gut feeling. That’s what told me to go talk to him at residency, what told me come to South Korea and it’s what is telling me to say what I feel, no matter what guilt might be lurking elsewhere. My gut is telling me to let go, just say the words.

“I love you, too, Mike.”

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After I watch Mike leave, I walk back to my apartment. It’s so quiet. I stand in the middle of the apartment, straining to hear some garbled voices through the walls. Maybe

if I stay still enough, I can pick up some conversations from the street below. I open my laptop. *I should write.* Maybe the clinking sounds of my fingers hitting the keys will be enough to distract me from what I have been avoiding since I got to Korea.

But my fingers are frozen. I stare at a blank document. I watch the cursor blink and my eyes blink in unison, blinking until tears come out. There's no avoiding it now. The guilt has found a way to take up the silence in the room. The word *love* bounces around in what feels like my hollow head. I think about Mike saying that word. Then I think about the ex-boyfriend saying that word. More words come to my head like, *You were the love of my life.*

And, *You were my rock.*

And, *How could you do this to me? I trusted you.*

I still remember the way the ex-boyfriend's lips trembled when he said those words. What am I crying about? Is it that I still love the ex-boyfriend? Have I made a mistake? I know that's not it. I told Mike I loved him because I do. But I'm crying because I know I hurt someone who I did love and that he might still be hurt because of me. I'm crying because I have moved on and I've found someone else and I feel like I've abandoned someone who I never thought I would. I'm crying because I want someone to tell the ex-boyfriend that she loves him, too. I just know it's not going to be me.

I let myself cry. I can't wipe my eyes fast enough. Tears fall swiftly from my eyes and nose, staining my shirt and my pants as I sit cross-legged on my bed. Pretty soon, the room is filled with my crying. My chest moves up and down because of my hurried

breaths and heavy sighs. I think about the ex-boyfriend's words again and remember how they cut through me when I first heard them and I remember how so, so sorry I was for doing this to him, for breaking his heart. I still am.

I want to run away from the thoughts, far away from those gut-wrenching words and the guilt. I want to go to Mike, but by now, he is an hour and a half away. I can't go on the subway like this. Maybe I need to be knee-deep in all of these messy feelings. Maybe this guilt that has been casted over me like a net, trapping me, is what I deserve. After all, who gets to break someone's heart and still find love? Why do I get to be happy when I caused someone else pain? I deserve this. I completely deserve this. I stop fighting that net around me. I just curl up into a ball onto my bed, letting the net engulf me, letting myself be caught.

## Chapter 5

I know what my parents would tell me if they saw how upset I got over the ex-boyfriend the other night. They would tell me to move on, to forget about him and to pretend he never existed — forget that I was even with him. “It's better this way,” they would tell me. “No point in dwelling on what has already happened.” I suppose this is how they started their life in America.

Growing up, my parents never told me about what happened to them during the Vietnam War. I knew my dad was in the army and fought with the Americans. My mom told me life was miserable with the Việt Cộng. But my mom told me some happy stories about her family before the communists, where she was one of six. She told me how her

favorite time of the year was Tết, the Lunar New Year, because the whole town would be constantly buzzing like a beehive, rushing to get ready to bring in the new year. She remembered how that was the time of year she would receive new clothes. But the more she told me about her life before coming to America, the more questions I asked.

“Why didn’t anybody else from your family go with you?”

“Why were you and Dad the only ones to come from your family?”

“Did Dad kill anybody when he was a soldier?”

“Did you get shot?”

“Did a lot of people die?”

“Who were the bad guys and why did they want to kill people?”

“Can a war happen here in America?”

My questions were met with a dismissive wave. “Hỏi nhiều quá,” my mom would say. She told me even if she answered all my questions, I still wouldn’t understand.

I only knew as much as my high school classmates did when we learned about the Vietnam War in my sophomore World History class. I don’t know where I saw these pictures — probably not in class because the images were so graphic. But I remember seeing the picture of the little girl in the middle of street with giant puffs of smoke and helmeted soldiers in the background. She was completely naked and the anguish on her face — the way her eyes were squinted and her mouth was agape — was so palpable I could almost hear her screaming. I could hear the sound of feet on concrete of the other

kids around her, as if they could run away from an aerial napalm attack. I wondered if this was the kind of the thing my mom saw, the kind of thing she had to live through.

Then there was the photo of a general executing what looked like a civilian at point-blank range. There was that same anguish in that civilian's face, only he knew in fact he was going to die. All the while, the general seemed nonchalant, his face and his gun-wielding extended right arm completely at ease, as if he were killing a fly or squashing a roach. When I first looked at this picture, I didn't know who the bad guy was. Because they were both Vietnamese, I thought they were on the same side. The photo was even more haunting than the one of the little girl running away from the napalm attack. Is this what my dad did? Dispose of people as if they were insignificant bugs?

Because the memories were so haunting, maybe it was best for my parents to lock them up in a place where the memories couldn't get out, instead of letting them linger around in their new American lives. When my parents left Vietnam, neither of them knew if they would see their siblings or parents again. Neither of them knew if they could survive the attempt to flee their country. But they knew they had to try and in order to do that, they had to completely abandon their lives. In some ways, they had already died. Sealing up old memories was how their previous lives remain buried. Otherwise, they would just be menacing ghosts, hovering over their new lives like the incense smoke above the ancestral altar after an offering. Moving on was the only option they had.

But what happens to those memories that are stored away? Are these the kind of memories people can just forget? There's moving on and then there's suppression,

pushing those feelings down further and further until they start to become a poison, like a foreign object that has been lodged into the body. Does the body know it doesn't belong there and push the foreign object out or does it just become a part of you?

I wonder if this is the same thing the Koreans call han. Han is a collective sense of sadness that seems to be a part of the cultural landscape in Korea as much as the mountains are of the physical landscape. A peninsula that is strategically situated in between the East Sea and Yellow Sea, Korea has long been a target of occupation throughout its 2,000-year history. In the aftermath of numerous invasions by Manchus, Mongols and ancient Chinese kingdoms to the Japanese occupation during World War II and the Korean War in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korea has become a country of survivors.

Suffering and hardship are passed down from generation to generation. Han is what binds the Korean people together. It's a sorrow that is historical, collective and personal — a profound resentment stemming from injustices or persecution. This feeling is lined with a bitter acceptance and yet, there is a sense of hope that comes with han, a strong resolve to overcome the pervasive feeling of suffering. It's something that has become a Korean characteristic, as defining to the people as black hair or dark eyes. Korean poet Ko Eun has described it as a part of the Korean psyche. "We Koreans were born from the womb of Han and brought up in the womb of Han." There is no direct English translation of what han truly means — it encompasses so many complex feelings.

Nobody has told me about han but I know I've been in the presence of it. This was the indescribable feeling I got when I first met Nikki, a potential substitute teacher for me. I



have only been at Sterling for three months but I need to take some time off at the end of June to attend my cousin's wedding in Vietnam.

Sam has been overwhelmed since the school year began. He has been trying to get funding to open a new branch of the school next year, which means staying out late and drinking soju with businessmen to secure deals.

"Why don't you just not drink when you go with them?" one of the teachers asked Sam one day during a teacher's meeting, where he was struggling to keep his head up.

"I can't do that. It would be disrespectful," Sam said. "This is just how business deals are done in Korea."

He tries to juggle the concerns of multiple helicopter parents, who call to check in on their children every week. That's the nice thing about being a teacher in South Korea. Because there's a language barrier, we never have to deal directly with the parents.

Sam puts up an exterior to show he has it all under control. But all the teachers here know the façade is a shaky one. It is just one big gust of wind away from completely toppling over. Sam needs notes tattooed backwards on his forehead for him to remember what teachers have told him that very morning.

So I look for my own substitute. I post an ad on the Substitute Teachers Page on Facebook and get immediate responses. I receive one from a guy who has been teaching in South Korea for a few years. Appearance-wise, we couldn't be more different. He's tall, black and looks like he may have been a football lineman in high school or college. I

wait to get a few more responses. Based on my own hiring process, I know there is a preference when it comes to looks.

I know Sam is at school today but there's always something for him to take care of. I knock on his door when I see him at his desk in his office. When he calls me in, his head is in his hands and it looks like he just been through the 12<sup>th</sup> round of a boxing match. He fights against lofty and unrealistic expectations. Opening a third branch of his school at such a young age would give him the appearance of a successful entrepreneur. The truth is, he comes to school with bloodshot eyes and tells any teacher who is willing to listen that he was up until 3 a.m. the previous night. He looks exhausted and defeated.

“Sam, I have a few teachers for you to look at.”

I hand him three resumes of male teachers, all of them accompanied with the customary headshot. Sam glances at each photo and flips through the pages.

“Let's wait to see who else applies.”

When Nikki applies a few days later, I know Sam will be happy. I hand over Nikki's resume but it seems he doesn't even read it when I tell him Nikki is Asian and female.

“Alright, that sounds good,” Sam says. “Let's bring her in so she can observe one of your classes.”

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When Nikki comes into my classroom after school, she only seems barely taller than my kids. She looks more like a student on the first day than a teacher. Nikki tentatively walks into my classroom, carrying what looks like an oversized briefcase. She looks lost.

“Hi Nikki. Nice to meet you. Let me show you around the school and the books that we use.”

I show her the lesson plan I have made for the time I’m gone but soon, we run out of things to talk about.

“So...Where are you from?”

“I’m from Maryland,” she says. “I came here to be with my family.”

“What do you mean, ‘be with your family?’”

“I was adopted by a white family in the United States and I came here because I found my birth family.”

I am surprised she has offered so much personal information but I’m also intrigued. I have a friend here — a girl from high school — who is also a Korean adoptee but she’s had a difficult time tracking down her birth mother. I know Nikki’s situation is a rare thing. I want to know more but I don’t want to be too forward. There is something about her demeanor that says she wants to tell this story and only needs to be asked about it.

Lesson plans and textbooks are the furthest things from my mind. I ask questions the way I would have when I was reporter, searching for a scoop. I don’t need to ask many before she tells me she grew up in a family where she felt smothered and neglected at the same time. She told me how even though her upbringing was very privileged, she felt alone and out of place. She never felt that her family was truly hers.

“I’m never going back to Maryland.”

*How is that she is telling me all this stuff? Who would tell all of this to someone they just met?* An hour ago, Nikki and I were strangers and now I feel as if I've gone past a wall she doesn't let down often.

There's a far-off look in her eyes when she tells me this. She's standing next to the ceiling-to-floor windows in my classroom, looking down onto the trees that line the streets of Mok-dong. I hadn't noticed before now that the trees had completely changed. There are no more cherry blossom petals decorating the sidewalks. The trees are full with vibrant, green leaves and when I see this, I realize I've been in Korea for one whole season, been here long enough to witness the trees go through a transformation. Nikki's eyes go from the trees back to me.

"I found my birth family," Nikki says. "And I'm living with them."

I can't imagine what it would be like to discover a new family halfway around the world, to all of a sudden be one of seven sisters, like Nikki is. Nikki's sisters told her that her parents loved her the most because they chose her to send away. They didn't want to let her go, but if they had to, they wanted to give her the best. It seems her sisters see her as the lucky child, the chosen one to live a big life in America while everybody else in the family was left behind to live a difficult life in Korea. She smiles a little bit but her eyes betray her. She was constantly reminded she never belonged to something or somewhere and then suddenly, she learned her real life was happening somewhere else, on parallel planes of time and place. Would I feel like the lucky one if I were her? Or would I feel

like just an apparition in both lives, not truly present in either place? It isn't that hard for me to imagine what she's going through. I am familiar with that feeling of otherness.

"I'm sorry," she says. "This is way too much information."

Suddenly, I'm embarrassed by my curiosity. This is the kind of story I would have liked to hear on the radio on NPR or "This American Life". I would be interested, but then I could just turn it off and be in control of how much the story affected me. But I'm in *this* story. My actions mean something. I don't know the right thing to say. I don't know if there is a right thing to say. I wonder if it even matters. Maybe all that really matters is I listened and I was there to absorb her story, some of her sorrow.

"It's OK. Sometimes, you just need to get some things off your chest."

And when she is done talking, the mood in the room changes. The light of the Seoul afternoon sun seems to be coming into my classroom in a different way. The sun makes bright, blinding rectangles on the hardwood floors.

Nikki has a plan. She wants to help her family with the income she would receive by becoming an English teacher. She wants to teach her little sisters and nieces English to give them the advantage only wealthy parents can provide for their kids. I don't know if she'll ever be able to shake that profound sadness that is in her, but in this moment in my class, she has a purpose. Even if it took her whole life to find it, she found something to lift her heavy heart, to give her a reason to be fully present. She's no longer a floating ghost. That's the thing about han — it's so heavy that it brings you back down to earth.

## Chapter 6

Today is June 16, my brother's birthday. That's why I'm thinking about him more than usual. When I see somebody his age — at work, on the subway, on the street, in a coffee shop — I think about what he would be like if this day 25 years ago were different. When I look at my kindergarten students, I think about how much more their little brains have evolved and developed in their six years than his brain has in his 25.

I think about how tall he would be. I think about the sense of humor he would have. I think about the questions he would come to me with, what kind of sisterly advice he would seek from me. I think about how close we would be. I think about how we could go to the park and play pick-up basketball together and then get banana milkshakes from Sonic afterwards because we both like bananas. I think about him introducing his girlfriend to me and me telling him I hate her because no one is good enough for my baby brother.

I have these what-could-have-been thoughts in the deepest, tiniest corner of my brain where no one can see that at one point in my life, I didn't want the brother I had. All I wanted was to have a normal brother and a normal family. *Why us? Why my family? Why did I have to have a retarded brother? Why me?* I would ask the universe, God, Buddha. Once I went down this hopeless path, it was hard not to keep going. A part of me dared me to wish for a different brother. I went further, re-evaluating the few tidbits I knew about Ghandy's birth over and over, as if the constant wringing of facts could undo what had already been decided by fate. Could anything have been done to save him from it? I

knew my parents moved from Utah to California before he was born because they heard it was cheaper there to have a baby, that my brother was born almost a month after his due date because of language barriers and miscommunication, that my mom couldn't give birth vaginally and my brother's brain was deprived of oxygen while she was waiting to have a Caesarean section. Was it all supposed to happen like this?

As I get older, I try to fill in the holes of what happened at my brother's birth but there are so many questions that are pointless to ask now. The constant speculating of what my brother's life could have been is the most painful kind of hopelessness because no matter how I try to untangle the facts of the beginning of his life, he still has cerebral palsy. Even if I could make sense of what happened, nothing changes. I wonder why I torture myself with even trying.

It's like the time I was five and my mom was helping me get ready to go to a wedding reception. My mom told me to hold a curling iron while she fixed my pantyhose. While her head was down, I heard a very distinct voice. *Just do it. Just do it. Just do it.* And very nonchalantly, I brought the curling iron over to my right arm and pressed the shiny, hot metal to my skin. I screamed and dropped the curling iron. My mom scooped me up and put lotion on the burn.

“Why did you do that?”

I looked up at my mom, my eyes still wet. I didn't want to answer her because I knew she would yell at me. She would be mad if she knew I burned my arm because I just wanted to see what it would feel like.

So I make up these scenarios in my head about my brother's birth that would erase all the sideways looks, the rude reactions and the snubbings we got during our childhood, just to see what it would be like to have a normal family.

For the first few years of my brother's life, it appeared we were a normal family. My brother was small enough that people didn't realize he wasn't hitting the typical milestones. But when my brother started school, people started to realize something was wrong.

My brother didn't go to the kind of school that my sister and I went to. For him, school was a place where his teachers squeezed his flat, platypus-like feet into stiff shoes attached to braces that were adjusted too tightly around his thin legs. It was a place that smelled like disinfectant and drool. It was a place where other kids like him learned things like opening a door knob or lifting food to their mouths.

My brother experienced the most growth in his first couple years of life. He learned to crawl and to clap. Since then, his brain has been stalled, unable to surpass the abilities of a nine-month old baby. Although he instinctively knows a few things a baby wouldn't, things like never crawling into the kitchen or the bathroom or jumping up and down on his knees when he hears music.

Of all of his senses, hearing made the best connection to his brain. He wailed when he heard my Mom's Vietnamese folk music, *cải lương*. The nasally singing and the sharp sounds of the instruments unnerved him as soon as the sound hit his ears. But he would smile and laugh when my dad turned on the radio, which was always set to his favorite



country music station. My dad learned to love American country music while he fought in the Vietnam War, where American soldiers introduced it to him. When my brother heard an upbeat song, he jumped up and down so fast he nearly got rug burn on his knees from the friction with the carpet. He also got excited when he heard a running washing machine or the sound of a revved-up lawnmower.

Although hearing was what connected Ghandy to the world the rest of my family lived in, it was also a trigger for his seizures, which he developed around seven or eight. He would bounce on his knees and make babbling and grunting sounds, showing just how much he enjoyed the sound reverberating in his ears. But as soon as the sound stopped, it triggered a tremble that started in his left side and ran across his whole body. Some seizures were short and he would resume crawling in the next minute. Some seizures were terrifyingly long.

This was our family's normal. With every new ailment or side effect his handicap brought on, my family adjusted. We fell into an unspoken and natural rhythm when it came to Ghandy's care. My mom got him ready for school. My sister put him to bed. My dad made him food. I would help bathe him. Everyone had a role and in our household, where we could control Ghandy's surroundings. We could let him listen to country music all day long. We could cover his ears when distant lawnmower sounds buzzed outside to soften the abruptness of when it stopped. But outside of the house, the unpredictable could happen and my family was lost without our routine.

Ghandy was 14 when my family went to Vietnam for the second time. My family had made the trip before, so we thought we were ready for the long voyage. We were wrong.

My brother sat between my mom and me in a four-seat middle row. It was dark in the cabin and most of the other passengers were asleep. My mom tried to coax him into sleeping, but lying across four airplane seats felt too different from the full-size mattress he fell asleep on back home. My mom put his head in her lap and I reached over to pull his chronically bent legs over mine. We put a haggard airplane blanket over him. My mom gave him a bottle filled with watered-down Tang. He only drank that or whole milk. But my brother didn't want it and in his anger, he ripped the rubber nipple, releasing a cascade of Tang across his face. He flung the bottle. He pushed up on his legs and thrust his pelvis in the air. A strained and urgent whine came out of his mouth.

“Shhhhh.....” my mom lowered her hand to pat his chest. He turned his head and found her hand with his teeth and chomped down hard. She pulled away from the shock of the pain and he reached his hands above his head and grabbed wildly, trying to find some flesh to pinch or dig his nails into.

It seemed as if he was possessed. I imagined it was an intense case of “airplane ear,” when pressure builds up in your ear and you need to pop them. I know how piercing that pain can be. I saw the urgency in his pleading eyes and I said a little prayer in my head. *Please let whatever is hurting my brother stop.* I worried about the other passengers and what they were thinking. The lights in the cabin were turned off and I was thankful that any possible impatient and judgemental looks were hidden by the darkness.

Ghandy's screaming and wailing were so loud and intense it seemed impossible that it came from such a little boy. I had never heard these sounds from him before. Ghandy drove his palm up into his chin, the blows came at a steady pace. His eyes were red and the mixture of tears and drool formed a shiny, thin mask over his face. My mom sat him up. She rubbed his back and made that relaxing shushing sound again. He took a breath and was quiet. He was probably exhausted from all the crying and howling. Finally, my mom was able to get him to go to sleep. I turned away from my brother in my seat and fell asleep, too. I hoped by the time he woke up, we would be in Vietnam.

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I haven't seen anybody like my brother in Korea. Ghandy doesn't represent what I know so far about the culture here. I've been in Korea for three and a half months and from the very moment I made up my mind I was coming to teach English, I knew how important appearance was. I didn't know exactly what the employers were looking for but I knew looks were a priority.

Every subway station is lined with plastic surgery advertisements, especially when I go to Gangnam, an upscale district in southern Seoul. When I'm in no particular hurry, I linger through the station, taking my time to get above ground, where rows and rows of plastic surgery clinics are waiting to cater to new patients.

I remember the first advertisement I saw. It was almost startling how enormous the faces were looking back at me. There was nothing especially unpleasing to the eye in the before picture. I saw a woman with narrow eyes, a nose not much higher and wider than

my own and thin lips. Her hair was greasy and pulled back and her face was expressionless and empty.

In the after picture, her eyes were bigger, as if someone had permanently pried her eyelids apart with their index finger and thumb — the way you would check to see if someone is dead or just asleep. The woman's eyes were fat drops of coffee, clear and dark. Her nose was thin and high and her lips filled out. She looked like a different person since the shape of her face had also transformed. The line of her jawbone was as delicate and controlled as the silky ink that flows from a ballpoint pen when it touches paper.

I took a couple steps back and squinted, not believing those two pictures were actually of the same woman. The transformation was so drastic, I wondered how many slits and cuts of a doctor's scalpel it took to achieve it.

I learn from my Korean co-teacher that cosmetic surgery is so routine, so unremarkable that girls sometimes get surgery as a high school graduation present. It's no more unusual than going to the dentist or getting an annual check-up.

The advertisements weren't just for facial surgeries. There were pictures of hammertoes that had been corrected, of protruding ears that had been pinned back. What these advertisements told me was here in Korea, anything could be fixed and should be fixed. You don't have to be born perfect but you can be made perfect.

So where would that leave my brother? Would people here cross the street if they saw my brother being pushed in his wheelchair, the drool dripping from his

chin like syrup? Would they contort their faces with disgust after seeing my brother's slightly crossed eyes? Or would they point when they saw him rocking back and forth in his seat while making croaking sounds in the back of his throat? There had to be people like my brother in this country. I wondered where South Korea kept them all.

The disabled people I have seen aren't treated like people at all. Their dignity has been taken from them as they beg for money, face down, never making any eye contact. When someone drops a cheon won bill into their cupped hands, they acknowledge it by bowing excessively.

There's one disabled man who haunts me. I think it's the same man but I've never seen his face. He's always in the middle of AK Plaza in Bundang, where Mike lives. When Mike and I walk through the crowds of people who are carrying bags from Louis Vuitton, Prada and Burberry, my eyes go to the man lying face down on an oversized skateboard. His arms are two triangles that jut out on either side, supporting his head. His chest looks broad and his stomach is substantial but the fish waders covering his lower body goes flat. Sad Korean music blares from the stereo next to him. Still, people ignore him as if he's a chewed-up piece of gum, only acknowledging him there when they want to avoid walking into him.

I strain to catch whatever details I can of the disabled man as Mike and I walk by to get to Traveler's, the bar where most of the foreigners hang out. I feel the urge to reach down in my purse to pull out whatever small bills I have but then I stop, hand still in my purse.

I hesitate because I want to remain in this world, the normal world, the one staring instead of the one stared at.

And by now, it's too late to drop money in the man's upside down hat. Mike and I have already walked past too far and I feel ashamed I could gawk so recklessly when I know how hurtful — how inhuman — those stares can make someone feel. So I do what everyone else does and the only thing I can do to make myself feel better. I pretend he doesn't exist.

The thing about having a brother with cerebral palsy is that I can't pretend he doesn't exist. On the other side of that hopeless path I used to go down is the fact my parents will die someday and Goldy and I will be responsible for Ghandy. This fact is what I have avoided and never truly addressed since I became aware of the reality. No matter where my life takes me or what I accomplish, being Ghandy's caretaker will be a role waiting for me. That means changing diapers. Feedings and baths. Sleeping in the same bed with my brother because he's never been able to fall asleep by himself. I don't want to admit that at one point in my life, all of that sounded like a prison sentence. A part of me still thinks it does.

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When I was 19, I was an interpreter for my parents during a meeting with Ghandy's Valley Mountain Regional Center worker. Her name was Mandy and her job was to make sure Ghandy had the equipment he needed and we had what we needed to take care of

him. She asked about his diet and his daily routine and then she asked how my parents were holding up.

“What do your parents do when they need a break?”

“What do you mean, ‘need a break’?”

“You know, when they get tired. It’s really hard to take care of someone like Ghandy, so sometimes, people need a break.”

I didn’t need to translate the question. I knew what the answer was.

“My parents have never needed a break.”

“Well, when they do, we do have facilities that provide respite care.”

I explained to my parents what Mandy told me, that respite care was where trained professionals were ready and capable to take care of Ghandy when my parents needed it. They could drop him off for a weekend or a week or even a month.

“You mean, leave Ghandy with strangers?” The beginnings of what looked like betrayal started to form on my mom’s face, as if I had already abandoned Ghandy. I knew then Ghandy could never go to a home or institution. Even though my parents have never said it, I know what this means for my future.

Even now, halfway around the world, I know I am tethered to this reality. I wonder if it will ever stop feeling like a slow crushing weight. Or if it’s just a truth I need to accept and embrace. My life has never really truly been my own. In my life, my family will always be with me.

Family — it's the most important thing in Vietnamese culture. Back in Vietnam, in the same house my mom grew up in, three generations of relatives live side by side. But in my immediate family, it's just us. No aunts or uncles or cousins. As my parents get older, my sister and I will become the cornerstones of this family. No matter how much I want my life to belong to just me, my sister and I have to be strong enough to hold everything up.

## Chapter 7

I'm in a makeshift changing room. The metal rod hangs low from the ceiling and arcs around one of the corners of this small dress shop. Because it droops in the middle, the curtain doesn't shut all the way. The shop owner sticks her hand through the opening and hands me three new dresses. Her hand is like a doll's hand, small and fragile. The mint-colored jade bangle bracelet seems like it weighs her wrist down more than decorates it. "How were these dresses, em (little sister)?" she asks me in Vietnamese.

"Umm...." I forget I'm in Vietnam. I just arrived in Ho Chi Minh City from Seoul this morning. I switch languages. "Yes, Chị (big sister), these dresses were a little too small."

I push the floral dress down past my waist and wiggle until it falls onto the floor, revealing the straps of my dingy bra and the least sexy pair of underwear I own.

The two previous dresses felt like trying to pull a full-size fitted sheet over a queen-size mattress. Upon first glance, it looks like it will fit but inevitably, something winds up being exposed. I take a break from trying on dresses. I look at my near-naked body in the mirror and see how my bra cuts into the flesh around my chest and how doughy my



stomach looks. I wish I didn't have to try clothes on right now but I need to find a dress today. I pull the decrepit curtain back and stick my head out of the tiny dressing room. My Aunt Sáu is sitting on a low plastic stool. My mom, who flew in from California earlier this week, is sitting on a piece of cardboard on the tile floor, fanning herself.

“What time is it?”

“We've been here for an hour already,” my mom says.

I look over at the shop owner. There's nobody else in the shop. We came toward the end of the day and I have a feeling the owner knows exactly what time it is.

I need a dress for my cousin's wedding, the event that has brought me to Vietnam for the first time in 11 years. There are other things I'd rather be doing — visit with my other cousins, ride on the back of a motorbike through Saigon's District 1 or drink a café sữa đá (Vietnamese iced coffee) at my aunt's coffee shop. But there's not much time because the wedding is tomorrow and I still have nothing to wear.

It's a Friday in late June and even though the sun has begun to set, I can't stop sweating. There's an oscillating fan hanging in the corner swaying back and forth and blowing dusty air. Sweat beads percolate along my upper lip and glide down the slick skin around my mouth.

I hold up one of the dresses the shop owner handed me. I take a step back and bump into the stack of three boxes taking up precious space in the cramped dressing room. I look the dress up and down and I suspect it will be too tight on my 5-foot-4, 137-pound body. It's a tight white lace cocktail dress and I struggle to get the hem over the combined

circumferences of my thighs. Three awkward lines form over my crotch. *Oh, God. This dress is already a 'large'.* My eyes go to my reflection in the mirror but I am only looking at myself from the waist down. I'm afraid to see the whole thing. When I do, I see that the dress flattens my chest and the armholes cut into my armpits. It looks like my arms are being strangled.

“Big sister, do you have this dress in a bigger size?” I ask.

“No, that is the biggest size we have in the store.”

I call her “sister” even though we are not related. In Vietnam, there are no strangers. It is a country full of brothers and sisters. But I don't know how it's possible I descended from the same people the shop owner did. I am in a land of short, delicate-boned people. The shop owner is like every other woman I've seen in Vietnam — about 5-foot, slight shoulders, narrow hips. Her tiny, dainty hands hang flimsy from her wrists.

“Come out so we can see you,” my aunt calls out from the other side of the curtain.

“I already took it off,” I yell back. “It's too small.” *They're all too small.*

I pick another dress. After I pull it over my head, I see that I look matronly and childlike at the same time. The dress is cinched at the bust line. The straps are too thick, making my droopy-shouldered frame look boxy. The top of the dress is covered in tiny silk roses and has the opposite effect of the previous dress — it makes my bust look big and frumpy. The bottom of the dress, which reaches about three inches above my knees, flares out and looks like an upside-down paper cupcake holder.

Nothing feels right about what I have on or any of the other dresses I have tried. I feel too big, too tall, too wide. *I'm the Vietnamese Godzilla*. This dressing room experience has made me so sensitive, so conscious of how much of an anomaly my body is. It has made it so clear I am not supposed to be here, not in this store, maybe not any store in all of Vietnam. I don't belong here. I'm ready to be somewhere else.

This unsettling feeling is a familiar one. It's a longing for inclusion I have chased since the moment I was introduced to a classroom of white faces and inquisitive eyes looked at me as if I were an alien. It's being overly aware of how I was so unlike everybody else, how weird and unusual I was because of my ethnicity or my family. It's not ever feeling completely at ease until I was by myself, trading in awkwardness for loneliness.

I thought it was a phase I had hopefully outgrown when I got to Korea, but now I realize it's only been dormant. Will this feeling ever go away? Right now, it seems this perception of otherness is so ingrained it's what you would find at my core. It's what is there when you look past what I do for a living, past how I look, past what my passions are, past who I love or who loves me. This is what everything else is built around. And even though I am surrounded by family, I can't shake this feeling while I'm here in Vietnam. In some ways, I feel it even stronger.

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My mom and I are staying at Si's house while we are here. On the night before his wedding, Si sleeps on the floor to give my mom and me his bed. Both Si and my mom

have already dozed off but I am still up watching episodes from last season's "The Voice" on television.

During commercial breaks, I think about how tomorrow will go. I haven't spoken Vietnamese too often since moving to South Korea. Even at the best of times, my Vietnamese is shaky, and in two previous trips to Vietnam when I was younger, I've never been able to fully express myself to my relatives. In the past, I had to rely on my mom to translate the English words in my head that failed to turn into the Vietnamese version. These untranslated words kept me on the outside, never fully able to connect with my family because I was insecure about how I couldn't say what I really wanted to. I've always been an outsider. During my childhood in California, my looks kept me from really fitting in. Here, it's the language that keeps me from being fully included.

I worry about maybe looking like a little girl tomorrow. My dress is blue and white. It was one of the last dresses I tried on and I chose it because it didn't make me feel like a stuffed sausage. It cinches at the waist and flows loosely to my calves. On the other hand, it does resemble a Vietnamese schoolgirl outfit, and I wonder if I made the wrong decision. I wonder what all my relatives will think when they see me.

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My mom wakes me up at 7 a.m. Si has already been up for an hour. He needs to go to the fresh flower market and get the bouquet for Thi, his bride. Then, iron his suit and shower before the groom's procession heads over to Thi's family's house for the traditional tea ceremony. There, Si and Thi will ask her ancestors in front of the ancestral

altar to bless their marriage. Si will then bring Thi back to his house and ask his ancestors the same thing.

It doesn't take me long to get ready and I head downstairs to wait for my mom and visit with any relatives I might run into — all of them live in this neighborhood. Si's house is a fourth of what used to be my grandparents' house. Since they passed away, the house has been sectioned off and the surviving family members were left with a piece. They took their inheritance and built up to at least three stories. So even though everyone lives in their own house, all of my relatives occupy the same space.

I am standing in the courtyard that Si and my Uncle Út share. I can only see my grandparents' house if I take a few steps back, take in the full view of what used to be here. I remember this house when I first visited. The house was never lifeless. There was always somebody home because the house was secured with a wide accordion steel gate and couldn't be locked from the outside. There was a chain attached to the gate and it was slipped through a hole in the wall into the house. But it wasn't just that. There were altars to pictures of relatives I never knew, the waft of incense smoke always making its way through the halls, up the stairs, to the roof. Life and death were ever-present.

I look up, seeing how tall my grandparents' house has grown. Si's house is where the family used to park the motorbikes, and my Uncle Út's house is where the storage area used to be. I try to remember where my grandfather's chair was or where my grandmother's hammock used to swing. So much has changed but for the moment, standing here in front of this house makes me feel like no time has passed since my last

trip to Vietnam, like I am still that 17-year-old just at the beginning of realizing my ‘real’ life would start soon. I would go off to college. I would decide my career. I would decide where I lived and who I wanted to be. I would be a part of something. I would be happy.

At that age, I thought once I lived on my own, I would be unburdened by my parents’ expectation. I felt smothered by the duties that came with being the eldest in an immigrant family. I was a translator, an interpreter, a cultural broker. I was my parents’ guide, helping them navigate life in America, even though it was uncharted territory for me, too. There was also the expectation of being the best student, reassurance that the sacrifices they made weren’t wasted. Away from my family, I would be free to be myself and to find my place in the world. But I’ve found this searching feeling has stayed with me, no matter how far away from home I moved.

I walk around Si’s house toward the marketplace.

“Where are you going?” Aunt Út, my uncle’s wife, yells out at me.

I turn around and walk toward her. My heels feel wobbly on the uneven pavement.

“How are you, Aunt Út?”

“When did you get here?”

“I flew in yesterday.”

“Come in and sit down.”

In her living room, I recognize my grandfather’s hand-carved wooden chair. It was the chair he slept in every night and it stretches across the far wall. I walk toward the chair and run my fingers across the tiny peaks and valleys of the carving on the back.

“Sit down,” Aunt Út says.

She is wearing typical Vietnamese housewife clothes — a sleeveless, billowing shirt over loose fitting pants that come to just below the knee. The floral rayon fabric is light and breathable and is preferred to other fabrics such as cotton or nylon in a humid climate like this. Comfort and ease are the most important things when it comes to clothing choice in Vietnam. There are no housewives in Vietnam who curl their hair, put on dresses and apply red lipstick to do chores around the house.

She sits down on the cool tiles and leans on her upturned right knee.

“How long are you here for?” Aunt Út asks.

I wonder if I should be sitting on the ground, too. *Is it disrespectful to sit here while she is on the floor? Should we be on the same level?*

“I’m only here for three days,” I say. I slowly sit on my grandfather’s chair as if it’s a medieval one covered in spikes that have just been sharpened.

“Go ahead, sit. Talk. Eat,” Aunt Út says, shoving a bowl of fresh jackfruit in my direction.

“How is Korea? What do you do?”

“I teach English to kindergartners.”

“Why did you go to Korea?” she asks. “You couldn’t find a job in America? How much money do you make over there? ”

There's no shyness when it comes to talking about money or jobs. Everything is out in the open. Nothing is off limits, especially if someone older is asking you these kinds of questions.

"Yeah, the job market is bad in America," I say. "They pay really well in Korea. It's easy work and I get a lot of time off and I'm close enough to Vietnam to visit often."

She nods slowly as she puts a piece of jackfruit in her mouth. My answer isn't exactly true but I tell her what I think she wants to hear. Does she really want to know I moved to Korea for Mike? That meeting Mike made me break up with the ex-boyfriend? That leading up to Korea, I was in the town I moved to for the ex-boyfriend and I had never felt so alone? Would she care that, even though my parents and close friends were completely caught off guard by my decision to move to Asia, South Korea just seemed like the obvious choice for the quickest life change at the time? I'm not sure I would even know all the Vietnamese words to tell her that. So I search my Vietnamese vocabulary to say something more direct. It's the most truthful thing I say.

"I needed a new place," I say. "And I can save \$10,000 by the end of the year."

Her eyes perk up. I've said the right thing.

"Well, then," Aunt Út says. "Sounds like you made the right decision."

My mom comes down from Si's house. She is wearing a black and pink áo dài, a traditional Vietnamese dress — a long tunic over flowy, silk pants.

"There you are. Let's go. We're going to be late," my mom says. "It's time for us to go over to the bride's house."



I look to Aunt Út, who is putting away the jackfruit in the kitchen.

“Aunt Út, you’re not coming?”

“I’ll be at the reception,” she says. “You go first to the tea ceremony.”

My mom and I ride in separate cars to the bride’s house. She’s in the car with her two sisters and Si’s dad, which is reserved for the honored elders of the groom’s side. I get in the front seat of a minivan driven by my Uncle Hai, who has a chauffeuring business.

This makes him the only one in the neighborhood who has a car. My 20-year-old cousin and his four friends fill up the seats in the three rows behind me.

“How is living in Korea? How long have you lived in Korea?”

I know what Uncle Hai is asking me but I didn’t catch how to say ‘Korea’ in Vietnamese.

“I moved to....” *Um, what’s the word again?* I put my head down and I rub my forehead as if the word is buried somewhere deep in my mind and I can bring it up to the surface. *I wish Mom was here.* My uncle looks at me in the passenger seat.

“Hàn Quốc.”

“Wait, can you say that again?”

“Hàn.” He pauses. “Quốc.”

“Oh, right, I’ve lived there since March.”

I hope my cousin and his friends were too absorbed in their own conversation to notice me fumbling in the conversation with my uncle. I know enough Vietnamese to get by but significant parts of the language still elude me and I feel at my age, I should have more of

a command of the language. I should know how to write and read in Vietnamese, know how each of the six accent marks contours the sound of each letter. Just this morning, my younger cousin corrected me on a particular word, giggling at my made-up inflection.

“Chị, that’s not how you say it.”

It didn’t matter what he said past “chị.” I lingered over the word, thinking about how it almost sounded like he was patronizing me.

We pull up to the bride’s house and I feel I am not in Saigon anymore. Houses in Saigon are tall and skinny, crammed into tight spaces bound by maze-like alleys. Thi’s house looks like a remnant from when the French ruled in the 19th century. The imposing, metal gate surrounding the house seems as if it is keeping a secret. The gates open and lead to a courtyard filled with a sea of different shades of green. There is a rock fountain in the corner, the pool of water speckled by glints of shimmering orange and white— the koi fish periodically popping up to the surface. Fruit and shade trees create a green canopy, keeping out the now high-noon sun. A thick veil of ivy plants has smothered the second-floor balcony.

“Will you carry one of the gifts?” Si asks me.

“Or course.”

I am honored to be a part of Si’s wedding procession. Each member of the procession brings a gift for the bride’s family. We hold crimson tins covered in red and gold handkerchiefs containing a boiled chicken, areca nuts and betel leaves, cakes and mounds

of dragon fruit, a hot pink fruit that looks like it's on fire with green flames. It is time to start the ceremony but there is confusion about how to line up.

“Let's put her in the back,” Si says as he puts the members of his procession in order. “She's the tallest.”

There was a time, like during my teenage years when I wanted to be the first Vietnamese player in the WNBA, that this statement would have made me ecstatic. I used to drink eight glasses of whole milk a day and told Goldy to pull and stretch my legs while I held on to the bottom of the couch. But I cringe now when I hear Si yell it out. Because today, all I want is to blend in and not bring any attention to myself. I know what it's like to stand out — to be the only brown person in my class, to be excluded because the other kids didn't want to play with me and my handicapped brother, to not know what church was because of my Buddhist upbringing. To blend in meant being normal and a part of something. As I get into place and walk toward the bride's house, I wonder if blending in is possible here.

The girls in the bridal party, who are all in modern neon-colored áo da`is, bring the presents upstairs to where the altars are and Si and his procession follow. The altar room is small, so only the elders in each family are allowed in. I scoot out of the way into the frenzied hallway.

They set the six red gift tins in front of the altar and one of them — Thi's younger sister — goes to get the bride, who is in one of the bedrooms. Thi is in a glittering red áo da`i and her shiny, gold silk trousers underneath peak out from the thigh-high slit of the dress.

Thi's mother is by her side. In Vietnam, giving a daughter away to her new husband is a mother's job. The photographer motions for Thi's mom to move to the side so he can get a shot of just Thi coming into the altar room. In that moment, Thi looks lost and unsure and overwhelmed by all the relatives and family members crammed into the small room. But her mother doesn't let Thi stand there alone for long. She regains her spot next to her daughter and slides her arm through Thi's. It seems Thi has found her footing again. Then, she looks at Si and smiles.

Thi approaches Si and together, they remove the cloth from each tin. Thi examines the quality of each gift. Some gifts, like the areca nuts and betel leaves — a mild stimulant found only in this region of the world — are more traditional than practical. It used to be that chewing the nuts and leaves opened up the conversation of marriage between two sets of parents to discuss their children's marriage. Other gifts, like the boiled chicken, symbolizes that the groom is capable of providing for the bride.

The gifts make a colorful presentation for the ancestors. Si and Thi light incense. This is when they ask Thi's ancestors to bless their wedding and their future family. The room has been buzzing with sounds of shuffling feet and chatter, but as the neon orange speck of light slowly moves down the sticks of incense, the room is momentarily overtaken by a solemn silence. On special occasions like moving to a new house, having a baby or a wedding, the ancestors are always consulted. In the small altar room, the present life and afterlife come together as the incense smoke floats around Si and Thi.

Next, Si slips a gold band around Thi's slender finger.

“OK, now kiss her hand,” the photographer yells out. Si pauses for a moment and gently presses his lips against Thi’s newly decorated ring finger. This kind of public affection, even on his wedding day, is uncomfortable for Si. Si’s mother died when he was 10 and my grandmother — the other woman who raised Si — died when he was 22. I don’t know where all that sadness went but I think he keeps it inside. I’ve always remembered him to be the serious cousin. I see the same sadness in him as I do in Nikki. But, not today.

After Thi places a gold band on Si’s hand, the newly married couple offers tea to the elders in the room. The relatives hand over bright red envelopes filled with cash and give advice for a happy marriage. Thi’s parents are the last to receive tea. Thi’s smile has disappeared. Her eyes begin to get shiny. She is trying hard not to ruin her makeup.

Before Si and Thi offer her parents tea, Thi presents them with a gift. In the tea ceremony, children usually thank their parents for raising and protecting them up until marriage. But Thi can hardly get any words out. Her gift is a framed piece of artwork she embroidered. A gift from the bride to her parents is unnecessary, but perhaps Thi knew the present would say everything she couldn’t. Her parents try to be stoic but their faces reveal that all the emotion is just underneath the surface. They look away when Thi hands them their present.

I see how strong their bond is by how Thi’s mouth curls up and how fast tears glide down her cheeks. In her glittering red áo dài, she no longer looks like a doll. Thi will no longer live with her parents. She will no longer be just a daughter. She is now a wife and

although there is excitement about starting something new, there is always sorrow about letting go of something old.

I used to think about my own wedding and what was expected of me. Was I expected to live at home until I was married, like all my cousins were expected to do? Was I expected to marry a Vietnamese man? Was I expected to have a Vietnamese wedding and ignore those fantasies of walking down the aisle in a flowing, white wedding dress? Would my parents feel betrayed if I wanted an American wedding?

Out in the narrow hallway, relatives and friends jostle around to get a good look of what's going on inside the altar room. I'm pushed toward the back, but because I am taller, I can see over all the black, bobbing heads. I wish I had my mom next to me so she can explain what I'm seeing. I want to understand what my aunt is saying as she gestures to Si and Thi and looks at Thi's parents. I always cry at weddings but standing in this crowd at my own cousin's wedding, I am not emotional. I am just lost, disconnected.

Everybody around me is either one of Thi's friends or relatives. They're nodding and whispering to each other. I try to focus on the ceremony but I realize for the first time in my life, I am the tallest one in the room. Now I know what it means to be physically unable to just blend in.

I set my hands down to my sides but they don't stay put. I play with my hair. I smooth out the skirt of the dress. I clasp my hands together, interlocking my fingers. *I wish someone would say something to me. I wish I knew the words to start a conversation. I wish I wasn't so tall. Maybe I should have worn áo da`i. Maybe that would have made me*

*fit in more. Maybe I should have worn flats instead of heels.* I can't stand the *what-ifs* and *maybes* in my head anymore. Finally, I make my way through the crowd and head outside.

There is a birdcage by the cherry-colored French doors downstairs. It's peaceful here since almost everybody is upstairs watching the ceremony. The greenery is more serene when it's quiet. I walk toward the birdcage and watch the two parakeets inside. One bounces from perch to perch. The other slides across one of the perches as it turns its heads from side to side. I flinch and snap my head back as it flutters its wings frantically and starts pecking at the side of the cage. I approached the birdcage thinking I was going to see pretty and peaceful birds. Instead, these parakeets are jittery and can't stay still. Their beady eyes are anxious and they turn their heads as if they're looking over their shoulder to see if someone is after them. I don't know how long they've been in here, but it seems as though no amount of time in this cage will ever get them used to it.

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In the eyes of Thi's family members and ancestors, Si and Thi are married. But the couple has to go to Si's house to ask the same things of my grandparents and Si's mother. It is only 19 miles from Thi's to Si's house but the 40-minute car ride convinced some members of the wedding party not to come. It's better this way, anyway. Si's house is too small to hold that many people. I envy the wedding guests who can slip away so easily.

It's early afternoon and the humidity is oppressive. I am one of the first to arrive from Thi's. I walk through the entrance of Si's house, which is decorated with a wedding arch

of white and red flowers. I pull up a low stool into a cool spot underneath the stairs, trying to hide from the heat. I start fanning myself with a piece of cardboard. The ends of my thick hair stick to the damp skin across my shoulders and arms.

I watch Aunt Út and Aunt Sáu put drinks and snacks on a table that has been set up in front of the altar for the guests. The Coke cans and the water bottles look like they're sweating as much as I am. Aunt Sáu wipes the sweat around her hairline and above her lip. My aunts are rushing to have everything ready but for a moment, it looks as if they are submerged in a pool of humidity, their movements as slow as if they're moving through water.

When I realize the sweat has made rings on my dress under my armpits, I decide to go to Si's room, turn on the air conditioner and put on a different outfit. I choose from the few dresses I bought from the store yesterday. This dress is cap-sleeved and falls right above my knees. I look into the full-length mirror on the inside of his closet door. I turn to the right side and then to the left side. It's cinched lower on the waist and the neckline is adorned with an eyelet pattern. I retouch my make-up and re-do my hair.

I check my iPod touch, the one Mike gave me for my birthday, and see a message from him. *Hope you're having a good time. Miss you.* This is the longest we've been apart since I moved to be with him. I wonder what I would be doing if I were back in Korea. Probably taking a walk with Mike along the Tancheon River by his apartment or riding the air-conditioned subway into Seoul to explore the city. I think what I don't want to admit, that I would rather be back in Korea than here struggling to figure out where to



stand, what to say, who to talk to. It's so much easier back in Korea. I don't have to force anything. Life there is fluid and natural. For the past few months, I have felt settled and comfortable, like everything in my universe finally clicked into place. And all of a sudden, I am asking myself the same question I did when I lived in Lake Tahoe. *Why do I feel so uneasy here?*

It's like when I was younger and my parents would take us to the flea markets that reminded my mom of the open air markets from her childhood. It's where my mom could buy ten pounds of oranges or five mangos for a dollar and it attracted other immigrants around the Central Valley — Mexicans, Laotians, Cambodians. My mom pushed my brother's stroller through the Sunday crowd as mariachi or Norteño music blasted from speakers in nearby stalls. People scooted away as my brother approached, but their eyes stayed fixed on him. There was no shame in their staring. Kids pointed at my brother and then tapped the person next to them, whispering and laughing. I didn't want to be associated with my family when I saw people's reaction. I wanted to wander off, get lost in the crowd and be entirely indistinguishable.

Even almost 20 years later, that same feeling is palpable now. I want to be untied from my family. There's a guilt that comes with that desire, a guilt that has never been reconciled. I look at myself in the mirror and smooth out my dress. I turn off the air conditioner and head back to the ceremony.

I take a few steps before I stop and sit down at the top of the staircase. It's dark and cool and quiet. Nobody knows I'm here. I can breathe easily. I feel the cool initial contact of

the back of my thighs on the marble. I look down at the wedding party through the thin metal bars of the railing. I see the backs of Si and Thi. They lift incense to their heads and bow.

The bride is presented with jewelry and gold from Si's side to show that they accept her into the family. My mom stands up and opens a small, red plastic jewelry box containing a white gold necklace. Thi bows and my mom drapes the necklace around her neck. I can't hear what my mom is saying but I see her nodding and smiling. I know this means a lot to Si. Since Si's mother died, my mom has been a surrogate mother for him. She always sent money when there wasn't enough to send him to school. He was the one who made calls to America to wish my mom a 'Happy New Year' or a 'Merry Christmas'. He put off his wedding until she could come. Si doesn't show emotions often. He's unsentimental when he talks — the things that come out of his mouth are straightforward facts and certainties. He doesn't talk about how he feels. But in this moment, he doesn't have to for me to know that this is the happiest he's ever been. I look over at my mom again and see her accept the tea that Si and Thi are offering her.

From the top of the staircase, it's easy for me to wish I wasn't here. Si's wedding plays out in front of me as if I'm watching a movie in a dark, empty theatre. The movie goes on regardless of if I'm in the seat or not.

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After getting the blessings from the ancestors of both sides of the family, we head to a wedding hall where two other weddings are also going on. There is a table in front with a

guestbook and a basket for guests to leave their wedding gifts of money. A huge poster-sized engagement picture of Si and Thi stands on an easel by the table so that guests know exactly where to go. And yet, I don't know exactly where I should be. My relatives are scattered. Aunt Sáu is dealing with the vendors. Uncle Út is talking to the photographers. My mom is talking to friends she hasn't seen since she last came to Vietnam four years ago.

Although the air conditioning in the dining hall is inviting, the thought of me not knowing where to sit — or worse, sitting by myself — keeps me from going inside. But it's hot and I'm hungry and all I want to do is get out of the humidity and eat. So I walk around the foyer of the wedding hall, looking over black-haired heads to find my mom. I find her talking to a person I know I've seen before in black and white pictures.

"Mom, when are you going inside to eat?"

"Not now. I have to visit with some old friends," she says. "If you're hungry, just go inside and eat."

"But I want to eat with you," I say in a slightly whiny voice.

"You are an adult. You can go in by yourself."

I stop talking in that whiny voice. I see Si and Thi walking into the banquet hall to address their guests and I follow them. I sit down by myself at an empty table. One of Thi's relatives announces them as a newly married couple. Then, a group of three couples in traditional attire performs a customary dance. The women flutter like butterflies,

shuffling their feet in tiny movements. The men perform moves that look more like tai chi than dancing. Together, the couples sway back and forth on the tiny stage.

My relatives have started to trickle in to the banquet hall. My Aunt Sáu and mom sit next to each other. My oldest cousin, Thanh, is next to me. Her little brother, Tý, is across from me with his wife and son. Everybody at the table makes a toast. Tý pours a shot for everybody. When the bottle wanders over to my glass, I politely shake my head. I don't like to drink. I know what can happen when you start. I've seen my dad sprawled out on the kitchen floor after wedding receptions before. I've ridden in a car when my dad shouldn't have been driving.

"Are you sure?" Tý asks.

I hesitate. I want to be a part of the toast but the alcohol is too heavy for me. Drinking is not who I am. I have to learn how to be more comfortable with what makes me *me*.

"Yeah, it's OK. None for me."

I revert back to the hesitation I used to have when I was a kid without a clue how to act around people I wasn't comfortable with. My movements are awkward. Unscrewing the top of the Sprite bottle and pouring it into my cup even seems robotic. *Don't spill this, don't spill this.*

What is it that makes me feel more comfortable in Korea? Maybe because the titles I gained — Maggie Teacher, Writer, Mike's Girlfriend — while I was there, the ones that made me feel safe and grounded, are gone now. Those are the titles I want to define me, but nobody here knows I am any of those things.

I don't want to be Daughter, Niece, Cousin. It's like all my roles are levers on a stereo and depending on where I am and who I'm with, the frequency of each one has to be altered and tuned. Adult Maggie has been turned down. Sometimes, it feels like she's not even here.

The wedding ends in the late afternoon and later that night, Si and Thi count the money they received from their guests to see if it's enough to pay for the banquet hall. The next day, I adjust who I am to fit with what my family expects of me. With my aunts and uncles, I am obedient and quiet until I am asked a question. With my younger cousins, I try to be more assertive, change the tone of my voice to be more direct and commanding.

When it is time to catch my flight back to Seoul, I hop on the back of Si's motorbike.

"Did you have a good time while you were here?" Si asks me over his shoulder as he tries to talk over the traffic and the wind.

"Yeah, Si. I'm glad I came. I'm glad I was here for your wedding."

What I tell him is true. Even though a sense of anxiety and restlessness hovered over me while I was here, these are the moments I want to be a part of. I don't always want to be alone in that dark theatre.

Si turns his head but he is still shouting into the wind. "See, now you can say you've been to a proper Vietnamese wedding."

I just nod, looking out into the skyline of the city, the one that has morphed into something unrecognizable in the last 11 years.

"A lot of things have changed, haven't they?"

“Yeah, a lot has changed.” I stay quiet for the rest of the ride, but I can’t stop thinking about how a lot of things have stayed the same, too.

I check in at the airport and I walk back outside to tell Si it’s OK for him to leave.

“You need to come back. Three days wasn’t enough.”

“OK, Si. I’ll make sure I come back.”

I turn around and walk toward my gate, past all the people waiting outside for their loved ones. In this place of transit, where people are either waiting to go home or to escape and get away, I feel those old titles coming back to me. As soon as I land in Seoul, I’ll take the subway straight to school and teach until 7:30 p.m. The next 24 hours will be exhausting but as I wait for my plane, a swelling sense of relief comes over me. I’m going back to a place that feels right, that feels —for the moment — like going home.

## Chapter 8

Even though my trip to Vietnam was only for three days, I’ve come back to a slightly different Korea. The air is thicker and the sun beats mercilessly down on the streets and pavement, sending up squiggly lines and waves that give off the illusion that everything is wet. And then there is the sinister rattling sound. This sound occurs at decibels so high they seem to cut right through the humidity and heat.

The sound is coming from all the cicadas that have infested the trees in Mok-dong. The cicadas I see are unearthly-looking giant insects with two large eyes in each side of its head, a flattish body and consuming, transparent wings that are defined by intricate black

veins. They have made their home in the trees that line the street I walk down to get to school.

There is an urgency in the constant buzzing. After years spent underground as nymphs feeding on root juices, cicadas come above ground and for about three weeks, the male cicadas sing a song to attract female cicadas in an attempt to mate before they die. The cicada song is rhythmic and pulsating, an unrelenting vibration that hits my ears and makes me anxious the same way a dentist's drill does. When I walk to school under the trees, it's as if I have walked into a tunnel where the buzzing is amplified and I'm immersed in the cicadas' world and their quest to find a mate. All the noise — the subtle chirps, dull hums and shrill cries — is a symphony of mating calls that has not only taken over my ears but seems to have overtaken my whole body. The sound is so intrusive, I feel the bugs are all over me.

Despite its disturbing sounds, I am also fascinated by the cicadas. I find a still one on my walk halfway to school. I grab a stick and poke it to see if it's dead. When the stick touches the bug, I realize it's just a shell, almost fully intact. I look up and see that this sidewalk is a graveyard of these empty husks. These husks are what's left after the molting process. The cicada finds something solid to perch on and then it bursts through its old skin, splitting the old body right in half. The head comes out first and wiggles until it's free. It's ready for its new phase of life, completely discarding what it once was.

It's how I felt once I landed in Seoul from Vietnam. I felt encased by the expectations that come with the role I have within my family. But I wonder how much those

expectations are actually from my family and how much are my assumptions. For so long, I have felt the weight of being the first-born American child. My cousins must have thought, *Why not me? How is it that she got that fate and I got mine?* I don't know what I did to deserve my fate but I know it would be reprehensible to squander such good fortune. My parents' hopes and dreams were built into my bones. At times it felt like they were strong enough to hold my being together and other times they felt so big and overwhelming that I didn't want the burden of having to be their keeper. Either way, when I am here in Korea, that encasing is gone. Those expectations are like these cicada carcasses, beautiful and fragile and yet, completely insignificant.

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My walks to and from school are never boring. I never get tired of the people rushing by but sometimes, someone approaches me and interrupts my people-watching trance. Usually, it's an older woman asking for directions. On this afternoon, it's someone the same age as my mom. She's right outside Exit 2 at Mok-dong Station. She has a map in her hands and is craning her neck back and forth, first looking at me and then at the confusing tangle of lines on the map. She stops me and starts talking.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Korean."

She replies, only louder.

"I'm sorry. I'm not Korean. I can't understand you."



She looks at me as if she's re-evaluating my features — my eyes and my nose — and wondering why she's still coming to the same conclusion. I shake my head and she nods and walks the opposite direction.

For the rest of my walk home, I compare my eyes and nose to those of the people who pass me everyday. I'm baffled by the idea of being confused for Korean. My creased eyelids make my eyes a bit larger. My nose is flat and my skin is dark. But now I'm starting to question what I am, or at least, what people see when they look at me.

The constant confusion of my ethnicity has forced me to add another phrase to the two phrases I already know. Now I know 'hanguk saram aniyeyo' (I am not Korean), along with 'ann-yeong-haseyo' (hello) and 'kamsa-hamnida' (thank you). The other foreign teachers have learned Hangul, the Korean alphabet, and some key expressions but I'm not interested.

I have experimented with other languages in my life. My mom tried teaching me to read and write Vietnamese when I was younger. I studied Spanish in grade school and high school. I learned to read Greek letters for a semester in the summer between my sophomore and junior year in college. Nothing really stuck. I wasn't interested enough in those other languages. I'll only be in Korea for a year, so I think what's the point?

But there's more to it than just not being interested enough to learn. There are moments when I say kamsa-hamnida to the store clerks and they smile and nod. There's a friendliness and graciousness there I know would deepen if I knew more Korean. It's not that I don't want to be immersed in the culture and have a deeper understanding of where

I live. It's just that the lack of language here has helped me build a wall, one I'm comfortable behind. The outsider role is a natural one for me and learning the language would break down a barrier I'm not willing to see crumble.

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I've been here now for four and half months and since being here, I haven't heard that nagging voice in my head, the one constantly asking what I'm doing with my life and if it measures up to the people I went to college with or the journalist peers I met while I was a reporter. Since coming to Korea, I haven't compared my life to anyone else's. Being in this temporary place has put me in a relaxed state — I feel content for the moment.

Because I know I won't be in South Korea for long, I want to have the experience that I lived here, that I belonged somewhere, even if it was for just a short time. Nothing makes me feel more a part of this culture than shopping at the many underground shopping malls.

I go to one of the largest ones, the one at the Express Bus Terminal in Seoul's Seocho District. I'm here on a Saturday, ensuring that if anything, my shopping experience will be hectic.

I walk off the platform and climb the stairs to get to the main shopping area. There are rows and rows of shops selling women's clothing, cell phones and hair accessories. I feel like a fish swimming upstream. I don't know where I'm headed but I know I'm going in a circle when I see the same Olive Young store, a beauty chain selling make-up and skin-whitening cream.

I'm trying to keep up with the pace of the crowd. I only get a glimpse of the faces rushing by but the faces I see suddenly become familiar. I wonder if I'm seeing the same people over and over again. Dark hair. Long oval faces. Slender, flat noses. Brown eyes.

Everything comes to my eyes in streaks. The interchangeable facial features, racks of clothes with signs advertising tees and sweaters for 10,000 won, the harsh fluorescent glow of the lights from the ceiling. I duck into a shoe store for a break. It's like I've stepped into a cave. The lighting is low and the four walls are lined with all types of shoes — sandals, ballet flats and boots. The shop owner sees me and I sense he is watching me. It's not unusual. I am watched closely in every store I have browsed today. I don't know if that's typical or something about my appearance causes them to think they need to monitor my every movement.

The store owner says something to me in Korean.

“Hanguk saram aniyeyo.”

“Ahhhh.....are you Filipino?” I'm surprised by how good his English is.

“No, I'm....” I pause for a second. I want to tell him I'm American but I know what answer he's looking for. I've learned how to answer this kind of question. Growing up in the United States, when people ask “What are you?” or “Where are you from?” or “Where were you born?,” they don't expect to hear, “I'm American,” or “I grew up in California,” or “I was born in Utah.” They want to know what I am — where my black hair and half-oval eyes come from, what country my parents were born in.

“I’m Vietnamese.” But I realize this question needs to be answered in two parts. “My parents are Vietnamese and Cambodian but I was born in America.”

“Ahh, I see,” he says. “You look Korean.”

This is something I keep hearing and I don’t know yet how to respond. Besides being one of the most aesthetically homogeneous countries in the world, Korea has an obsession what makes it one of the leading countries in plastic surgery. People strive to have the same kind of wide eyes and long, thin, high noses. I can relate to the idea of wanting to fit in and buying what everybody else has. But the things I longed for were jeans that didn’t come from Family Bargain Center and an Adidas jacket, not surgical procedures. In Korea, cosmetic surgery isn’t just to help someone fit in. It’s to help them land a better job or attract a more desirable husband or wife.

Everywhere I look, there is something telling me beauty is valued above everything else. I am bombarded by advertisements with men and women with smooth and fair skin. The women have luminous long, black hair, waists that look like they could fit in the circumference of my hands and heart-shaped faces. I see this obsession with looks at school. During breaks between classes, I could walk by the wash room and see at least three of the Korean staff members staring at their pores in the mirror or gently massaging the delicate skin under their eyes in tiny circles or turning side-to-side, examining their outfit from every angle.

I'm questioning again whether I really do look Korean. Is it possible even I don't even know what I look like? What does it mean to look Korean? To look Vietnamese or Cambodian? To look Asian, or American, for that matter?

"Do you want to try something on? Are you looking for something in particular?"

"I'm not sure," I reply. "I don't really know what I'm looking for."

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It is my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday although according to my Korean co-teacher, Vanesa, I'm just a few months short of 30, far too old to be unmarried and childless. Despite what she says, I'm looking forward to getting older, looking forward to getting out of the phase where insecurities and doubt rule my thoughts and actions.

For my birthday, Mike and I went to Insadong, a shopping area in the heart of Seoul. Quirky shops selling traditional Korean gifts are hidden away in narrow alleyways. It's popular with both tourists and residents. Since it's mid-July, we decided to go early to avoid the stifling afternoon heat and the crowds.

We're on our way back to Mike's place in Bundang and I'm relieved as soon as I step onto the subway car, soaking in the cold air blasting from the vents. I'm in a skirt and a light button-down shirt but in this heat, it feels suffocating. There is one empty seat in the packed subway car and I sit there while Mike stands over me. I cross my legs and take off my right moccasin to massage a part of my foot. I brush the leg of the man sitting next to me with my shoe. He is a sharp-dressed man and I don't realize the bottom of my moccasin touched his immaculate-looking dress pants.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I don’t immediately realize he might not understand me. I put the shoe back on my foot and slowly move my eyes up to look at his face. I can sense he has been looking at me for a moment, waiting for me to figure out my mistake. His eyes scold me. The way his mouth is turned downward tells me I have done something very wrong.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

He lets out a breath that sounds like it is taking considerable self-control to hold back his anger. He shakes his head as if I have committed a very egregious error, broken some sacred rule of subway etiquette. He doesn’t say a word to me but he doesn’t need to. His body language says enough and I feel uncomfortable, wedged in the seat between him and another man on the crowded subway. I tell Mike I want to move. I get up but it’s so crowded, I don’t go far. Another seat on that same row has opened up and I sit down, not able to withstand the blister forming on my foot.

“Are you OK?” Mike asks.

“That was so weird. I’ve never experienced that before on a subway. For the most part, people have been really nice. He was so mad.”

“Don’t worry about him. If he doesn’t want to get his precious suit dirty, then he shouldn’t be riding the subway.”

Just as Mike says that, an ajusshi starts pointing at my crossed legs. His voice gets loud, his pointing aggressive. I look up at the old man and feel tears coming to the bottom of my eyes and I hold them back, knowing how much more embarrassed I would be if I started crying. Mike steps in.

“She doesn’t speak Korean. Just leave her alone.” Mike then speaks the little Korean he knows to get the ajusshi to stop yelling. But the ajusshi is persistent and says in English, “Your leg. Your leg.”

I uncross my legs, sit up straight and look around the subway. I look to see if anybody else is wearing a skirt and wonder if I am being offensive by showing so much bare skin.

The subway stops and the doors open, relieving the throbbing rush of people onto the platform. The ajusshi leaves, still muttering something under his breath and shaking his head. Mike and I don’t say anything. I don’t have the words anyway.

I am silent the whole way back to Mike’s place. I try to put together a reason that makes sense, shuffle through what just happened. I think about what I could have done differently and wonder if my silence just made me look ignorant. If I told the ajusshi, “Hanguk saram aniyeyo,” would he have thought that I was mocking him in some way? I wonder if those two men would yell at me if I were white, if it was absolutely clear I was American.

Foreigners are held to a different standard than Koreans are, or even gyopos, foreigners of Korean descent. Koreans are amused by a foreigner’s attempt to speak the language or try Korean food. It’s not so different from how excited my dad would get when an honorary white guy would drink and eat dried squid with him and his friends at those drinking parties when I was younger. A foreigner doesn’t have to do much to extend a gesture of camaraderie.

It seems Koreans have their own set of social rules and breaking these rules elicits a much-deserved shaming. *You should know better. You should be ashamed* is what those ajusshis' eyes told me. In their minds, they put this gyopo in her place. Today, I turn 28, but I can't get over how easy it was for those two men to make me feel like a scared little girl. Maybe it was partly my fault, too. I let them make me feel that way.

The train stops again. I had been reliving the confrontations and imagining ways I wished I would have reacted or things I should have said for the past eight stops. It's time for Mike and I to get off and transfer.

"Maggie, just forget about those guys. It doesn't matter," Mike says. "It's your birthday. Don't think about that."

The subway car stops, the doors open and it sounds like the air has been let out of a bicycle tire. We are greeted by a crowd of impatient people who don't even let passengers off before coming in. I'm still in a daze over the two ajusshis and I'm not paying attention to where I'm going. When I look up, I see Mike looking over his shoulder, his hand reaching back for me. I put my hand in his and let him guide me through the sea of people.

## Chapter 9

Cooking is too much of a hassle in my tiny studio apartment. There's no counter space and making a meal takes at least an hour because there's only one burner. So I decide to stop by a fast-food Korean restaurant on my way home from school. It's usually cheaper anyway. I'm already tired of their kimbap — the rice is too dry and the filling is always



disappointing. When I lift a piece of kimbap to my mouth, I can't help but expect the kind of flavors that comes with a spicy tuna or a rainbow roll.

I walk in the restaurant and see a table of teenage girls dressed in their school uniforms with dark-rimmed glasses, each pair of eyes caged behind the same blunt, thick bangs. They're hovering over bowls of steaming soup, reaching across the table to sample each other's kimbap.

I am relieved to see there are pictures above the hieroglyphics that decorate the wall. I see two types of soup and I realize that what I really want is a big bowl of my mom's phở. I don't even like phở that much, but there's something so comforting about the harmonious scent of star anise, cardamom, coriander seed and cinnamon. It's been six months since I've had my mom's cooking.

I settle on the red broth soup, the one with the mussels, squid and shrimp, hoping the different textures would satisfy my phở craving. I flag down the owner, and point to the picture.

As I head out, I walk past the same table of girls, who look in my direction and start laughing. *Are they laughing at me? At the way I had to mime and point to order my food? Or how I tried to pay with a cheon won (1,000) bill instead of a man won (10,000) bill because I still get those two confused?*

When I come home to my apartment, I set the Styrofoam to-go container on my desk and lift the lid. The broth looks different than it did in the picture — it's a deeper red and thicker, more like gravy. I poke my two silver chopsticks in the middle of the bowl,

swirling the contents inside into a tornado of seafood and buckwheat noodles. I pick up strands of thick noodles that seem to have been wrapped in red cellophane. The heat doesn't hit me until a moment later, and my tongue hangs from my mouth as if I'm a thirsty dog. I take another bite, but the burning is unrelenting. I lay a bright yellow piece of pickled radish across my tongue and there's a slight relief but the spiciness has coated my mouth. I look at the almost-full bowl with the same sense of dread as a novice runner at the start of a marathon — I wasn't prepared for this kind of spice.

I poke around the mussel shells, prying out the mussel and examining how red the broth has made it. Before I eat the shrimp, I drag it along the side of the bowl in an attempt to scrape off some of the spiciness. I can't eat anymore. I walk over to the sink and hesitate before I pour the soup down the drain and scoop the noodles out with my hands to dump it into the garbage can.

The next day after school, I still had phở on my mind. It is early evening and Jennifer and I are the only ones at the school because we have private tutoring sessions. I walk to her classroom, which is filled with do-it-yourself props. She made a cash register, a kitchen sink and a refrigerator out of felt and cardboard boxes so her students would have things to play with during break time. Of all the teachers, Jennifer is the most dedicated. This is her real profession — not like the other teachers, including me, who came to Korea to either find or get away from something. She was a teacher in Georgia, where she went to college, and is only here to appease her Korean parents, with whom she made a deal to live in Korea for a year.

“You wanna grab some dinner with me? I’m going to the phở place across the street.”

“Oh, yeah, I miss phở. There was a really good place I used to go to in Georgia.”

We walk into Good Morning Saigon, the restaurant across the street. The place is sparse. It’s too early for the dinner crowd. We start with egg rolls, which are small and look fragile. The egg roll wrappers aren’t crispy and golden, like my mom’s. It’s thin and I can see where the bubbles have formed when they were fried. A small bowl of nước mắm is brought out for dipping. I take a bite, and feel the same disappointment I get when I have kimbap.

The phở smells the same but the broth tastes like warm, oily water. The noodles still stay clumped, like they have just came out of the bag. I reach for the dish of garnishes but don’t see what should be there. There’s no thai basil, no cilantro, no limes. Instead, there are pickled onions and radishes and a handful of bean sprouts and a few slices of lemon. This is phở, Korean style.

I shouldn’t be surprised. Many foreign foods have a Korean twist. At the Pizza School restaurant near my house, pizza toppings include potatoes, shrimp and corn and a lot of times, Korean pizza comes with a side of pickles. I stay away from Pizza School because it seems no matter how hot the pizza is, the cheese is never all the way melted.

I know I can’t be so picky. Restaurant phở is never as good as my mom’s because I know how much time goes into making it. I remember watching my mom as a kid. She simmered beef bones in a big black pot and let it sit there with the burner on low for hours to let the bone marrow become completely saturated into the soup. The flavor

would be intensified by the whole onion and daikon floating in it, along with the stainless steel tea infuser containing star anise, cloves and cinnamon.

“Mom, what is that white stuff on the side of the pot,” I asked once.

It was the foam that accumulated at the top of the broth. My mom grabbed the ladle sitting on the counter and skimmed the top, mindful of scooping up just the foam and not too much broth. She collected the foam in a separate bowl.

She handed me the ladle. “Here, you wanna try?”

I resisted the urge to stir the contents inside as if I was a witch whipping up a brew in her cauldron. My mom rarely let me into the kitchen to help her, so I approached the task with conviction, standing on my tiptoes to get different angles, determined yet careful to get rid of the unwanted froth. My mom stood nearby, washing thai basil and plucking mint leaves from its stems. Other than that, it was silent in the kitchen, all of my mom’s focus harnessed into making the perfect bowl of phở. I kept skimming the top of the soup, even though there was no more white stuff to scoop out.

My mom’s cooking is perfect. The meats and soups are perfectly spiced and egg rolls and wontons are thoroughly symmetrical. That’s why she never let me help her. My small fingers hadn’t perfected her techniques. I remember one time trying to help her make egg rolls. The ground pork — massaged with garlic, onions, thin slices of wood ear mushrooms and shredded carrots — was prepared the night before. She would put two tablespoons of the pork on the egg roll wrappers, which had been cut in half diagonally, making two triangles. She folded in each corner, dabbing them with warm water to make

them stick, like the egg roll was hugging itself. She smoothed out the meat, rolled it up slowly, making little cigars.

“Can I try?”

“Yes, but they can’t be sloppy. They have to be pretty,” my mom said. “They taste better that way.”

When I tried, everything I did was wrong. For some, I put too much meat, ripping the wrapper. The corners stuck out. One egg roll was limp when I held it up to show my mom. She let out an exasperated sigh when she saw them but she fried them anyway. The egg rolls expanded in the hot grease. The loose corners turned into gaping holes. They were skinny in the middle and grotesquely large on the ends, forming the shape of a dumbbell. She was right. The ugly ones weren’t as appetizing.

I ate my deformed egg rolls. They tasted the same but I resented every bite. What I really wanted was for my mom to put her arms around mine, to show where each one of my fingers should go when wrapping egg rolls. I wanted her to pretend that she was impressed with my work and say my egg rolls were the most delicious she had ever tasted. I stopped trying to help her in the kitchen after that. Her food was too perfect and I couldn’t compare. Even just watching her cook became too much of a reminder that what I made could never measure up.

My insecurity in the kitchen also spilled out into the actual meals. This started because I always felt I was in the way and a nuisance in my mom’s kitchen and it worsened during my first trip to Vietnam when I was 11. At almost every meal, my relatives asked my

parents questions as if my sister and I weren't there. They would ask, "Does they know how to use chopsticks?" and my parents would laugh and say, "No, they don't know those things."

At home, we only used spoons and forks but my sister and I didn't need to. A naïve stubbornness made me resent my parents' statement. I wanted to yell out, "Yes, we do! We can use chopsticks. You just don't let us." But I knew I would get in trouble for talking back. My sister and I were both annoyed at how dismissive my parents were, but at that age, we didn't have the words to fully communicate what we were feeling. We both just ate in silence. Over the course of the trip, the emphasis of attention put on how I held my chopsticks made me doubt myself. *Why do they keep watching me when I eat? Maybe I don't know how to use these things.*

In the middle of the trip, my aunts and uncles brought out a bowl of bún bò huế, a spicy noodle dish that swam in a vibrant red broth. The noodles were covered up with bean sprouts, mint leaves and green onions. Slices of beef shank floated to the top. Congealed blood cubes, chunks of oxtail and pig's knuckle bobbed up above the surface like icebergs.

"Do you know how to eat this?" my aunt asked.

I eyed the animal parts in the bowl that I was not used to eating. Humiliated, I shook my head. I picked around the beef shank and blood cubes and pig's knuckle and slurped down the noodles and soup, the red broth burning my throat as it went down.

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I have the same hesitancy when I eat in Korean restaurants. I watch other people eat first to make sure I'm doing it right. On this night, I'm going to dinner with Vanesa, my Korean co-teacher, Emma, a Korean staff member and Ellen, a teacher from Australia. Vanesa picked a restaurant in Hongdae, where Hongik University is located. Because of this, Hongdae has a youthful, urban ambience. The neighborhood is filled with artistic cafés, unique galleries, clubs that feature indie rock bands, street food vendors and endless clothing stalls.

Like it was for most foreigners, Hongdae was where I went shortly after I arrived Korea. I was with Mike, Ellen and her boyfriend, David. As soon as we came up from the subway station, we stumbled upon a silent disco at a park. There was a throng of young people bouncing in unison to a secret beat, all of them with thick, white earphones wrapped around their heads. I knew when the DJ changed the song or played something everybody liked by the way the crowd moved and reacted. Everybody was having their own unique experience with the music pulsating between their ears. But bodies were smashed against each other, moving together in unconscious choreography, each individual just a small part of something bigger.

It wasn't any different than what I saw on the subway I just got off of. Except for the dancing, everyone on the subway was in their own world, lost in the screens of their smart phones. Strangers sat and stood shoulder to shoulder, completely oblivious to the person right next to them.

The restaurant Vanesa chose is just as eclectic as the rest of Hongdae. There is a bear surrounded with Korean characters on the sign out front and the words, “Bob Café.” She chose this place because she said there are ajummas in the kitchen and the food tastes home-cooked.

We let Vanesa order and I’m relieved when she starts pouring water into our small silver cups. I always hesitate to make the first move when I go to a Korean restaurant. I don’t know if there’s an order to filling up the cups. I don’t know if it’s polite to hand everybody silverware from the box on the side of the table or let everybody grab their own. When I see Emma wipe down the flat silver chopsticks and wide-mouth spoons before handing them out to the rest of us, I feel embarrassed for all the times I distributed utensils without cleaning them first.

It doesn’t take long for our meal to arrive. Vanesa ordered kimchi jjim — long fermented kimchi slow cooked with pork belly or shoulder. Each of us gets a small silver bowl of rice and like any other main dish here in Korea, the kimchi jjim comes with six smaller side dishes, or banchan. In other restaurants, the side dishes are uninteresting. Everything is red. There are over 100 different kinds of kimchi and this is what makes up the banchan I’ve had at most restaurants. But at Bob Café, everything looks enticing.

The waiter is wearing a sweater with a dancing bear on it. I look around and see all the servers are wearing the same sweater, and about half of them are wearing those trendy dark-rimmed glasses. Early '90s music plays from the boombox in the middle of the restaurant.



Our waiter sets down side dishes of marinated potatoes, fried eggs, dried seaweed sheets, and blocks of soft, jiggly tofu. Emma takes the scissors that come on the plate of kimchi jjim and cuts up the kimchi and pork, although it doesn't take much for the tender meat to fall apart. My co-workers start grabbing morsels of food and adding it to their silver bowls of rice. I know in Vietnamese culture, it is customary to wait for the oldest person to have the first bite. I wonder if this is a part of Korean etiquette, too, and then I wonder if we are all good enough friends to put these rigid customs aside. I watch first how Emma and Vanesa pick at the banchan with their chopsticks but eat their rice with their spoon. I always thought the spoon was a courtesy for foreigners, used only for soup or when one doesn't know how to use chopsticks.

“Maggie, eat!” Vanesa says. “What are you waiting for?”

I eat, but I eat slowly. I reach across the table to break off a hunk of the tofu. *Is it rude of me to reach across them?* I watch how Vanesa and Emma fill their bowls and without making it too obvious, do exactly what they do.

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Despite my insecurities of never measuring up to the cook my mom was, I did find my way into the kitchen. Cooking was something I poured myself into when I lived in Nevada since I was jobless and bored. I tried making some of my mom's food. There was that one time I tried to make wonton soup. I called my mom for guidance.

“Mom, can you tell me how to cook something? I want to make wonton soup.”

“I don’t know why you didn’t watch me when you were younger. You could have learned how to cook by now.”

I’m glad my mom was on the phone and not in front of me so she couldn’t see me roll my eyes. According to my mom, it was my job to learn from her how to cook, not her job to teach me.

“Mom, I tried, remember? But you said my egg rolls were too ugly.”

“So, what? If I told you to jump off a bridge, would you?”

“Yeah, maybe if it came from my mom.”

“Never believe everything someone says, even if it’s your mom.”

I rolled my eyes again.

“Can you just tell me how to make the soup?”

Her directions were vague. When I asked her how much sugar or salt or MSG, she told me, just taste it. My tongue would tell me what it needed.

“But I want it to taste like yours.”

“Every time I make it, it’s different,” my mom said. “It just depends on what my tongue says that day.”

All the ingredients were laid out in front of me. Ground pork, wonton wrappers, sugar, salt, MSG, chicken broth, cilantro and fried onions. I sprinkled sugar on the ground pork. I looked down at my left hand, my thumb was pressed up against the first line of my index finger. I tried to eyeball the amount and add just that much sugar. I added half that amount of salt. I tentatively sunk my fingers into the meat, which felt like wet clay. I

pulled back and was only able to work my fingers around the edges after that. I felt the meat making its way under my fingernails.

I placed about a tablespoon of meat into each square of wonton wrapper. The first mistake I made was not having warm water to seal up the sides of the wrappers. I only pressed the edges together tightly, thinking that would be enough to keep the wontons intact. I made 20 wontons and dropped them into the boiling pot of water. I kept the heat on high and placed the lid on. I chopped the cilantro and fifteen minutes later, I removed each wonton and placed them into a bowl. I saved half that water and mixed it with the chicken broth. I dropped the wontons back in the broth. I took a sip, just as I had seen my mom do a hundred times. I skimmed the top, sucking in the broth between almost clenched teeth. It was bland, just barely better than warm water. I put in more sugar, more salt, more MSG. I tasted it again and it was a little better. *How does mom do this?*

The heat was still on high when I grabbed bowls and spoons. I invited a friend over who was brave enough to eat my first home-cooked meal. When I removed the lid, I saw the wrappers had all come loose, like shapeless ghosts, and had floated to the top. The pork meatballs were bobbing underneath the layer of wrappers. I heard my mom in my head. She didn't say anything, just sighing the same way she did when she saw my sorry-looking egg rolls.

The cilantro and fried onions saved me. The soup looked pathetic in the bowl but I covered it up with the garnishing. They did a good job of disguising the unrecognizable wontons. I topped it off with a thin layer of pepper. I presented my friend with the bowl

of soup and prepared myself for the forced compliment and nervous smile I knew was coming. But my friend seemed impressed and even asked for the leftovers to bring home to her dad.

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My cooking skills have gotten better since that bowl of wonton soup. My supplies are limited in Korea but I try to make dinner for Mike at least once every weekend I visit him. On this night, all I want to make is comfort food. It's raining outside, typical of August in South Korea, and just a few days past Typhoon Bolaven.

I had to go to Itaewon, the district near the U.S. military base, to get all the ingredients. That's where you can find most of the foreign food you wouldn't find in a typical Korean market. Even though I have fallen in love with living in Korea, it's hard to fight my craving for American food. This craving started when I was much younger, when I equated eating American food with being American. I remember eating my first Big Mac. I had to take the burger apart because my small hands couldn't fit around the two layers of meat and three pieces of bread. I opened the box and picked the melted cheese that found its way into one of the corners. The secret sauce was creamy and tangy, two flavor combinations that had never touched my taste buds before. As I chewed, I reveled in the idea that I could go to school and brag about my McDonald's and the other kids would know what I was talking about.

It takes just under an hour to get to Itaewon — 16 stops and two transfers. My go-to store is High Street Market. It's expensive, but it's where I can get oatmeal and chickpeas

and taco spice mix. There are things there you wouldn't find anywhere else. In almost every bar, they give you a wedge of lemon to go with your shot of tequila. At High Street Market, you can get limes — tiny, wrinkled ones for 3,500 won. On this trip, I only need sour cream and chicken breasts. Everything else I need to make this meal I bought at E-Mart, just a 15-minute bus ride from Mike's house.

Mike's kitchen is much more luxurious than mine. It has two burners and twice as much counter space. Still, it is pretty sparse. There's a washing machine where an oven should be. There's a drying rack almost directly above the burners, so Mike's socks and running shorts dangle around my head as I'm cooking. Only one of the burners can be used because the pots are too big for two to be going at the same time. When I get home from Itaewon, I boil eight potatoes in a large pot. After that's done, I sauté spinach in olive oil and garlic and mix it with mayonnaise, sour cream and individually wrapped wedges of cheese with a laughing cow on it. The cheese remains globs that refuse to mix in with the other ingredients.

I place the mixture between halved chicken breasts and run downstairs to the GS25 convenience store in the apartment complex because I forgot an essential ingredient. Convenience stores are everywhere. I could buy something from one convenience store, leave and walk for a few feet, remember that I forgot something and find that walking to a new one would be faster than walking back to the one I just left.

In the GS25 in Mike's building, I buy the paper-thin bacon that comes in packets of eight, just above the tuna kimchi triangle kimbaps and caramelized quail eggs. I go back

upstairs and wrap the chicken breasts with the almost-not-there bacon and stick it in the toaster oven, which only gets as hot as 300 degrees. While the chicken slowly sizzles, I smash the potatoes and mix it with milk, butter and more Laughing Cow cheese.

I keep opening the toaster oven, not satisfied with just looking at the chicken through the dirty glass door. I watch the bacon curl up around the chicken. Just the smell of cooking bacon makes me feel like I'm not in Korea anymore.

After a full afternoon of getting ingredients and cooking, I present Mike with a plate of bacon-wrapped chicken breast and mashed potatoes soon after he comes home from teaching. I like taking care of Mike in this way and he acknowledges me and my effort, something I'm not sure I felt all the time in my last relationship. Mike knows the trouble it takes to make a meal like this. I imagine the feeling I get when I do this is the same my mom feels when she presents me with a perfect bowl of phở.

You can't appreciate food until you cook it, until you realize how fragile and delicate it can be, how easy it is to ruin it. Until you realize the care and time it takes to create something for somebody else, something that satiates them and fills them.

When I was younger, my mom didn't say the words 'I love you' often. She didn't always hug me and tuck me in at night. But she didn't need to do all those things. She didn't need to because she made me egg rolls, and she let me have the first bite.

The next weekend, I call my mom, just as I do every weekend. She asks me what I've been eating and if I'm eating enough.

"You can't just eat kimchi," she jokes.

“I know, Mom. The food here just isn’t as good as yours.”

Then I tell her it’s not just her food I miss. I miss her. There’s a long silence, as if we have both just been hit by the heavy realization that we are half a world apart.

“Mom....”

“Yeah....”

“Can you tell me how to make your salt and sugar fried chicken?”

“Is that what you want to eat? OK, here’s what you do...”

I nod as if she can see me. I ask her every question I can think of. I ask her for her exact recipe, even though I already know how to make it.

## Chapter 10

We have cooking class today at school. There really isn’t any cooking involved. The woman who cooks lunch for the whole school every day just puts ingredients in separate bags and the students put the ingredients together. Today, we’re making songpyeong, a traditional Korean food that is a staple during Chuseok, the Korean version of Thanksgiving. Chuseok happens on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the eighth month of the Lunar calendar. This year, it’s at the end of September.

I’ve seen songpyeon in bakeries and in the food stalls in the subway station. They are colorful crescent-shaped rice cakes. They’re plump in the middle and the edges are so clean and precise that I imagine only tiny ajumma fingers and years of experience can yield those kind of perfect little scallops.

I help my students put on an apron and a little bandana that's supposed to act like a hairnet but really just makes them look like a gang of menacing kindergarteners. They put on tiny, clear plastic gloves that hinder their already shaky dexterity.

All the ingredients for songpyeon are on one big tray on my desk. I go around to each student and give him or her a clump of green, orange and white dough. There are three bags filled with fillings — mung bean, dried fruit and chestnuts. I know what they want to do. They want to squeeze each ball and watch it come through their fingers. They want to mash all three colors together. They want to flatten the dough into pancakes with their palms and roll them back into balls.

These are the days that give my job much-needed variety. I have friends at other schools who compare their jobs to babysitting. *My job is something a monkey could do* was what I read on countless job boards in my job search last winter. I read about how mindless jobs drove some teacher to go home early. But at Sterling, there's something new going on every week. There are cooking classes and theme days and field trips. On some days, when the weather is nice, I'll ask Emma if we can go to a nearby playground. It's usually OK after she texts the mothers of each of my students to get permission.

In past cooking classes, I was overwhelmed by making sure each kid got his or her allotted amount of ingredients and stressed out by all the constant questions and demands — “Like this, Teacher?” “Help me, Teacher,” “I don't know what to do, Teacher.” But today, the kids have an unexpected focus. I told them they will take three of their



songpyeons home to their families so all of their attention is poured into pulling the dough perfectly over a spoonful of filling.

MinJae, holds one up for me to see. His bandana slips down over his eyes and his hands are lost in the plastic gloves. It's lopsided and there's too much stuffed into it.

"This one's for my mom," MinJae says.

"That's beautiful, MinJae." My comment makes him smile and squeeze his eyes shut under his bandana.

It's such an absurd thought but when I look at my students, I think I wouldn't be so scared to accidentally get pregnant. Before, it used to be that I was terrified at the thought because I knew I wasn't ready. But now, especially if my kid was this cute, I think what would be the reason for apprehension? I'm 28. I have figured a couple things out in life. I know nothing can prepare you for being a mother but I would feel pretty confident I'd be ready. I would probably be brought to my knees, be utterly exhausted and feel completely annihilated by the demands of a helpless, selfish tiny human being, but I think I could do it with Mike.

Before I came to Korea, I had a dream. I saw myself lying on a hospital bed about to get wheeled into the maternity ward. Doctors and nurses surrounded me and guided the bed toward the delivery room. I looked down and saw someone's hand clutched around mine. I looked up and it was Mike. When I woke up, I was reluctant to admit to myself that was an image floating around in my head. It was embarrassing to think this was what I was imagining with a person I had just met months before. But deep down, the dream gave

me assurance. It helped push me to take the leap to come to Korea because I realized that with the boyfriend before, when I envisioned a wedding, the one with the little votive candles wrapped in the article I wrote on him, and me in the white dress, I didn't see him there. Even if I changed the venue or the type of ceremony to fit who he was — a small wedding in the woods, a ceremony on top of a mountain on a sunny, winter day — I never saw him there.

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After each student has made about six, I tell them to pick their best three to save for their families and that they can eat the other three.

“Songpyeon is too delicious,” Edward says.

I ask them to tell me about Chuseok and what it means to them. They all shout out, their words slightly garbled and their cheeks puffy with rice cake.

“I wear my hanbok.”

“We go to grandparents' house.”

“We get money for bowing.”

“We eat lots of yummy food.”

“We burn long, skinny sticks.”

Even though I need to decode what they're saying, I know my students are talking about making an offering at the family altar. I remember offerings during my childhood. My family made many offerings throughout the year on various anniversary death dates of

our ancestors but the biggest offering came during Tết, the Vietnamese New Year celebrating the arrival of spring according to the lunar calendar.

Every year, my mom made a feast for the ancestors. There was a calming symmetry to the offering table every year. Four bowls of white rice would line the top of the table. Between each bowl would be wooden chopsticks and spoons that had never touched our lips — they belonged to the ancestors and were only pulled out on occasions like this. Two small dishes would contain a traditional Tết food, caramelized egg and fatty pork. The sauce gave a rich color to the egg whites, which had been infused with an earthy brown hue, but the yolk still remained a vibrant yellow.

A big bowl of my mom's special occasion soup would anchor the table. The soup was a sweet, thick broth that was weighed down by shredded chicken, baby corn, shiitake mushrooms and quail eggs. Two giant reassembled crabs would sit on supple lettuce beds on each side of the soup bowl. Underneath the shell would be a sweet concoction of crab innards, butter and sautéed onions. This was always the most decadent dish on the altar and the smell of butter overpowered the whole table. The crab legs would have been propped up under the shells, and I remember that for a moment, it looked like the crabs could just walk right off the table.

Halved shrimps accompanied by long shreds of carrots, cucumbers and daikon would be drowning in a sea of nước mắm, a sweet and spicy vinegar-based sauce, and topped with cilantro and peanuts. Fat tiger prawns and cashews would wallow in a sweet mayonnaise sauce. Sheets of crispy, thin quail skin would barely hang onto the succulent white meat

underneath. Then, there would be a couple plates of sliced up bánh chung, a traditional sticky rice cake with mung bean and salty pork.

My mom would wrap her hands around seven sticks of incense and pull her hands to her forehead. She would stick the incense into the lotus flower-shaped holder. Through the incense smoke, the food was admired by my family. The incense would shrink, sending puffs of gray ash over some of the food. But it wouldn't matter. The food would be accepted anyway.

The food was an offering for my ancestors on the altar and the Buddhas. When I was a little girl, my mom told me during offerings, the ancestors and the Buddhas ate the food first. After they ate, we could eat. There was a time I thought when we made offerings, we would leave and come back to see half-eaten bowls of rice and nibbled-on slices of bánh chung, the way you would see cookie crumbs on a plate near the fireplace on Christmas morning. It was proof that Santa was there. But I never got my proof. The food looked just as perfect as it did when my mom put it on the altar and I wondered if anybody ever came to eat it. A part of me felt sad to see the food completely untouched because it made me think my ancestors forgot to come.

The altar was the meeting point between the living world and the nonliving world. My paternal grandfather and my maternal great grandmother died long before I was born, but they have always had a presence in my life. Their 8x10 black-and-white photographs watched over me throughout my childhood. They were the ancestors my family first

worshipped and then when my paternal grandmother and maternal grandparents passed away when I was in high school, they, too, made their way onto our ancestral altar.

For Vietnamese people, death is just a portal to another realm and it is the duty of the deceased's descendants to meet their needs in the other world. On special days — Tết, on new or full moons or anniversary death dates — we would make these offerings of food or alcohol or cigarettes and the ancestors would give us advice and good fortune in return.

Tết was the time of year when we could throw all our wishes and hopes out into the world without being afraid we were asking too much. There was an effortless feeling about Tết in my house. Everybody was happy. The house was filled with anticipation and the not yet failed expectations of the upcoming year. I remember dressing up in my blue áo dài, the one with the silver circles. I would swing the front flap of my áo dài up and down, assured by the white trousers underneath. In my áo dài and beaded red slippers, my parents took me from house to house to greet their friends and wish them a happy new year. I didn't need to do much to earn lí xì, those little red envelopes that contained money. Most times, it would be just two one-dollar bills. Sometimes it would be a twenty-dollar bill. Goldy and I liked to line up our little red envelopes and guess what was inside each one. I counted my money over and over, not believing all of it could be mine.

I bowed to my elders and I burned incense and because of this, I was rewarded. This was why I loved Tết as a kid. I didn't know the holiday was a time for new beginnings. I

was too young to appreciate the blessing of a fresh start. I looked forward to Têt probably the same way my peers looked forward to Christmas or Easter. It wasn't about what the holiday represented and why we were observing it. It was about what we could get out of it, how many presents waited for us under the tree or how much chocolate the Easter Bunny brought.

Now, all I remember is the food and the way my house glowed with newness that time of year. Like me when I was a kid, I suspect my students have no idea what they're doing when they bow and burn incense. They care about how much money they'll get and the special food they'll get to eat. I hope one day, they'll see why Chuseok is important and why it's such an important holiday to the Koreans. But for the moment, there is something about my students' wide-eyed innocence and excitement that makes me feel like that little girl in the blue áo dài again.

## Chapter 11

The Chuseok holiday is a welcomed break. Since the beginning of summer, I have taken on two after-school tutoring gigs, one that keeps me at the school from 9:20 a.m. until 7 p.m. twice a week.

I've booked a pension to stay at in Seoraksan National Park, one of the most famous parks in South Korea, for the four-day weekend. Mike and I are going on the trip with a group of four other foreign teacher friends and Sumin, the Korean girlfriend of one of the teachers. We are taking a bus from Seoul Express Bus Terminal to Sokcho, the nearby beach town, then taking a 20-minute taxi ride into Seoraksan National Park.

Sumin saved us from spending the night at the Sokcho Bus Terminal. Our trip started at 11 p.m and I thought Chuseok traffic would put us in Sokcho at just around dawn. But the roads are almost clear the entire way and halfway into our trip, Sumin calls and convinces the owner of the pension to not only give us the room a night earlier than what I reserved the room for, but to wait up for us until we got there, around 3 a.m.

Our pension is one large room with a mini-refrigerator, a television, a bathroom, two full beds and a closet filled with sleeping mats and musty blankets. The wood laminate flooring feels uneven under my feet. The two couples take the beds and the remaining three make their sleeping spots on the floor. We rest up for the hike in the morning.

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It's the end of September and I want to see the changing leaves on the trees that cover the mountains. The pictures I saw online assured me this was the place to see summer turn into autumn, to see the leaves turn from green into crimson reds and vibrant oranges. The mountains looked engulfed in flames in the photos. But somehow, the trees have held off autumn, even though the air up here is chilly and brisk. The mountain has found a way to hold onto summer.

The morning comes suddenly and the sunlight darts into our room from the large windows that open out onto the back patio. This view makes me forget about the stiff sheets and the clusters of grey tiny lint balls in the corners of the blankets. When I walk outside, it reminds me of the morning ritual I had before I got laser eye surgery. I would stumble through the hall, having memorized the direct path from my bedroom to the

bathroom sink. I saw clumps and blobs of colors that blurred into one another. Once I put in my contacts, the things around me turned sharper, forming lines and edges. Going from our dingy pension room to this view is like the moment I looked into the mirror after inserting each contact — it's a transformative clarity.

The mountains look as if they're covered in broccoli florets, making them look just as supple as the clouds in the infinite sky. And in the middle of all of it is a giant Buddha statue, emitting an overpowering serenity.

We head down to the lobby and the manager, Mr. Kwak, gives us a few options for hikes. We decide to go to Geumganggul Cave, about a 2,000-foot climb. The manager said there is a Buddhist Temple up there. We head toward the trail and we end up at Shinheungsa Temple, where we are greeted by a 48-foot bronze Buddha, the same one I saw from the back patio of our room.

Despite his size, he is not an imposing presence. He is sitting cross-legged, his left hand is palm-face up and his right hand is gently draped over his right shin — a mudra, or hand gesture, showing that he is enlightened. His eyes are slivers but they're not closed and there's a slight smile on his lips. The feeling I get in his presence is the same one I get in front of every Buddha statue that I've stood in front of. There is an overall feeling of peace and a swelling calmness but at the core, there is uneasiness, a flickering flame that has never been resolved.

This is the first Buddha statue I have come face to face with here in South Korea and I am surprised I haven't seen more temples in my time here. I didn't expect to see a temple



on every corner or Buddhist monks in saffron robes alongside commuters racing from subway station to station, but being in an Asian country, I assumed seeing a neighborhood temple might be as ordinary as seeing a Starbucks in a big city in California. I thought maybe living in South Korea might give me more opportunities to understand the religion I grew up in.

But I was surprised to learn there is a big Christian presence in Korea. In Mok-dong, I pass a huge cross every day on my way to school and since the seasons have changed and the evenings come earlier, the red fluorescent glow of the lit-up cross usually leads me home. I've been handed religious pamphlets on busy streets and at parks. On a walk home from school one night, Sabina and I stopped at a grocery store on the way home. An ajumma tapped on Sabina's shoulder.

"I notice you guys speak English. I just wanted to let you know there's an English-speaking service at my church around here. Are you guys Christian?"

The ajumma offers a card. Sabina doesn't take it, but I do. I'm not interested in going to church but I felt bad, just ignoring her invitation.

"I'm Catholic so I have a church I already go to."

"Well. OK." She turns to me. "How about you? What religion are you?"

I don't answer right away. I've always had trouble answering this question. But finally, I say: "Umm, I'm...I grew up....I'm Buddhist."

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I was 11 when I became aware of the concept of heaven and hell. That was when I believed hell was a real place and my family would be there after we died because we didn't believe in God. Because Buddha was our God and burning incense and making offerings in front of our ancestral altar was our church.

If you ask my mom, she'll say that she wouldn't have made it to America on her first escape attempt without her faith. When she was in Cambodia, en route on foot from Vietnam to a refugee camp that spilled right into Thailand, my mom saw a Buddha statue on the street. She didn't question where it came from or how it got there but she stopped and she worshipped, bowing and praying, asking for guidance and help to get to the camp. She arrived at NW82 refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border months later, where she met my father and I was born in America two years later.

Altars were always a part of my life. They were set up in every rented home we lived in. The red and gold plastic houses that contained the Buddha statues faced the door because my mom said they brought good luck to the energy coming in and out of the house. Altars were like furniture, not any different than the black leather couch set or the lacquered artwork that hung on the wall. They weren't anything to ask about. But when the brown-haired, blue-eyed girls across the street, Candy and Misty, came over to our house, they asked about the Buddhas, the candles, the incense and the little plates of assorted fruits we put out as offerings.

“So you guys give food to statues? You worship pictures?”

The skepticism and judgment were apparent in the questions. I didn't know the answers. I never needed to know the answer. The rituals that revolved around the altar never bothered me, but Candy's and Misty's concerned questions reaffirmed what I already knew — my family was different. Strange. Weird. Not like other families. This wasn't news but for the first time, I realized there was a consequence for not fitting in.

Candy and Misty lived with their grandparents across the street. Their mother moved around a lot so they lived with their grandparents, who were devout Seventh-Day Adventists. Every Saturday, I watched Candy and Misty in their ankle-length pastel-colored dresses get in a powder blue Cadillac with their grandparents. All of a sudden, I was compelled to ask them questions about God and about the rules of getting into heaven. To me, they were authorities on Christianity. They knew so much about religion and the afterlife and I marveled at their certainty. I didn't know anything about religion. Altars and offerings had always been a part of my life but my parents never talked about Buddhism. They didn't teach me the tenets and principles. They probably thought I would learn to worship the way they learned — by watching.

I knew Candy and Misty had answers that might have been scary, but I wanted to know what happened after we died so badly, like wanting to see the scar forming underneath a band-aid but needing to squeeze my eyes shut and look away to rip it off. I wanted to examine the wound underneath, to see exactly the damage that was done.

Candy and Misty were clear. We didn't necessarily have to go to church or stop eating pork — which never would have happened in a Vietnamese family — but we all needed

to accept Jesus into our hearts. They told me everybody gets exposed to Jesus at one point in their lives and if they don't accept him, they've missed their chance.

“Who knows?” Candy asked one day. “Maybe you're the one to expose them to Jesus Christ.”

That made my stomach drop. What if it was up to me and only me to make sure my family was saved and let into heaven? What if I was their only hope? I was convinced. My family was going to hell.

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Mike calls out to me. The group is moving toward Biseonda Cliff. Once we pass all the restaurants at the bottom of the mountain that all seem to sell the same things — haemul pajeon (pancakes filled with seafood and green onions) and bibimbap (rice mixed with vegetables, kimchi and eggs), the trail goes straight up. It's intimidating and I try to focus on that overall peace I was feeling before I let that unresolved flame in me start to flicker.

I find flat spaces on huge rocks to land on. I bounce from rock to rock, confident in how sturdy the rocks are positioned along the water, like they've been there and haven't moved for hundreds of years. Up ahead, Korean hikers on their way down lounge on these rocks, shoes and socks off and hiking sticks leaned up against a nearby tree. There are kimbap rolls wrapped in foil and green bottles of soju and white bottles of makgeolli, even though it is 10:30 in the morning. A shot of soju seems to be the preferred way to celebrate the ascent of an imposing mountain.

I feel underdressed in my thin, stretchy yoga pants, the brown souvenir shirt my mom got me from Cambodia and a light fleece. I see older Koreans dressed as if hiking Seoraksan is an event they've trained their whole life for. Ajummas and ajusshis are in brightly-colored, multi-pocketed windbreakers. Their gloved hands are wrapped around sturdy hiking poles. They carry North Face backpacks that surely hold rolls and rolls of kimbap and bottles of soju. And there probably is a bag or two of dried squid in there, too. Ajusshis wear baseball caps while ajummas where over-sized green poker visors that hide most of their face and allows their short, frizzy permed hair to move and bounce with the wind as they find their way around the rocks.

The hike isn't too long. The manager at the pension told us it would take about an hour and a half. As soon as we leave Biseonda Cliff, the real ascent begins.

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There was a time during that year I learned about heaven and hell when all I could think about was hell. I thought about what it would feel like and what it would look like. I thought about my family drowning in a huge black cauldron, all of them crying, and the devil, with his red cape and pointy chin and big horns, laughing as he stirred in vigorous circles.

I didn't tell anybody about this because I thought my parents would think I was betraying them in some way if I told them I had accepted Jesus into my heart and they needed to, too. I thought I would get in trouble. So I prayed. I prayed whenever someone

left the room. I prayed during commercial breaks while I was watching television. I prayed to Jesus when no one was looking.

When I prayed on the side of my bed, I didn't kneel all the way, making it easier to get up and pretend I was doing something else. When I couldn't sleep, I looked over at my sister in her bed and wished I could close my eyes without thoughts of a gigantic fire pit with unholy people as barbecue running in my head.

To try to go to sleep, I ran through the list of the Ten Commandments. I saw the list in the hallway at Misty and Candy's house one day. *Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. Thou shalt remember the Sabbath Day. Thou shalt not take other gods before me. Thou shalt not use the name of the Lord in vain.*

I would get cozy in my bed and as I recited each commandment in my head, I rubbed my feet together, finding the spaces in between the toes on my left foot with the outside edge of my right foot. And then I would do the same thing on the other side. If I missed a space — usually the one between the pinky toe and the one next to it — I made myself recite the commandments over. *Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not kill.* I recited until I fell asleep.

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*Just go, just go, just go. Go, go, go go.* It's what I say to myself when the trail gets extra challenging and I know if I go slow, the hike will be twice as grueling. So I whisper this to myself until I get to a flat spot where I can rest. I rest my hand on a tall rock in front of me, throw my weight back on my heels and then use the momentum to make it up the

really steep parts. The group is back together now and we come to a long and intimidating red staircase. The first few steps are short and the stairs are weirdly spaced. I can't look out, even though I know on this blue-bird sunny day, it would be a beautiful view. But I never know when my dormant fear of heights turns from being a minor annoyance to a crippling condition. So I play it safe and focus on my bright mint green and neon colored Nikes.

After careful and tentative steps, the staircase spills out onto a natural platform, where I can see how high I've climbed.

"How much farther until the temple?" I ask.

"I think it's up there," says Kristin, one of the girls on the trip, as she points to an even steeper staircase. I look up and can see the mouth of the cave. Is that an entryway into the temple? Is the temple further into the rock? I'm not sure what could be up there. It seems impossible there would be a temple like the one at the bottom of Sinheungsa.

"Nope, not for me," says Mike, once he sees how sharp the staircase goes up. "I'll see you guys down there."

Mike heads back toward the platform. Heights aren't his thing. I entertain the thought of turning around, too. This staircase looks like a ladder and I wonder if it would be possible to keep my eyes mostly closed to momentarily forget about how fast and horrific a drop from that height would be. But now I really want to know what could be up there. All these treacherous stairs must lead to something amazing for people to suspend their fear of falling just to see it. For a moment, I forget about my fear, too.

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When I had asked Candy and Misty all the questions I could ask about heaven and hell, I internalized the answers and then started rationalizing. I thought maybe if I believed enough or followed the Ten Commandments closely enough, it could give my family some kind of credit and all of us could get into heaven. I thought about how cruel it would be that God gave our family a brother and son like Ghandy and still made us all go to hell. God would only give Ghandy to a nice family, a family worthy of going to heaven. I thought about how God couldn't let my mom go to hell. My mom, the one who cooks for us, who makes our clothes, who sews dresses for large factories in our freezing garage for 14 hours a day.

I stopped praying so much and tried not to think about it. I assured myself I would figure it out when I got older, when I went off to college and could go to church without the guilt of disappointing my parents. My plan was to start going to church, get baptized and find a way to save my family.

I went to college and I called myself "spiritual" and I said things like, "I feel so blessed" when I was around my Christian friends. But after college, after I moved to Salt Lake City and was immersed in Mormon culture, I found myself drifting back to the religion I always knew, what always felt comfortable, even though I never let myself feel it completely. Buddhism became the unassuming, mysterious suitor that, as I got older, looked more enticing. Christianity was like the pursuer who was too eager and serious.

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I stay to the right and grip onto the railing tightly with both hands. I make sure each stair is completely under me before I put my weight on my foot. I only look at the stair in front of me, climbing each one at a steady pace. And finally, we make it to the meager mouth of the cave. It is dark, so my eyes have to adjust. When they do, I see a shallow cave with three small white statues and five candles in front of them. There is faux wood adhesive flooring and two mats for praying. The whole thing is smaller than my mom's altar room back home. I look around the cave, searching for something more that would make this whole trek worth it. Three rows of pink prayer lanterns line the roof of the cave. There is a woman at a small stand, selling little trinkets and bracelets. This is it. This is all there is.

Winded, I do the only thing I know how to do. I press my fingers and palms together and I close my eyes. I say my grown-up prayer, different than the money or wealth or good-paying job that my mom told me I could ask for when I was younger. I ask to be more open, to be more patient and to be more understanding. My hands, palms still pressed up against one another, rock back and forth three times and I open my eyes.

When I turn around, I see the expansive Cheonbuldong Valley underneath me. Jagged rocks and mountains go until the horizon line. The light at this time of day is so radiant, I feel I can see the cut and line of every jagged edge of the mountains. The blue of the sky and the green of the trees pop out against each other. When I see this, I realize how remarkable it is to have this tiny temple here.

I'm standing near the triangular mouth of the cave, just a couple feet away from the edge. I let the sun warm my face. I look out onto the Cheonbuldong Valley and because

everything is still, I feel like I'm looking out into a massive painting. The sharp angles of the mountains below are hidden by a canopy of thick trees. The few clouds in the sky are motionless and the sunlight shines through them like gossamer.

Guemganggul Cave is where Buddhist monks used to retreat to for prayer and meditation. They found peace in the humble temple that resided in the middle of this mammoth rock. Although the cave is seen more by tourists than monks these days, that same peace can still be found. From this view, I am suddenly very aware of my place in the world, of how very insignificant I am in the midst of this valley. There's a growing acceptance that comes with this peace and as I head back down the steep stairs, I feel an overwhelming comfort in my smallness.

## Chapter 12

The Korean climate is unlike any other I have lived in before. The weather was mild in Central California and even though I experienced living in snow in Salt Lake City and Lake Tahoe, nothing quite compares to the extreme seasons in Seoul. When I arrived in March, there was no more snow but the cold weather was unforgiving. I dreaded the first step outside my Officetel building because I knew the severe wind would be there to greet me. I could feel the wind finding the cracks in the skin around my nose and lips. My hands were never warm enough in my pockets.

In the hot months, I wanted to jump out of my skin, just like I saw those cicadas do at the beginning of summer. I was trapped under a suffocating film of humidity. I hated the way my fingers stuck to my forehead when I rubbed my face at the end of a long school

day. By the time I got home from work, the oil and sweat on my face would have made the meticulously applied kohl eyeliner into crescent moon-shaped shadows under my eyes.

Right now, though, I'm happy to live in a place with such drastically different seasons because autumn in Korea is my reward for making it through the grueling summer. When I came home from Seoraksan, I got the fall foliage I was looking for. The colors of the leaves were similar to the hues you would find in a ripe mango — sallow yellows turning into luscious oranges and deep reds, with only a hint of green. I take in as much of the fall as I can because I've heard it doesn't last long. The spring and autumn are overpowered by the other two seasons.

The next big event to prepare for at Sterling is Halloween. Decorating for the holiday has been a month-long affair. Vanesa and Emma have led the Korean-staff effort in decorating the library and hallways with fake spider webs and signs. Wesley cut out ghost shapes, laminated them and hung them from the ceiling. There are skeletons and bats hanging in my classroom. The kids made the skeleton out of poster board and fastened the arms and legs with brass brads so the skeleton looked like it was dancing when they held it up. The bats are made out of recycled toilet paper rolls covered in black construction paper and two googly eyes. I let them watch old Disney cartoons on YouTube where skeletons dance around a cemetery and Donald Duck pranks his three nephews, Huey, Dewey and Louie, while they're trick or treating.

“Maggie Teacher, what's Trickin' Treating,” asks Kenny.

“Not trickin’ treating, Kenny. Trick or Treating. It’s where you wear a costume and go to people’s houses, ring the doorbell and when they come to the door, this is what you say. Then, they give you candy.”

“Teacher, why?” This is their favorite question.

“Because it’s a tradition,” I say, trying my best to hide the fact that I don’t know exactly how Halloween started and why it’s still celebrated.

“That’s what kids do in America every year and it’s one of the their favorite holidays because it’s so fun.”

The more I ramble, the less interested my students become in my answer and the more interested they are in how Huey, Dewey and Louie get their revenge on their Uncle Donald. By the time the cartoon is done, I know they’re looking forward to Halloween as much as any other red-blooded American kid.

“Tomorrow is our Halloween party,” I say as they put on their jackets and stuff their books into their tiny backpacks. ““Don’t forget to wear a costume to scare all the ghosts away.”

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Since the beginning of the school year, Sam emphasized how important it is for Sterling to provide an authentic American school experience. That was the draw for a lot of the parents to send their kids here. That means having day-long parties for holidays like St. Patrick’s Day and Easter. We’ve gone all-out for Halloween.

All the teachers are in costume and I am dressed as a zombie. I covered my face in white makeup and used the rest of my black eye shadow to make my eye sockets look deeper and my cheeks look more sunken in. I squirted some red paint from the arts and crafts room in my palm and strategically placed it on my face, neck and shirt to make it look like I had just been feasting on some human flesh.

Edward and MinJae, who are dressed up as Mickey Mouse and Dracula, are the first to arrive to my classroom. I hide behind the door and jump out when they walk in. Their startled gasps followed by uncontrollable giggling reminds me of how I loved Halloween as a kid. It was a magical holiday where nobody was excluded, no matter what religion you were or language you spoke. I hadn't felt that about Halloween in a long time.

Sterling has been transformed into a carnival. Every classroom has been turned into a different activity station. My room is where the kids get their face-painted. There is a crafts station, a scary story room, and a station where covered containers are filled with peeled grapes, lychee and wet spaghetti and the kids are told they're touching eyeballs, brains and intestines.

Then, after our spooky snack — a Ritz cracker with a marshmallow on it with a ribbon of red icing draped across the marshmallow — that is supposed to resemble a giant bloody eye, we gather the kids near the elevator to head downstairs for trick-or-treating.

October 31 is just another autumn day in Korea. It seems people are familiar with the holiday but still, it's not one they care about. So as the other teachers and I were wrangling princesses and power rangers and pirates on the eighth floor, Wesley hurries

downstairs to three stores on the same block and gives them bags of candy to hand out to the kids.

Our first stop is maihaus, a high-end bedding store. There are two ladies behind the cash register and they're surprised at how many kids burst through their doors. There's nobody else in the store so the women have time to gush over the cute costumes. There's Edward in his homemade Mickey Mouse get-up. Ryan and Jerome are pirates, their oversized hats dipping past their eyes and their ruffled shirts tickling their chins. And there's Anne, who's dressed up as Jessie from Toy Story. The kids are eager to get their candy and the women put handfuls of candy in each bag.

Next, we go to Kraze Burger, the chain in Korea that sells American-style burgers, although you can get a bulgogi or salmon burger for around 9,000 won. No matter how authentic a restaurant says it is, there's always something to satisfy the Korean palate. The kids' bags are half full by the time we leave Kraze Burger.

Our last stop is a place behind our building where golfers go to tee up on simulated golf courses splashed across a giant screen. It's a small lobby so the kids have to take turns going inside. The man handing out candy sees the kids waiting outside and quickly dumps candy in the open-mouthed bags he sees. The kids outside complain about the wind and how their costumes aren't keeping them warm enough. Even though we only went trick-or-treating to three places, it takes an hour to get everyone through. We walk back to our building and as the elevator takes us back upstairs, the kids sift through their candy bags and take inventory of their haul.

We ended the day on another old Disney cartoon. My students are transfixed, sticks of orange and red suckers jutting out of their mouths, their bags of candy clutched in their lap as they sit cross-legged on the floor. Even though they're heading home, my day isn't done yet. My elementary kids are coming in half an hour.

My afternoon class is small. Originally, I only had two girls — Hye Seon and Hanna — but I convinced Sam to add Andrew, the student I tutored who kept me at Sterling until 7 p.m. on some nights. Even though I know Andrew will not be able to keep up with the girls, who have been at the school and been learning English for the past four years, I hope he'll pick up something by listening and interacting with them.

Hye Seon and Hanna have been talking about Halloween since the school year started. Hanna often reminds me of how she won the costume contest last year with her vampire outfit. Hye Seon arrives first and she's a ghost. She's dressed in all white and is wearing heavy makeup to make her eyebrows darker and to make crooked, uneven lines around her eyes. She swiped red lipstick down her cheek along her nose to make it look like blood was coming from her eyes. Fake blood also runs from the corners of her rouged lips.

Hanna's costume is less severe. She is wearing a black and red dress that on any other occasion would look sweet and adorable. She's wearing some eyeliner and inserted vampire teeth.

Andrew is wearing jeans and a blue Braves sweater. I assume he's not dressed up because he thinks he's too cool for Halloween. Andrew is big for his age and because of

this, I think he's much older than 11. He's a hockey player and initially, I got him to open up to me because I asked him about sports and his hockey games.

Before class starts, I ask the girls to come take a picture with me in the gym. I see Andrew watching from the doorway. He doesn't say anything and then he walks back to class.

I didn't want my elementary students to feel left out so I saved some candy for them and I bought them some spooky snacks, which was nothing more than those popular Korean corn snacks that look like Bugles, the snack you can slide onto your fingers to make your hands look like claws. I also got the kids Oreos. I told them to twist the cookies apart to look like giant eyes. At break time, I let them eat their snacks and I put on a cartoon. I go to the bathroom and on the way back, Vanesa stops me.

"Andrew is very upset."

"What do you mean? He seems fine to me."

"I think he's really upset that you took a picture with Hye Seon and Hanna and not with him. Maybe you could talk to him."

"What are you talking about? He doesn't care about that stuff. He's a tough kid."

"Maybe not this time."

When I walk back into class, the kids are still watching the cartoon.

"Andrew, can I talk to you outside for a moment?"

The girls look at me like they know something is wrong.

"After the cartoon is over, I want you guys to open your workbooks and wait for me."



Andrew and I go into the library. We sit on one of the tiny chairs made for the kindergarteners and Andrew's knees come up almost to his chin.

"Andrew, are you upset about something?"

He puts his arms on his knees and he turns his face away so I can't see him.

"Hey, Andrew, if something is wrong, you should let me know." I wait for him to say something. Nothing. "Is it because I asked Hye Seon and Hanna to be in a picture and I didn't ask you?"

He picks his head up but is looking down. He nods.

"I'm sorry, Andrew. I didn't think you wanted to be in it."

"I told my mom I needed a costume. She said I could wear my brother's after he got home from school today but it was too small. She said I didn't need one. I told her I needed one."

I see Andrew as this budding athlete and I forget that he's just a kid. He wants what every kid wants and that's to fit in and do what everybody else is doing. I know what it's like to be a kid and try to get your mom to understand something that is so foreign to her but makes so much sense to you. I know what it's like to try to explain something and how important it is to you and not have the words to do so.

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I was the new kid in class when my second-grade teacher told my class about the potluck dinner the school was having. I had just gone from a school where most of the

kids were Mexican and Laotian and Cambodian. As soon as I walked into my new classroom, I had the feeling I didn't belong there. There was no other face like mine.

On that first day of school, I got off at the wrong bus stop and the principal had to come pick me up. When I arrived late, my teacher, Mrs. Payne, told everybody to stop what they were doing, look up at me and she introduced me to the class. I wanted to step behind Mrs. Payne, although her frame was so slight I wouldn't have been able to completely disappear behind her. I was so quiet and indistinct in my former classroom, my teacher sometimes forgot I was there. I liked that. There was a comfort in being overlooked.

I stood in front of the class, my toes pointed toward each other, a nervous habit I still have, and looked to the floor. I realized in that moment, seeing all the white faces look at me, how much I didn't fit in. It was then I linked my feeling of otherness with the unwanted attention of others. From this moment on, I always wanted to blend in, to be looked over, maybe even ignored. As a kid, I thought being ignored was better than being different.

When Mrs. Payne showed me where I was sitting, I slid into my chair without even pulling it out and hoped everyone would just go back to what they were doing.

I hadn't been at the school long before Mrs. Payne told my class about the potluck. Salad was what my class was supposed to bring. I went home and told my mom she needed to make a dish for my school event.

"I know. I'll make *chả giò*."

“Chả giò? No, mom,” I said. “Nobody wants to eat egg rolls. They don’t even know what those are. They want to eat salad.”

My mom didn’t know what a potluck was. She didn’t know if it was rude to bring something else so she listened to her persistent daughter. My mom made the salad I asked for. She chopped a head of lettuce, shredded one carrot and drenched all of it in a dressing made of mayonnaise, sugar and white vinegar. She put it in the refrigerator and let it sit until the potluck the next evening.

I remember sneaking out of my room that night after the whole house was asleep. I felt my way along the wall to get through the hallway and into the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator door and saw the salad, which had been turned into a white soup with specks of green underneath saran wrap in a big bowl. The light from inside the refrigerator revealed my smile in the dark kitchen.

The next night, my dad dropped my mom, my sister and me off at my school. Immediately, I realized our salad didn’t look like the others. Ours was just one of 20 bowls of green salad.

“See? You should have let me make egg rolls,” my mom said.

I told her it was fine and that white people really liked salad. Even though I didn’t let my mom make egg rolls, it didn’t stop her from bringing some anyway.

There was no line and no teacher around to show us what to do. Even though I made my mom make a salad she didn’t want to make and come to an event she wasn’t sure about,

I, too, really didn't even know what a potluck was. We looked around for plates and utensils. I saw Mrs. Payne and asked her how we were supposed to eat the food.

“Margaret, this is a potluck. Everybody brings something to share and their own plates and forks.”

*Why couldn't she have told me this before? Why didn't I think to ask before?* I lingered in front of Mrs. Payne, nervous to go back to my sister and mom and tell them there was no way for us to eat the food. Just then, Mrs. Payne turned to grab three Styrofoam trays from the kitchen, the same ones used for the hot lunches.

I walked over to my mom and sister and handed them the trays. We stood in the middle of the cafeteria and I looked at my mom, neither of us knowing what to do. A line had formed and we watched the family in front of us for guidance. My mom pulled out the egg rolls and told my sister and me to use them to scoop the food onto our tray.

It was funny how just the night before, I thought this potluck would be the chance for me to really feel like a real American kid, eat American food with my American classmates. Instead, I was sticking egg rolls into potato salad and coleslaw and trying to scoop them onto one of the designated spots on my Styrofoam tray.

We walked outside and saw families sprawled across the lunch eating area and the blacktop where I played hopscotch and tether ball. Some families brought their own food. Some brought picnic baskets and blankets. They knew what they were doing.

We found a spot under a tree. On our way there, I saw some sixth-grade boys eating stuffed-crust pizza. They didn't seem to appreciate how beautiful the pizza was with its

glistening pepperoni and gooey cheese. I could picture myself raising the pizza to my mouth, turning it around and making a big dent in the puffy, cheese-filled crust. I imagined the cheese and bread swirling around in my mouth in contrasting unison with the tangy tomato sauce. But I couldn't have pizza. I was stuck eating potato salad with an eggroll. And then I had to eat the cold egg roll afterwards.

At the end of the night, we went to retrieve our salad bowl. We found it untouched. The plastic wrap hadn't even been lifted. Nobody ate my mom's salad. The look on my mom's face could have summed up what I was feeling — that the untouched salad was a symbol that no matter how hard we tried, we didn't know how to make American food, or even how to be American for that matter.

I could see the discomfort on Mrs. Payne's face as she returned the bowl to my mom. I wondered what was going through my teacher's mind as she tried to make small talk with my mom. Even though there was a language barrier, their forced smiles made it clear that they both understood the uneasiness of the predicament they found themselves in. My mom had never made an offering that was rejected. Mrs. Payne spoke first. She tried to emphasize the positive.

“You know, Margaret is a pleasure to have in class.”

My mom nodded, but I knew she wasn't quite sure what Mrs. Payne had said. I wondered if she could feel how embarrassed I was standing there, listening to awkward chit chat and hearing Mrs. Payne try to elongate every syllable that left her lips. *Thank you for coming. What a lovely.....bowl.*

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Andrew is crying now. He's probably going over and over in his head the conversation he had with his mom this morning and how he wished she would have listened to him. This might be compounded by the fact that he knows his English isn't as good as Hye Seon's or Hanna's and that he's always trying to come up with a reason to get out of reading out loud when we read as a class.

I've noticed in the past few weeks that he doesn't talk as much in class as he did when it was just the two of us during tutoring. I've noticed how energetic he is when he first comes to Sterling, but how he shrinks and his shoulders droop when class actually starts. I realize his tears might have been waiting to come up since long before Halloween.

"Andrew, Halloween isn't about costumes. It's about having fun."

Andrew finally looks up at me.

"All that matters is that you're having fun. You want to go back to class and finish those cartoons? You can pick the next one."

"OK," he mumbles. He lifts his arm and wipes the tears from his cheeks with his sleeve. I'm relieved it doesn't take much to forget why he was crying. But I wish I could have given him more assurance. What I should have told him was that nobody thought he was weird for not dressing up and that sometimes, everybody feels left out at one time or another. I should have told him what I wish Mrs. Payne would have said to me.