

“*The Magical Language of Others* is a beautifully crafted saga, and a testament to how the most complicated, often elusive truths and inheritances can shape us and reverberate across generations. Anyone who has ever wondered about their own family history, or sought to understand how it comes to bear on their most intimate relationships, will find much to ponder and relate to in E. J. Koh’s graceful, moving memoir.”

NICOLE CHUNG,
author of *All You Can Ever Know*

“*The Magical Language of Others* is an exquisite, challenging, and stunning memoir. E. J. Koh intricately melds her personal story with a broader view of Korean history. Through these pages, you are asked to experience one family’s heartbreak, trauma, and complex love for each other. This memoir will pierce you.”

CRYSTAL HANA KIM,
author of *If You Leave Me*

“This memoir broke my heart. The tragedies that filled the lives of Koh’s mother and grandmothers are woven into mythic, magic tales in Koh’s hands. Only by Koh’s grace and mastery are we not crushed by the stories within *The Magical Language of Others*. I could read this book a thousand times over.”

SARAH BLAKE,
author of *Naamah*

“E. J. Koh’s *The Magical Language of Others* grapples with intergenerational loss and love between mothers and daughters across time, war, and immigration. Koh’s painful journey is bridged by her mother’s letters, which she translates, unfolding the language of mothering and tenderness. Koh remarkably and beautifully translates the language of mothers as the language of survivors.”

DON MEE CHOI,
author of *Hardly War*

“Indisputably brilliant. I read *The Magical Language of Others* in a single sitting—all the while never wanting it to end. With a formally daring structure and finely distilled sentences, Koh creates a densely layered, lyrical exploration of the bonds between generations of daughters and mothers.”

JEANNIE VANASCO,
author of *Things We Didn’t Talk About When I Was a Girl*

“E. J. Koh artfully wields both words and the spaces between them, and in the gaps between languages, generations, countries, and members of a family, she finds both bridges and aching deep rifts. This is simultaneously a coming-of-age story, a family story, and a meditation on language and translation, with an emotional range to match: Koh movingly guides us through deep longing and loneliness towards forgiveness, understanding, and purposeful, tentative joy.”

CAITLIN HORROCKS,
author of *The Vexations*

“In *The Magical Language of Others*, E. J. Koh writes of the boundary between anonymity and naming, between absence and abandonment, between cruelty and safety for four generations of mothers and daughters, each speaking with an occupied heart and crossing narrative borders between Korea, Japan, and America. As a reader, you give yourself over to her narrative territory and the resetting of the borders of lineage, language, and lives lost.”

SHAWN WONG,
author of *Homebase* and *American Knees*

The Magical
Language of
Others

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The Magical Language of Others

A Memoir

E. J. Koh



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A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

My mother opens her letters in Korean, *Abnyoung*. This translates into *Hi* or *Hello*. I use both for the Korean greeting. *Hi* beams outward like the sun's rays. The tone transports energy without expecting reciprocity. One may absorb *Hi* with a casual wave or respond with a smile. *Hello* boomerangs for a response. Over the phone, one says *Hello* to hear a voice calling through silence. *Hello* is an alteration of *Hallo* or *Hollo* from Old High German *Halâ* or *Holâ*, used to hail a ferryman. *Hello* comes as a question. *Are you there?* *Hello* fetches me across an expanse of water.

Eun Ji is the name she gave me. Eun, as in *mercy* and *kindness*, closer to mercy than kindness. Eun falls between *blessing* and *blessed*. Ji lands at *wisdom* and *knowing*. Ji resides with *judiciousness* more than *intelligence*. Eun Ji does not

echo willfulness or innocence. It resonates with softness and sensibility. Angela is my Catholic name, after Saint Angela Merici, a holy messenger. My mother calls me Angela when she speaks formally. Angela is proper for its foreignness—postured for the public. Eun Ji belongs to her. Angela, to everyone else. She calls my brother Chang Hyun, his Catholic name John, or your brother. For my father, your dad. For her, she is always Mommy.

Mommy addresses a child, who remains one in her letters. This becomes clear when she switches to third person. *When you feel a little better, if you want to talk to Mommy again, call me.* Her third person is, in part, her mothering.

Since my Korean was limited when I was a child, she uses kiddie diction. She stays mostly at a basic level. For advanced vocabulary, she transcribes the first definition in her English dictionary and notes it in parentheses in place of or next to the original vocabulary. *Auntie must get jealous (envy) because I have my Eun Ji.* Translating is problematic for her, but also a treat. The letters note, at times, the wrong English definition. In one, she means *promise* and next to *promise*, she writes *confirm* but misspells it as *conform*. She says, *Promise (conform) and say it to yourself.* Her error becomes a delight that cuts tension, or stalls grief. In another, she defines *promotion* as *propaganda*. She writes, *I have to assert and promote myself (propaganda).* Her language slips out of a perfect transcription and gives relief with its obfuscation and humor.

Words she writes in English or changes into Korean English are italicized in the book, such as *last of my life* and

God is *fair*, you know. Japanese words she writes in Korean are romanized: *Nani ga hoshii desu ka?*

Korean phrases are a favorite. *Aja, aja, fighting!* Not a signpost that signals transition between parts, this translates into *Let's go, let's go, fight!* The phrase uses the English *fight* or *fighting*. *Aja, aja* is a sound of activity, quick-footed, rising from the gut. Together, they bolster fortitude.

Readers may ask whether I wrote her back. Her letters are a one-way correspondence. The thought of writing her was unbearable. Korean was a language far from me. I never suspected I would come to it in the end.

The letters are included in their original form and not all appear in chronological order. Some letters have dates for meetings that happened at different times.

To my limits, I do not see my translations as complete. If her letters could go to sleep, my translations would be their dreams. The letters transport my mother to wherever I reside, so they may, in her place, become a constant dispensation of love.

Forty-nine letters were discovered after an unknowable number had been trashed or forgotten. In Buddhist tradition, forty-nine is the number of days a soul wanders the earth for answers before the afterlife.

1

Dear Eun Ji.

Hello, hello, hello, my Eun Ji.

You said you're doing well? We phoned yesterday, remember? Mommy got a little angry, but not at you. Mommy didn't take good care of things and had thoughts like, "I've put you guys up in a very dirty place." If you lived with Mommy, you wouldn't raise a dog and Eun Ji wouldn't be alone at the house in Davis every day, right? Then, without asking, you guys bought a *TV*. *Of course*, you could've done that, but. *Anyway*, everything is fine. It's fine. After some time passed, I realized, "They could've done that." Still, if *Aeson* goes in and out of your room, the thought of my Eun Ji's body, clothes, his dog hair sticking to everything, even

now it makes my heart ache. You can understand, right? Oh, my friend Gwi Won's daughter Jung Yeon (*finally*) got hired (*pass*) at KBS television studios. Starting next year, she will be an announcer and come on *TV*. Gwi Won was so hysterical she called me crying. Didn't it turn out well? For a year and a half, you don't know how many times Jung Yeon tested. It's a big, big deal. I'll have to thank God. Gwi Won had only been getting bad news as of late.

God is *fair*, you know. My Eun Ji is tired and lonely now, but you'll get good news too. You will go to the college you want, then *graduate* from college, get a *job*, and from here on, you'll only get lots and lots of good news. *Especially* in college, a *good boyfriend* will appear. Mommy's excited just thinking about it. Right?

Looks like you have exactly a week left of tests. This letter will probably *arrive* either a day before you test or just after you tested. When you feel a little better, if you want to talk to Mommy again, call me. I'll be waiting.

Tomorrow, your dad's second oldest brother's wife said she's coming over to play. We're going to the bathhouse together. You want to go, don't you? *I know!*

You know the restaurant owner in the bathhouse? That woman said my Eun Ji is prettier than Jung Yeon. Mommy thinks so too.

My pretty Eun Ji. You know to live all you can and always boldly, right? Eun Ji must be *happy* so Mommy can be *happy*. When I *finish* this letter, I'll *pray* too. "God, *always* be

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with my Eun Ji and Chang Hyun. Please help my Eun Ji go to the *college* she wants.” Like this, you know. I’ll write again tomorrow. Bye. *Be happy.*

Mom

November 28, 2005

은지에게.

안녕 안녕 안녕 우리은지.

잘 지내니 있대며?

어제 전화 했잖아.

엄마가 좀 화가 났었거든, 너한테가 아니고

엄마가 잔 번산대지 못하리

네네들을 너무 지저분한곳에서 살게 하는구나' 하는
그런 생각이 들었어.

엄마랑 같이 살고 있었으면 개도 안키웠을테고

은지가 매일 혼자 자는 게 있지도 않은테고, 그치로

너희들 마음대로 T.V도 사고

of cause 그럴수도 있지만.

Any way 다 괜찮아. 괜찮아.

시간이 지나니까 '그럴수도 있지' 그렇게 생각이 든다.

그래도 Aesom 이 네방에 들락거리며

우리은지 몸에, 옷에 개털의 악 묻는다리 생각하면

지금도 속이 상해.

이해는 하지?

참. 귀원의 아줌마 딸 정연이 인니는 KBS 방송국에

드디어 (Finally) 합격했다. (pass)

내년부터 아나운서가 되서 TV에 나올거야.

귀원의 아줌마가 너무 좋아서 울면서 전화 했더라.

정말 잘됐지?

1년 반을 시험은 몇 번을 봤는지 몰라.

정말 정말 축하할 일이야.

하느님께 감사 해야지

요즘에 아줌마네 안좋은일만 있었거든.

하느님은 fair 하시거든

우리 은지도 지금은 힘들고 외롭겠지만
곧 좋은일도 생각꺼야.

원하는 대학이든 들어가든 또 대학 graduate
하든 job 가지든,

앞으로 좋은일만 많이 많이 생각꺼야.

Specially, College에 가서 good boy friends
생기든,

엄마는 생각만 해도 즐겁다. 고치?

시형이 꼭 일주인 뵈었구나.

이 편지는 시형분이 하루전이나, 만나서
도착 (arrive) 하겠다.

기분이 좋 좋아지고 엄마하고 또 애기하고 싶으면
전화해. 기다리게.

내일은 종현이네 큰엄마가 놀러온대.

같이 짱짱방에 갈꺼야.

너도 가든 싶지? I know!

짱짱방에 식당 아줌마 왔지?

그 아줌마가 우리 은지가 재연이 만나 이별대.

엄마 생각도 고해.

이별은지.

열심히 살고 항상 씩씩해야 하든거 안지?

은지가 happy 해야 엄마도 happy 하든.

지금도 편지 finish 하면 pray 할게.

"하느님, always 우리 은지. 창현이와 함께 하시고
우리 은지 원하는 College에 갈수 있도록 도와주세요"
이렇게 말야.

내일 또 쓸게. 안녕. be happy

Mom

11/28/05

2

The present is the revenge of the past.

There is a Korean belief that you are born the parent of the one you hurt most. I was revenge when I was born in 1988 at O'Connor Hospital in San Jose, California. I was the reincarnation of somebody wronged, and no wonder I took out a chunk of my mother's body. It was late September. Not the average six pounder, I weighed ten pounds. The crown of my head split a fissure, and when my shoulders passed through, I nearly killed her. Broad, swathed in muscle and green veins, I was hairless except for the faint whiskers of eyebrows, and hungry, giving my mother and the doctor the impression of another boy.

That same day, at the hospital, my mother wiped her ripped parts and bussed to her job at the dry cleaners across

town, passing her home—a six-hundred-square-foot unit at Sunnyhills, crowded apartments in Milpitas near sewage treatment ponds. It was her first month at the dry cleaners. She could not tell anyone that the stitches on her parts had opened. She hid in the bathroom to cry. Since her own mother had died young, she had looked after her siblings until she married. She had come to this country, taking her son—my brother—and following her husband and his elderly mother a year ago. Only her two brothers and her sister back home could comfort her. As she reached down where it hurt, her eyes swelled shut like the glazed ducks with baked eyes they hung out on hooks at the Lion Market.

When I was four, the doctor suspected I was a mute, a person who could not or would not speak, and no one could tell if I could read. Four and a half years and I had said nothing. Even so, at Berryessa flea market, at the Lion Market in Milpitas, at Yaohan Plaza in Fresno, my mother used my name like a fire poker to stoke me alive. The teacher urged her to put me in a school for children with learning disabilities. It was unthinkable to my mother, who chose to tutor me herself. She would have to stay home for longer. However, they needed extra money until my father graduated from school. In our apartment, she talked quietly since my father's mother napped on the floor pad in the same room. "Epper." Apple. She held it up. She took a bite of it. She drew a picture. A mother in pain may scold to the point of her own tears. When she had found out she was

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pregnant with me, my father and his mother urged her to lose the baby. She defied them for the chance that it might be a daughter. “Epper.” Four doctor’s visits, and she refused.

In 1993, at Santa Clara University, I was five and my brother nine when my heart broke with love for my mother, who was herself again, on the grass lawn, under the palm trees—she wore a red three-piece suit with sharp notch lapels, hair blown dry with a round brush. She stood a prisoner of her own light. A year before, my father, the youngest of six brothers and one sister, hauled around a crimson brick called the *Webster’s New World Dictionary*. My father attended Santa Clara University for computer science and used the dictionary to learn English. My mother worked. He studied in the library. They decided together that his degree would be important one day. Six feet tall, 140 pounds, his shirts and pants were loose, yet he never complained. He said to me, in a calm voice shaped by his years in Korea’s compulsory military service, “Some believe that if we’re not smart like your mother and brother, we can’t accomplish things. But we can if we are: one, funny, and two, humble.” After he graduated and we took photographs under the palm trees, my father began to work, and my mother came home early—the resounding clamor of her unshackling. We moved out of Sunnyhills, fifteen miles to a house in Fremont, and my father fitted my mother with his class ring, 1993 engraved in gold, mounted with a red ruby.

~

Our family met fortune in the mid to late nineties. My father worked at a garage-sized networking company in Silicon Valley. He was a first hire and never broke from the company when they offered mere stock. Overnight, his one-dollar stock shot up to \$280. My parents, who had prayed for years, were prepared. They poured two cups of barley tea and sold the house.

They bought a home atop a hill overlooking San Francisco Bay. They covered our kitchen in granite and marble, careful not to boast how the sun resided in our bay window, chandeliers above our dining table. Our tall cage where my parakeet, my mother's surprise for me on my thirteenth birthday, preened her white feathers. Chrysanthemums nodded inside their black vases and perfumed the house. The emerald lawn watered itself with pop-up sprinklers, splashing over our slab walkway, our brick foundation. Through the valley, the wind perpetually traveled with good news to us from our future.

I rushed to my parents' bedroom to say that I was home from school. Through their doors, their bedsheets moved like there was a whale under there. My father rolled over and cursed. Her hair, then her hand appeared. If I had never seen my mother and father hurt each other, I might never have known how they loved each other. They were doing what happy parents do.

~

If it was possible for my parents to be surprised, it happened when my father got a baffling job offer from an electronics company in Korea. I was fourteen years old. The company asked him to come to Seoul and head their advanced technology department. Maybe the company was exaggerating. Then they faxed him a three-year contract.

My parents quibbled over the offer without telling our neighbors. It was the kind of opportunity others might envy or criticize. Some were not ambitious; others might have signed up for longer considering how the company would finance our lives. Both position and pay left a knot of amazement on my parents' faces. They discussed the offer over sliced fruit, chewing seriously on yellow-ringed melons. The company would pay for college tuition. Two flights a year for visits. Should my parents move to Seoul, they would be sensible parents, well paid, confident with tall backs from splended living. My father, a top-tier executive. My mother, reunited with her brothers and sister she had left behind seventeen years ago. Two luxury cars, a condo in a skyscraper, shopping sprees at the company-owned department store, new friends like themselves, could be theirs. They would have to live apart from their children, but only for three years. It was better to pay for your children than to stay with them. That was how it had always been. If the company had said four years, my parents would still have considered it. The years would pass quickly, unnoticeably. Their children could be proud of them. My parents could make new wrinkles around their eyes from smiling.

The offer changed my father. Wearing a slim polo, he asked my mother if he ought to try a livelier color. My mother had her brothers and sister on her mind. She wanted to see my father in salmon. Paired with light pants, the color made him look softer. My mother read his face—an age-old tradition. My father had a large nose, which meant good luck, but narrow-set eyes. His future would be lavish, albeit lonely, and she must protect him. If she wanted a bigger house, she would stay here. By square feet, the condo in Korea was smaller, so it would be easier to wipe down, my mother said, rubbing her shoulders, sore at the mention of cleaning. She packed her books, winter coats, and photo albums.

I would move in with my brother ninety-three miles north in Davis, on Oleander Place, a cul-de-sac off Covell Farms, in a one-story with a roof that sank slightly above the garage. The house was brown with white trim. The lawn, overgrown, midway to yellow. Two concrete steps led to a porch, a tin mailbox anchored by the door. From the driveway, the arch of a forty-foot ancient oak in the backyard, its knobby branches spread out, half covered the house in shade. The sidewalk dipped into a water ditch. The fire hydrant to the left was pure rust. The noise of traffic beyond a main road followed the signs of a college campus nearby. The house itself sat on a tilted stoop where it heaved forth a long-drawn-out sigh. They put me up to live with my brother and left the country in a hurry. My father flew with a briefcase so he could go to work as soon as he landed.

~

My first day, at fifteen, I awoke inside my old blanket, fooled into thinking that I was home. The room had a wooden desk, my same bed pushed against the wall, under a window facing the yard. There was a stucco ceiling and a mirrored closet. I looked for her in every room. When I could not find her, I felt as if I would die. In the kitchen, on the refrigerator, there was a paper note with her number. Her handwriting was evenly spaced the way she might arrange herself standing in a crowd.

I found my brother. I had watched him with our mother and father, but I never saw him in this city where he worked and went to school. If he walked into another room, I followed but stayed at the other end where he was both in my sight and far away. When he stalked into his own room, I suspected he hated to see me.

In elementary school, when my brother was ten, he picked me up at my bus stop. I had fallen asleep on board, so he passed the driver to drag me out by the loop of my knapsack. He was darker, a foot taller, fearless, and led me home seven blocks. One day, when my mother aimed a frying pan at my back after I had lied to her for the first time and she was pained to correct me, my brother stepped in front of it, splitting the handle; she moved away from my brother, who must have reminded her then of my father.

My brother slapped the house bills on the kitchen table. He looked at the clock hanging in the living room and waited for

my mother to wake up. He took his phone into the yard and closed the sliding door behind him. From his voice, I guessed a pipe had burst. She would wire money as soon as the bank got back to them. It was difficult to move money, easier to move people. We waited for the water to be turned on. Opening the garage door, he got into his car and drove away.

Some say brothers cannot replace mothers and fathers. My mother called after he had left and said, "I'm not there, so your brother will take his anger out on you. Mommy knows all too well. Try to remember that he is mad at me, not you." The next morning, from the hall, I would look to see if my brother was in his room, and from his voice behind his door, hear what kind of day it would be. Other mornings, I found my brother hunched over his bedsheets, retreating into a small boy again, whose image would make any mother inconsolable to see it.

Outside, the oak shed its giant hairs. The wood siding invited termites to nest against the grain. I spent most days in my room after installing an interior lockset on my bedroom door. I twisted the rusted interior knob that worked in conjunction with pins and springs and tangs. Without a dead bolt on the door frame, the single cylindrical lock would have given out against a stampede of fists. But I fixated on the lock in that quiet house—privacy is the shadow of grief. Two or three times, I unlocked it to make sure it was locked to begin with. I stopped going to the new school regularly, missing a week or longer, though my brother did not know it. When

he dropped me off, I walked to a nearby park and sat on a bench facing an empty gazebo for six hours before returning to the school where he picked me up, without a word, in his car. At the house, I slept for twelve hours or longer if I could, and come morning, I watched the sun come up like an egg cracked open underwater, its yolk rising with listlessness.

~

One spring day, after a year had passed in Davis, I was replacing the bedding of my parakeet's cage atop a table behind the sofa that separated Miekko from the living room. I had hugged Miekko's cage in the back seat of the car when I moved after standing firm that she would come with me. As I wiped down her tray and clipped fresh stalks of millet to her cage, as I did every week, Miekko looked down from her birch swing. My brother had also bought a Siberian husky he called Aeson. While I cleaned, Aeson watched from the living room. Normally, I waited longer to swap Miekko's tray, but my brother had complained about the smell before leaving the house. At a passing siren outside, Miekko, startled, flew out of her cage and, beating her clipped wings, crossed into the living room. Aeson, teeth first, snatched her up and escaped under the coffee table where I could not reach him. Crawling under, I kicked my legs. I heard him gnawing—a crackling. Her tiny screams. A louder crunch. How he crushed her, ground her down. Finally, I upended the table and seized Aeson by his neck, forcing my fingers into his jaws.

I had never seen a bird without bones. She lay flat on my palm like an envelope. When I was twelve, I had asked my mother for a parakeet. For a year, I tied a string to a plastic bag. It caught air, flying behind me like a bird. So little labor could bring so great a reward. I never knew a real bird was warm with tiny eyelashes, blue-gray eyelids. Violence felt wet in my palms. Her pellet-body punctured by dog teeth. Her feathers engulfed my hands. When my brother returned and saw what had happened, he must have been frightened because he shouted at me like I had never heard before, maintaining his cool, dry eyes. After he drove off in his car, I punched Aeson hard on the nose, but when I stumbled outside, Aeson still followed me, whimpering, and I was in no position to refuse company.

I buried Mieko in the backyard, at the fence, where I would often come to sit afterward. I wrapped her in a thin cloth and placed her inside a tin box with the millet she loved, in a hole a foot or two under the rightmost wooden panel. Children have no concept that every moment comes to end, but rather feel as though their suffering, at present, will last for an eternity. One small thing, taken away, was to feel the loss endlessly. I stole my brother's Lucky Strikes, left on the console table by the door. I took his lighter and retreated to the backyard. The living room sofa and rug would give up her feathers all month. I would clean, and it would not do anything. I curled up on the dirt and cried my heart out and smoked cigarettes. If anyone saw me, they might have wondered when everything had gone so wrong. They might have never known I would start to force

up my food or starve myself. This city was famous for blue jays, seen almost everywhere—though it seemed inconsequential. Then I looked up at the oak tree, and there, a hundred birds came flying in on their fullest wingspan.

~

I almost saw a dead body once. I was ten or eleven, sitting beside my brother in the back seat of our sedan. My family was driving home after our monthly meeting at El Camino Real in Santa Clara, hosted each time by another Catholic family. The babies had gotten a taste of soju, kissing their parents on the mouth. We had pushed the lacquered fold-out tables together for eight Korean Catholic families. The table settings: rice bowls on the left, soup bowls on the right. If we set the table oppositely, as we did for ancestral rites, then ghosts would devour our dinners. We tried not to disturb or refuse the dead.

Past eleven at night, our car exited the neighborhood, drove onto the on-ramp, and my parents began to let out their hateful thoughts about each other. At first, my mother folded her hands above her lap, then unbuckled herself to rise with the height of her voice.

My father's foot weighed heavy on the gas. His fist came down over the center console. The car veered off the shoulder of the freeway, then jolted back onto the road. A rosary hanging from the rearview mirror pedaled left and right. My brother cupped his hands over my ears.

My mother said, "I'll just die."

"No, I will," my father said.

"Why do you get to die?"

"Because I did all the work!"

From the passenger seat, my mother must have considered his words. In that second in the car, something closed inside her, and her face softened.

My mother opened the door until the light from outside filled the car. "You did all the work?" she asked calmly. "Then what am I?" Death must have seemed more approachable than her husband.

My father said, "Don't joke around—"

Suddenly, she jumped out.

Through the hinge of the door, her white skin passed slowly, the way she would go through the church door and into mass. She leaned out as though she might confess, beyond my field of vision.

I heard her body's density as she tumbled past me.

My father braked hard and the car lurched forward. The shocks and springs compressed, putting pressure on the joints, bushings, and bearings.

He pulled the car over, ran outside.

By the end of the month, she said cheerfully that she wasn't trying to kill herself. She changed her bandages before bed, rubbed on a paste for the burns on her right side. When churchgoers asked, she described outdoor concrete stairs, mimicked herself tumbling, and elbowed me to follow. Before long, she was walking normally.

My mother told me if she hadn't jumped, the whole car might have crashed. It would be a waste to see in the paper: dead parents and dead children, roasted inside a vehicle, separated into parts. She said to me, about the trouble with reincarnation, "What universe must God create for these souls to meet again and resolve their obligations?"

I never could jump out of a speeding car.

~

She began writing me letters from Korea in 2005. They had been gone for nineteen months. Once a week, a letter came. Her first was an airline postcard, addressing me as *Angela*. Her second was two pages in blue ink, describing the store where she had bought her pen. I did not know the Korean word for *fair*. But what we knew only in Korean or only in English, she tried to put together. I read the letter out loud to hear the sounds. Otherwise, I could not recognize the words and their shapes, filling the page, covering the creases.

In the letters, I heard her voice, closer than it felt over the phone. I read them in my room—sitting at the desk, standing in the doorway, lying on the bed. I folded the letter and slipped it into its envelope. I placed it on my nightstand. I kept her close. I read a letter once or twice. Moving my lips, I read it again. Each time, I hoped to see something new, a word that I had missed. When I put it away, a panic returned. I took out the same letter and, with no thought to what I had read before, started over.

Early one morning, the phone rang. Her voice sprinted into my ears. "I'm calling you because I miss you," she said. "Did you pick up because you miss me too?"

They had signed another contract with the company.

"My chest is tight," she said. "Will you hold bitter feelings against me?"

They would stay in Seoul for another two years. All together, they would be away for five years including the three years from the first contract. As we talked, my father renewed his work visa, but I said nothing. I put the phone back into its place on the wall next to the refrigerator. When my mother had first asked whether it was okay with me, I was fourteen and copied my brother. "I'm not a baby anymore," I had said to her, and now I huddled over the floor with the memory of all the words she had said to me then.

At the airport in San Francisco, on the day my mother had left the country, she had asked me again if I might come with her. She knew that I would be troubled growing up in another country but wanted me to come because she could not fathom how I would manage without her. She had to go, it was clear to her, but she said it would be difficult. "Do you know what happens after I'm gone?" she asked me. "You have to raise yourself with dignity. Your brother can be mean only when he is unsure of himself. But he loves you. We will look back at our time apart and laugh together and be sad, but we will have many stories. If you have no suffering, you have no story to tell—isn't it true?"

Standing there, she jokingly called me lazy, pointing to my long fingers as further proof. And I was gullible: my earlobes were so thin, words penetrated them easily. “When you age, wrinkles don’t make you older. They make you look more like yourself,” she warned me. “Everything comes to the surface eventually.” Displays of celadon pottery, their pale green glaze, lit up inside their glass cases in the terminal. I did not cry in front of my mother, never having asked her to take me with her.

Before my mother’s plane lifted off the airfield, the edges of her lips stretched taut into a smile. “If you’re too nice to me, I won’t be born again as Eun Ji’s daughter,” she said. “You must be my mommy, who’s come back to make me happy.”

~

Emboldened by impulse, I stole away to a playground, a half mile’s walk from the Davis house, to freeze myself to death. In the dark, I heard Mieko’s feet clasp the bars of her cage and Aeson barking past the road. In dreams of dying, a park and a body, frozen over, made a serene picture, but after three or four hours into the night I jolted awake in the grass, thrashing over the earth. There seemed no reason for me to live. Embarrassed, I trudged back over wet roads in a zigzag, aching. Though I did not expect a soul outside, a tunnel of light shone from the doorway of the house, where my brother stood, waiting, wrapped in a blanket. I ran toward his hand, outstretched with a mug of hot chocolate. He never asked

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where I had been or why I had been gone for hours but offered hot cocoa he made from a mix he had bought on his trip to the supermarket because he remembered the way it could cheer me up, and he had been hoping to do just that, though he did not know, always, the graceful way of doing so, but he tried anyway, his very best, reminding me that we were not stuck—we were liberated—and he understood at his young age that he was all I had in this world, and only when he had returned to his room and closed the door behind him did my tears fall freely.