

# SARAH

Minneapolis  
1993

When I was eight, they told me that my mother's death was preordained. She had been murdered.

One Sunday after service, our minister, Reverend Jansen of the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, bent down in a cloud of Aqua Velva to explain. We had been learning in Sunday school about Heaven and Hell, and in the middle of class I had fallen into a panic, wondering how I would recognize my Korean mother when I saw her in Heaven—or in Hell, if perhaps she and I both sinned too much.

Not to worry, I was told.

“God called your Korean parents home so that you could become the daughter of your mother and father,” he said, his eyes sliding sidewise, for just a second. His breath smelled vaguely of toast.

“It was all part of His plan—you see how much your mommy and daddy love you? When the time comes, if you're a very good girl, you, your mommy, daddy, and your sister, Amanda—the whole Thorson family—will be in Heaven together, thanks to the Lord's wonderful and mysterious ways.”

“That's why we named you Sarah,” Christine and Ken added. “Because it means ‘God's precious treasure.’”

God kills, I thought then. The same God who brought us Christmas and the Easter Bunny—he murdered my mother.

Shortly after that Sunday, I brought up my Korean mother again, asking about the car accident, how it had happened, exactly—was it like Phil Haag's father, who fell asleep at the wheel? Or like our plumber's teenage son who drove into a semi head-on?

“Sarah,” Christine said patiently, looking up from the chopping board, where she was slicing carrot discs for pot roast. “We really knew nothing about her. *I'm* your mommy. Let's not talk about this any more, it makes me sad.” She made little crying motions, pretending to wipe away tears, the same thing she did when I was bad, to show how I had disappointed her.



I had grown up in a house in which *Korea* had always been the oddly charged word, never to be mentioned in connection to me, the same way we never said “Uncle Henry” and “alcoholic” in the same sentence. It was almost as if Ken and Christine thought I needed to be protected from it, the way small children need to be protected from boors itching to tell them that Santa Claus is not real. The ban on *Korea* extended even to the aforementioned Uncle Henry, who was then deprived of his war stories at our Memorial Day weekend cookouts. Although he proudly wore his felt VFW hat with its flurry of pins, including ones from his tour “overseas,” Christine or Ken would quietly slip him some of his favorite Pabst or Schlitz, and in return he’d set up residence in the lawn chair at the far corner of our yard, away from everyone.

Somewhere back in the fuzzy clot of my teens (now, I’m at the worldly-wise age of almost-twenty), the ’88 Summer Olympics were held in Seoul. We couldn’t buck the Thorson family tradition of watching absolutely everything (that winter we’d raptly watched curling, for God’s sakes!). But I was aware that pains were taken to modulate voices, vocal cords twisted to an excruciating, studied casualness until *Korea* came out *Korea*, exactly the same way we’d say “Russia” or “Carl Lewis” or “Flo-Jo.”

Then Bryant Gumbel invaded our living room with his special segment on how *Korea*, one of the four “Little Tiger” economic miracle countries, was so enterprising that it had even made an export product out of its babies. Since the Korean War, more than a *hundred thousand children*, Made-in-Korea stamped on their foreheads, had left the country, their adoption fees fattening the government coffers.

Top that, Singapore! Gumbel’s cheery smirk seemed to say.

“Well, Sarah’s really American, not Kor—,” Amanda had begun, until the look on Christine’s face—despairing, fierce—stopped her.

We invent what becomes us.

## SARAH

Seoul

1993

The plane had finally approached Kimp'o Airport three bad movies and five shrink-wrapped meals after I'd left Minneapolis. The video monitors had shown a graphic rendering of our progress, a cartoon of our plane inching its way over the Pacific Ocean toward the Korean peninsula. As we descended toward Seoul, the white cartoon-plane veered from its arcing trajectory to fly directly over some dot in the Sea of Japan called Tok-do. The Korean people on board cheered.

The twinkly-eyed senior across the aisle turned and smiled. He and his wife, matching canvas Elderhostel totes, clutched gnarled hands over the shared armrest, fingers tangling like brush.

“Glad to be home, eh?”

It took me a second to realize he was talking to me. Another second to step back and see me as he did: Korean girl returning to Korea.

I wiped at the corners of my eyes, fuzzed by no sleep.

“Oh yah, you betcha,” I said, in my purest Minnesota-nice accent. His wife, whose name would just have to be Effie or Jean, leaned forward out of her husband's shadow to beam at me.



“We can still turn around and just go back home—Daddy and I don't care about cancellation fees.” Christine's last words to me at the mouth of the jetway. “Sarah, you don't have to do this to yourself.”

She made it sound like I was off to get a tribal tattoo, or maybe to go do that Sioux sun dance where you pierce your breast with a sharp spike attached by rope to a pole and dance around the pole in the hot sun for days, waiting for a vision.

“I'm just taking my slightly belated graduation trip,” I'd said. In the waning days of my senior year, I'd been promised “a trip anywhere you like” if I could get myself off the Hold list and back into that stream of graduating seniors.

An extra credit report on plate tectonics (Earth Sciences), plus a record

one week of resisting the urge to bolt while sitting in every class except maybe Chemistry, earned me my prize.

However, somehow, that subsequent summer oozed through my fingers, and I was still snoozing in my bikini when dead leaves and Ken and Christine's insistence that I take a try at college came raining down on me. I lasted not quite a year as a Golden Gopher at the U of MN, Duluth. I never knew the shores of Lake Superior could be so cold.

So here I was, taking my trip just a little bit late. It was just that no one expected me to choose Korea as my final destination.



My watch proclaimed it almost midnight, but a blinding sun was battering to be let in under the ovalette window shades, my tongue stung from the sugar-greased pastries and rank orange juice the stewardesses had foisted on us.

In the airport, the silver-topped heads of the Elderhostel couple acted as a beacon as I followed them to Immigration and waited behind them in the line marked FOREIGNERS. They seemed to know what they were doing. In line, the woman showed her husband something in *Fodor's Asia*. At the baggage claim, my things were among the last to arrive, and Effie and Burt, as I'd named them, went on without me. After that, the only Caucasian people I saw were a few shorn soldiers in camouflage fatigues and black boots that always looked too big.

The last set of opaque electronic doors spit me out, then hermetically sealed behind me. I found myself in an arrival area filled with clots of identically black-haired people leaning over metal barricades, as if at a parade. Grannies, children, every age in between. TV monitors placed overhead about every six feet—the scene of me standing bewildered multiplied about eight hundred times—occupied the attention of the people on the fringes of the crowd. It appeared that some dignitary, or maybe a movie star, would be coming through. But if I could read Korean, I would have seen the signs plastered throughout: *Because of the increasingly hazardous congestion at our beloved country's national airport, please send only ONE family member to drop off or pick up the traveler*. In actuality, the government had already secretly broken ground for an additional airport

on the other side of Seoul, acknowledging how obdurate and unbreakable, the Korean custom of deploying the entire extended family to greet or send off a sojourning family member.

The travelers behind me grunted their impatience and so I moved on. At the taxi stand, the snoozing driver didn't respond when I tapped on the window. I opened the back door, feeling like I was breaking into his house. But he didn't object, he readily accepted the Korean directions the school had provided. He lit a new cigarette, jerked the stick shift, and we began to make our way down a drive snaking between two giant Coca-Cola and Samsung billboards, neon looking wan and strange in the light of day.

We were bound for open fields framed by a sky that seemed to go on forever. Low flames blackened the fields of dead stubble to our left. On the right, three solitary figures inhabited the landscape: a man guiding a primitive plow being pulled through the dirt by two women straining under ropes, towels and pink plastic sun visors wrapped around their heads. Behind them, a yellow billboard rose out of the earth: HYUNDAI — FOR BETTER LIFE.

As if entering Oz, the fields gave way to tile-roofed storefronts, clusters of office-type buildings, then glass-and-steel skyscrapers. A shiny Kia car dealership, a Printemps department store. A giant pagoda-like gate commanded its own concrete island as six lanes of traffic flowed around it (Seoul once was a gated city, like Troy). Taxis and sleek black cars, billiard-ball-striped buses jostled us for space. On the sidewalks, men in suits, women in designer outfits carried fancy ruffled umbrellas to shade their faces from the sun. How could this be? My teachers always said that Korea, despite parts of it being gussied up for the Olympics, was a poor country, one where people only had small fistfuls of rice to eat, where they ate dogs and cats.

And what about Nana, goading Amanda and me into eating mushy Brussels sprouts?

*“Remember the starving children in KOREA.”*

Or had it been, *“Remember the starving children in INDIA”*? Both? A multistory Pizza Hut whizzed by.

The driver shot through a majestic stone arch that said CHOSUN UNIVERSITY chiseled in English, somehow managing not to run down any of the students placed like obstacles in the street. We passed Gothic stone

buildings, drove through what looked like a miniature forest, looped up a long driveway, then came to a stop in front of a building that looked like a Howard Johnson's: efficient, cagelike.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS RESIDENCE, it said, in English.

The driver dug some wax out of his ears with a pinkie, pointed at the meter with that same digit. ₩ 23,000.

Then he left me there. I made my way into the International Students Residence, my luggage wheels squeaking and echoing in what I feared was a dark and empty building.



It had seemed, on the face of it, a clever plan to arrive a few days before the Motherland Program officially started (March 1, also the beginning of the Korean school year). The brochure had said the Residence would be open as much as five days before. But I was, indeed, the lone occupant of that dank building, save for the five-foot watchman who skulked around the halls like some Asian Quasimodo. From time to time, he experimentally lobbed some Korean my way, then muttered something like *aiieesshh* when I didn't reply.

It hadn't occurred to me that most of my program-mates *were* already here in Korea, some had even come a full month early. But unlike me, they had Korean parents who had molded their young bodies with Korean hands, so that their hearts had a space for this place. They knew how to bow correctly, the polite way to receive a gift. They also had relatives who took them in, gave them comfortable places to sleep, and filled their plates at every opportunity.

I had gone a small ways into the neighborhood beyond the school's back gate searching for food. But each time, confronted with the sprawling signs, the hard, sticklike letters, my courage failed me. The days ticked off, one by one, until the third day had passed with nothing to eat but a single bag of airline peanuts.

By then, I even found myself longing for the baggie of tollhouse cookies that Christine had forced on me at the last minute, that I had left on top of a garbage bin at Kimp'o Airport. At the time it had been a kind of adolescent exuberance—I'm an ocean away from Christine! But now, dammit,

I was hungry. I didn't want to admit that maybe Christine was right, that having never been in a foreign country before (unless you want to count fishing in Canada), I was ill-prepared to be here in Seoul. *Korea is a Third-World country. Everything over there is very different than what you're used to here.*

"*Mwoy yah?!?*" the crone screamed.

I had approached her, and her wooden cart displaying some kind of golden steamed bread, on tiptoes. She was squatting next to the cart, leaning against one of its battered wheels, eyes closed. I stared at her face, fissured with wrinkles. Her hair, thinning, greasy, shrimp-gray, was pulled back into a tight bun that looked like it was made out of wire.

She opened her eyes with an almost audible snap, as if she had always known I was there. Startled, I did what I always do when I'm nervous: I made a fist and chewed on my thumb as it poked out, I've-got-your-nose fashion, between my fingers.

"*Yah!*" she screamed again, her thin eyebrows converging like birds.

My head, bulbous and light above my body. The bread seemed a brighter yellow, as if lit from within.

"I'd like to buy some," I said loudly, motioning with my fisted thumb.

"*Mussen sori yah?*" The woman leaped to her feet and began to slap the air around her as if she were fighting off a sudden swarm of gnats.

"*Ga, Ga—GA!*" she yelled, dancing.

Some passersby—students in primary-color track suits, housewives carrying plasticized shopping bags stuffed with giant leeks—stopped to titter benevolently.

"A-me-ri-ca, *nambah wang*," said one of the track suits.

"You like-u practice Ing-leesh with Korean mans?" queried his friend. His sweatshirt said CHOSUN UNIVERSITY in English over what looked like the Cadillac crest. LUX ET VERITAS.

"*Na-GA!*" the crone screeched again, now waving a rusty cleaver.

I considered grabbing a hunk of the bread and running like hell. But no, too Dickensian. Something a street urchin, a desperate *orphan* would do.

I walked back the way I'd come, smelling the strange, smoky air, noting a heavy blue sky that looked close enough to touch. I could scarcely believe it, that this place existed, and I was here.

## SARAH

Seoul

1993

“*Neh* is the word for yes,” said our teacher, Choi *Sunsengnim*.

She made us go down the row, the five of us, repeating.

“*Neh*.”

“*Neh*.”

“*Neh*.”

“Again, please,” she said, when she got to me.

“*Neigh*,” I repeated.

“Again.”

“*Neigh*.”

“Again.”

“*Neigh*.”

She stopped, flustered.

I have always had an affinity for languages. When I was ten and went to the weeklong Concordia Language Village, I learned Spanish so fast, Christine went around telling everyone I was going to be a simultaneous translator for the U.N. someday.

I had planned to pick up Korean just as quickly, and then leave the Motherland Program to strike off on my own. But this wasn’t some camp in the north woods of Minnesota. And Korean wasn’t Spanish.

I was at the bottom of eight levels at the Chosun University Elite Academic World Language Institute. Our class was referred to as *ill-gup*, as if we were sick. At the placement test, someone handed me a sheet of paper containing only the broken-stick Korean letters, not even anything as basic and familiar as NAME \_\_\_\_\_. When the teacher saw my befuddled face, she said something to me in Korean. Then louder. When it dawned on her that I didn’t understand a single word she was saying, she announced in a braying and modular English that anyone who knew absolutely no Korean should report to the *ill-gup* room on the first floor.

I found myself in a cramped room, a chilly breeze seeping through a cracked window patched half-heartedly with duct tape. The floor was unspeakably grimy, the blackboard had its corner cracked off.

Eventually, two Korean-looking guys, one squat and thick-necked, the other better looking and wearing a Princeton sweatshirt, walked in. Then, a pretty, willowy Korean-looking girl appeared. I thought I was imagining it, but the three of them began speaking to each other in Korean.

We were joined by one more student, a thirtyish, solemn-faced woman in gray nun's habit, the kind that would have made her look like a hospital orderly if not for the black headscarf. Her eyes were the almost transparent green of iceberg lettuce. I was relieved that she didn't join in the Korean conversation—that would have been too much. I ventured a greeting, *Hi, I'm Sarah*, but she didn't respond. She seemed to think there was something fascinating outside the window, opaque with grime.

"Sarah-ssi, you never heard the word 'yes' at home?" Choi *Sunsengnim* said.

I shook my head.

"But what about your pah-rents? They never taught you any word? Not a one? Do you know *u-yu*, the word for milk? No? You never hear them talk, at least know the sounds?"

I shook my head, again, again.

"Your pah-rents never speak in Korean?"

I would be surprised and amazed if they did.

"They're not Korean. I'm adopted."

My classmates stared.

"Excuse?" said Choi *Sunsengnim*.

"I'm adopted. A. Dop. Ted."

"*Oh-moh!*" *Sunsengnim* put her hand to her throat. "*I-byung*. I have heard of those like you, but I have never before met—" She drew in air through her teeth. "So your pah-rents, they are, are—"

I was wondering if she was searching for the word for white. Honky. Gringo. Paleface, etc.

"Cock. Asian." The Princeton sweatshirt guy filled her in, sliding me a Bryant Gumbesque smirk.

"Ah, yes, Caucasian," the teacher said with satisfaction. "So you think of these Caucasians as to be your pah-rents?"

I shrugged.

"But your Korean pah-rents, what happened to them?"

You're supposed to be teaching us *Korean*, I wanted to say. I wanted to learn. As quickly as possible.

No one moved.

"Your Korean pah-rents, what happened to them?"

I took a big breath.

"Dead. Car crash."

"*Oh-moh-moh-moh!*" Choi *Sunsengnim*'s textbook hit the floor with a hollow crash.

For the rest of the class, she eyed me, the way one does when passing a horrible accident. You look, but want to pretend you're not looking. You don't want to have it known that you are the kind of person who can be horrified, repulsed, and fascinated all at the same time.



My new classmates—Bernie, Jeannie, Helmut, Sister Marie-Thérèse—were walking toward the main campus gate. Maybe they were going to lunch. I began to follow them.

Then Bernie Lee, Princeton sweatshirt, turned and saw me, cocker-spaniel-eager to catch up. He sneered. Microscopic crick of the lip, but a sneer. I swerved back into the school building, walking busily, arms swinging, pretending to have somewhere much, much, much (much!) more important to go.

In the dark alcove, students pushing past me, I shook with hunger—and ridiculous pride. The same pride that had kept me from asking for help in the first place just because the program handbook had said:

*Although the International Students Residence has no cafeteria facilities, Seoul has an abundance of restaurants, cafés, and food preparation services, so this should not be a problem.*

*On the contrary, most students find that the variety of food available can be almost overwhelming.*

I was expecting, what—manna dropping from the sky?

I slipped out the back of the building, where I found another small gate in the massive stone fence that encircled the entire campus. Just outside it, four lanes of traffic hurtled by. A few blocks down there was a metal-and-concrete pedestrian overpass conveniently waiting.

On the other side I found a maze of alleys, promisingly crammed with businesses. Many of the storefronts had rice-paper windows and doors, keeping their trade a mystery. I passed some clothes stores, then not one but two prosthetic shops, artificial arms and legs wrestling in dusty bins out front. Another store had its paper door pushed open to reveal rows of women bent over at sewing machines.

A few doors down, a photo studio. In the display window, a group of portraits. A couple in Western wedding clothes, a stiff-posed family. The photo in the middle of everything was of a pleasingly fat baby in what must be Korean clothes: a silk jacket with rainbow-striped sleeves, shiny orange pants that were tied at the ankle, and—I suddenly noticed—cut away at the crotch to reveal a shy, beetlelike penis.

Then, in the reflection of the window, the marvelous vision appeared: a 7-Eleven sign beckoning from across the street. Could it be? I almost knocked over two old ladies in my haste to get inside, where it looked exactly like the 7-Eleven at home, down to the Slurpee rotating on its tilted axis, cigarettes behind the counter, a cold-food section in the back, racks filled with chips. They even seemed to sell booze, judging by the rows and rows of green glass bottles, one of which said “alcohol drink” in English.

I ran to the back and lost no time grabbing a sandwich, then noticed that next to it in the refrigerated case was a flattened, shrink-wrapped squid. The shelf above it had takeout trays of what looked like wheels of rice wrapped in carbon paper. The sandwich in my hand was white bread, sure enough, but holding a slurry of pimento-red filling of unknown provenance. The bags of chips had pictures of smiling shrimps and raccoons on their wrappers—could they possibly be made of raccoon?

A skinny young man with John Lennon glasses and possibly illegally tight jeans, brushed by me carrying a styrofoam bowl. He peeled the lid off and filled it with hot water from a spigot, stirring it with disposable chopsticks. A most delicious, salted smell wafted up in the steam.

It was a foodstuff I recognized. And even liked.

Ramen! I was saved—for now.

## KYUNG-SOOK

Enduring Pine Village

1993

Her parents had named her Kyung-sook, Virtuous Modesty, but by now, most villagers called her “Shrimp Auntie,” or, on Sundays, “Esteemed Minister’s Wife.”

She was, of course, no longer young, no longer known for her thick, gleaming hair or her musical talents. Now, she drew her daily pride from her reputation as an honest merchant: she haggled out of habit, but never overpriced her offerings. The quality of her shrimp was unquestionable. And she had her cadre of faithful customers, whom she rewarded with a bit extra added to their orders, every time.

One of these regular customers was a girl, Small Singing, who was newly married. This girl couldn’t even read the labels that declared “Special Product!” on the tins of salted shrimp, but she did have that kind of country common sense that Kyung-sook appreciated: she didn’t dither on and on about whether the salted shrimp in this pile was better than in that pile. She brought the right amount of money so that Kyung-sook wouldn’t have to run out for change.

The girl, however, always left the shrimp stall with a frown, even with her extra grams of shrimp and with Kyung-sook’s polite language ringing sweeter than spring birdsong in her ears; Small Singing had grown up all her life hearing only the low language, just because her father’s job was cleaning shit out of concrete sewers with his short-handled brush. In her childhood season, Small Singing’s neighborhood nickname had been “stinkpot,” despite how she always took pains to make sure she was scrupulously clean, scrubbing even between her toes and in the part of her hair with the pumice rock. Now she was a wife taking care of an entire household, but except for Kyung-sook the Shrimp Auntie who called her Gentle Customer, the other merchants in the market still subtly disdained her, addressing her only as “You, there.”

No, her displeasure had to do with the fact that Shrimp Auntie had never acknowledged first, her moonlike pregnancy, and then, her precious baby boy. When she made her visits, Shrimp Auntie might amiably com-

plain about the weather, ask about Small Singing's family, but never a word about Small Singing's bulging belly, or, when she showed up at the shrimp stall after the birth, about her beautiful baby boy. Even the most disinterested people found it fit to congratulate her on the success of her breath-holding exercises (done so zealously, they had often caused her to faint), her hundred continuous days of prayers to the Birth Goddess and the Seven-Star God, the bestowers of male children.

"Shrimp Auntie can be so cruel," Small Singing complained to Cooking Oil Auntie, whose bottle-lined stall was across the way. "Even when I presented her with the hundred-pieces rice cake for the baby's hundred-day anniversary, she didn't say a word. How can she be so cold?"

Cooking Oil Auntie made a clicking *tsk-tsk* noise in her throat, bent to adjust the seed presser so that the drops of thick oil didn't come out so fast.

"Don't be such a silly girl," she said. "Tell me, where do you see her children, the sons who will support her in her old age and provide her with grandchildren? Are they hidden in the barrels of dried shrimp?"

"Then she is like the thirsty calf looking down the well," Small Singing huffed. "She resents what she can't have."

"Now, who is the one being cruel?" asked Cooking Oil Auntie.

"It's not my fault that I am able to bear children. I did a hundred breath-holding exercises every day for a month. Shrimp Auntie married when she was long past twenty—and to an old man who's a cripple to boot."

Cooking Oil Auntie made the *tsking* noise again, mumbling about how the girl's sighs and cries as she performed those vaunted exercises could be heard far beyond her family's gate (and what was a few sessions holding one's breath compared with having wild mugwort burned onto one's bare stomach, as she had done to combat her own drawn-out infertility?).

Neither woman was aware that Kyung-sook the Shrimp Auntie herself was walking right behind their backs, returning from a delivery to the Gleaming Jade restaurant. Even though each merchant had his or her own patch of dirt, carefully marked off by wooden crates of still-flopping fish, fabric towers of ladies' panties, display cases of mirrors and scissors, or

buckets of dried crickets, no one owned the market's air or the words that floated within it, so Kyung-sook, ears itching, had received every bit of that conversation as freely as if she had been standing next to them.

That girl, she thought, who did she think she was?

She watched Small Singing leave the cooking oil stall, heavy with groceries and the child strapped to her back by a quilted podaeki. She probably needed to add some meat to her load, or at least stop at the fishmonger's before trotting down the dusty road back to her in-laws', where she would wash, chop, peel, scale, and cook the day's dinner, laboriously feeding wood or charcoal briquettes into the stove, the whole time the baby on her back crying for milk, the mother-in-law wailing that she was going to die of hunger before her infernal daughter-in-law would have some food ready.

Once the endless dishes of seasoned vegetables, salted fish, steamed rice, several kinds of kimchi were laid out, the house would quiet as everyone except Small Singing ate their fill. Small Singing was known to be a fine cook, so likely when it was her turn to eat, alone in the cold kitchen, only some dregs of vegetables, perhaps a fish head if she was fortunate, would be left to mix with the grains of rice still sticking to the sides of the blackened iron pot. To clean the rice pot, she would pour a kettle of hot water into it, then drink up the rice-water to fill her stomach.

Her mother-in-law, who had always secretly envisioned her son marrying someone who looked like those sleek, big-eyed women she saw in the fashion magazines and not the snaggletoothed daughter of the night-soil hauler, would often interrupt even this rude meal. Between burps and tooth-sucking, she would complain that the seasoned bellflower roots, which Small Singing had scrubbed to whiteness with salt, then shredded painstakingly with a pin, had needed more hot pepper. In slicing the fruit for the last course, perhaps a bit of pale apple-flesh had been wastefully pared away with the skin. Small Singing would have to get on her knees, lower her eyes, and say, "Forgive me, Mother. I did wrong."

Later, Small Singing's husband, a filial son, would reiterate his mother's message with his fists.

The next time Small Singing came to Kyung-sook's stall, she would have a bruise under one eye, her lip would be swollen and split like a

packed pig's intestine sausage. The baby on her back would be dirty and crying. The late afternoon sun would be slanting through the spaces between the plastic roof-tarps, so Small Singing would implore Kyung-sook to hurry and give her a kun of shrimp paste, which she would wrap into her carrying-cloth and go on her way.

That girl thinks she's better than I am because of that pumpkin-headed baby, Kyung-Sook would think with wonder, shaking her head.

## SARAH

Seoul  
1993

"Sarah-ssi—" Choi *Sunsengnim* sighed like a deflating balloon before adding, "What will we do with you? You are falling far behind in class."

"Thank God *Sunsengnim* finally said something," muttered Bernie Lee, sotto voce. "She's holding up the whole class."

Okay, I admit I had trouble remembering the word for "car," *cha-dong-cha*, and no one else seemed to have trouble with it. But it wasn't for lack of trying. I studied all night. It was just that Korean words were so damn hard to remember.

Bernie was staring at me. He was wearing yet another orange-and-black PRINCETON sweatshirt, as if he feared we might forget where he went to college unless he reminded us, every day.

"What are you looking at?" I snapped.

"You look Korean," he said. "But you sound *exactly* like a white person *trying* to speak Korean—it's the weirdest thing." His face was handsome in its own way: long, angular, hairless as a pear. I already disliked him.

"You're a Twinkie," he concluded. "Yellow on the outside, white on the inside."

"Ber-nie," Jeannie giggled. "That's so mean."

I rolled my eyes. He didn't know the first thing about me: in a taxonomy of Hostess junk-food cakes, I went beyond Twinkie, I was a Sno-ball, the coconut treat that's white to the core.

Some time after Rev. Jansen's mini-sermon on whose daughter I was, I became the *Fabulous Sarah Thorson*, the daughter with Ken's seaglass-blue eyes, Christine's creamy complexion, pale cornsilk hair.

*But are you saying that you truly believe you have blond hair and blue eyes—despite what the mirror tells you? An unbelieving shrink, from when I was ten. Is that why you keep trying out for The Sound of Music every year even though you must know they would never give the part to someone who looks like you?*

How could it be otherwise? With the arrival of Amanda (who eventually landed the part of Gretl, the youngest Von Trapp daughter), our family became the living embodiment of the Scandinavian phenotype. I wanted to be included.

True, an accidental pass by a mirror, a store window, the bright-polished side of a toaster might yield a glimpse of a girl with black, straight hair, eyes the shape and color of apple seeds, a light spray of chocolate-chip colored moles across her left cheek. But those fleeting images I disowned. That girl's Asian face was recognizable yet strange, like seeing your name writ large in an unfamiliar hand.

The lovely, fragmentary Fabulous Sarah Thorson was the one who explained away the dissonance of family pictures: Who—or what—was that dark stain in the middle of this American family?

Not the Fabulous Sarah Thorson: she comes from sturdy Norwegian- and Swedish- and German-American stock. Her speech is punctuated with Norwegianisms like *uff-da!*, and her Nana, who looks just like Grandma Moses, was born in Norway. At Christmastime the Fabulous Sarah Thorson stuffs herself with Swedish potato *lefse* and *spritz* cookies, even chokes down rubbery bits of lye-pickled Norwegian *lutefisk* herring, which will make her father, Ken, happy, for he is the Son of Thor.

I claimed stomachaches on school picture day. Christine despaired at the crooked parts in my hair, green balls of snot hanging from my nose. No matter what high gloss she could buff me to in the mornings, I acquired my own patina of gleet and ooze by afternoon.

"Sarah, don't you ever look in a mirror?" she would sigh, scouring my face with a spat-on hankie as I sat in the back of the car on the way to yet another classical music concert or Ibsen play at the Guthrie Theater. Even

now, when I sit in the back seat of a car, that maternal musk revisits me, that same intoxicating Joy-parfum-lipstick-wax-Mommy-breath-Johnson's-baby-powder concoction I once discovered inside the bundles she mummified in yards of toilet paper, those white pillows hiding mysterious, rusty stains.

Yet, why did the spit-hankie never touch Amanda? Amanda with her blond curls neatly barretted off her face, scuffless Mary Janes; in the summer, she ran free under the radiant sun while Christine smeared me with a zinc-oxide sunblock the color of chalk. It was only those young summers when we rented that cabin out at Sand Lake that Christine let me enjoy the unadulterated kiss of the sun. That was back when Nana was still alive, when we still lived in that tiny house in Bliss Court, and when Amanda was still part of some cosmological future Ken and Christine couldn't even (pun intended) conceive of. By the time we moved to Inwood Knoll, within the environs of the Eden's Prairie Country Club, my hue had become her obsession. Thus the summers in whiteface, designated a nonsinging minstrel, the most useless kind.

But the Fabulous Sarah Thorson, I knew, tans a honey-gold, which makes her look even blonder, her seaglass eyes paler. I depended on her to get through the day. That time I had almost lost her made me realize that.

The last day of school in fifth grade. Our teacher had covered the back wall in brown kraft paper and told us to make a mural of our ideal summer vacation.

I drew myself as a stick figure, fishing rod in hand, sitting atop a crate (THIS END UP pointing down—humor where I lacked artistic talent). I was drawing in our Sand Lake cabin, when Merlin Gustafson muscled me aside.

“You need ching-chong eyes,” he declared. He reached a sweaty arm across me and rubbed a black crayon over my figure's dot-eyes until they became a pair of heavy, horizontal lines.

Then, his encore: he pulled the corners of his eyes until the lids became razor slits, pulled until they turned inside out, displaying pink, moist undersides.

The Fabulous Sarah Thorson, exploding: blue eyes, creamy white skin, golden hair. Protoplasm splattering everywhere.

The bell rang. While my classmates streamed out into the larger world, I ran into the girls' room, sitting fully clothed on the toilet, trying to shut out the voices.

*Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees.*  
*Ching-chong Chinaman*  
*Ah-so.*

Returning to the classroom, I dug through the Crayola box until I found the color I wanted: a deep, oceanic blue. Then I redrew my eyes as larger orbs, Merlin's horizontal lines the circles' diameter; when finished, my picture had eyes bigger than everyone else's, a drugged, dilated-pupil look that satisfied me.

In Korea, however, everything has reversed. This morning, in a crowd of people hurrying to class, I happened to glance at the giant mirror posted at the entrance of the school. For a giddy, vertiginous second, I didn't know who I was looking for, or who I would find. I had somehow smoothly joined this black-haired, dark-eyed crowd.

"So, iss dat why you never told us your last name?" asked Helmut, who came from Munich. The first day, the three students of authentic Korean stock had proudly rattled off their Korean names, surnames placed first in the traditional style: Lee Jae-Kwan (Bernie), Lee Jiyoung (Jeannie), and Kim Bum-Sik (Helmut). I just said, "I'm Sarah," a habit acquired after hearing "Thorson, that's a funny name for an Oriental," ad nauseum.

"Hey Twinkie, do you even know your Korean family name?" Bernie, working my nerves. "All Koreans should know their family names and their ancestral clans."

"My clan, *I-ssi*, is the Chunju Lees," Jeannie broke in, giving Bernie a significant look. If there was an "in" clan, that, apparently, was the one. Almost a quarter of Koreans shared the name Lee, but these particular Lees could claim lineage reaching back to the beloved King Sejong, the inventor of the Korean alphabet, whose picture graced the ten-thousand-won bill. Apparently, for each family there was some kind of official document, a family register that recorded all the births and deaths and marriages starting from when the first Koreans climbed out of the Primordial Ooze.

“Mein klan is the Cheju-do Kims,” added Helmut.

Bernie looked at me with a cranky, hungry expression, as if suffering from some male version of PMS.

“Why are you even here?” he said. “It’s not like you’re going to go home and start talking in Korean to your *pah-rents*.”

“You don’t own Korea,” I said, scratching my nose with an upraised middle finger.

“Ooh, I’m scared of you,” he said. “*Sunsengnim!*”

“Lee Jae-Kwan-ssi?”

He spoke quickly in Korean, the only words I recognized were my name and “bad.” He was obviously tattling that I had flipped him the bird; however, in his re-creation of my crime, he raised a fist—thumb poking out between the first two fingers. Exactly the gesture I had made to the old crone that day I tried to buy some steamed bread.

Choi *Sunsengnim* looked in shock from the thumb to me and said, “*Oh moh!* Sarah-ssi, please! We must show respect in our classroom.”

“Bernie is the one who started the whole thing—” My voice involuntarily thinned to a whine. “He—”

“Please, Sarah-ssi. Of all the students, you have the most to learn. As I was about to be saying, you must have extra conversation practice. A friend of my brother’s wants to make his English better, so you two can do a language exchange. His name is Kim Jun-Ho, and he’s a student here at Chosun University, although right now he’s doing his mandatory military service.”

I opened my mouth to protest. This was the beginner’s class, for Christ’s sake, the class for people who don’t know any Korean. But even the nun, from Paris, had studied Chinese from when she had been a missionary in Hunan province. A goodly number of Korean words were based on Chinese ones, so she already had a solid vocabulary. She, for instance, didn’t have any trouble remembering the word for “car”: *cha-dong-cha* was “moves-by-itself-vehicle” in both Chinese and Korean.

Choi *Sunsengnim* handed me a telephone number. She would brook no objections.

“I will wait to hear from him, Jun-Ho Kim, how it was,” she said.

“Let’s get *pudae chigae* for lunch,” Bernie said, after class. Everyone else, nun included, seemed to think that was a splendid idea. No one

turned to me and said, “Sarah, what are you doing for lunch? Want to come along?”

Sarah the misfit, even in her native country. How had it come to this, I wondered, that in the space of a single generation, I had become some kind of Darwinian reject, a fish with lungs, a duck-billed platypus. I wasn’t Korean-hyphen-anything, for what was Korean in me had become vestigial, useless. But at the same time, ching-chong eyes prevented me from claiming any kind of race solidarity with the nun—or with my so-called family, back in Minnesota.

All I knew was that if someone were to invite me, I would gladly eat poo day chee-gay, even if it was literally made out of poo, I would allow Bernie Lee to classify me as any preservative-and-lard-filled cake he wanted to, just so long as I wouldn’t have to eat yet another meal standing awkward and abandoned at the 7-Eleven counter.

The four clattered out without me.

## KYUNG-SOOK

Enduring Pine Village

1993

Enduring Pine Village was Kyung-sook’s official ancestral village, but more tellingly, because she still lived there, had lived there basically all her life, it was also her ko-hyang, her hometown. The best way to know a stranger, any fool knows, is to know their hometown.

Enduring Pine Village was situated within the southern tail of the sacred Diamond mountains, almost within sight of the border with North Korea. It was a place of wildrushing beauty intertwined with a melancholy history, just like in the sentimental song:

*I remember my old hometown,  
a mountain valley where the flowers bloom:  
peach blossoms, apricot blossoms, and baby azaleas,  
what a colorful place it was . . .*

Back in the Chosun dynasty, a geomancer had decreed that a new village should be erected “where the mountain peaks resemble a horse’s ears, and where the valley is encircled by ancestor pines.”

The horse-ear formation was found next to a grove of long-needle pines, the kind that bore the pale nuts revered as a delicacy and whose parasol-like shape was a staple of classical paintings. The elders noted this auspicious sign and made sure that the first structure built in this new settlement was a shrine for San-shin, the Mountain God who had so generously inspired the geomancer.

The town became known as Enduring Pine Village for its abundance of long-needle pines, blue-green pines, and the stately white-bark fir. Farmers marveled at how rice planted in the mountain soil seemed to mature overnight. Pregnant women received the ultimate blessing from the Birth Goddess: sewn bundles of bright red chili peppers hung from almost every family’s gate announcing the good news—sons.

And because the village happened to be situated at almost the exact midpoint between the capital to the south and the northern provinces, naturally travelers stopped at the village to meet and trade, and soon there was a booming business for Enduring Pine Village’s wine houses, which became famous for the pungent local mac’oli rice wine as well as the most beautiful, most witty kisaeng hostesses in all of Korea.

The spirits continued to offer their protections even during the terrible Japanese colonial period. No villagers lost their homes. No women—kisaeng or otherwise—were taken to the rape camps set up for the Japanese soldiers.

Even on the fateful March First, 1919, when villagers pulled out their taegukis, the forbidden national flags, and cried “Korea will live a thousand years!” the Japanese did not retaliate with bayonets and murder as they did in other parts of Korea. When the Americans dropped their light-flashing weapons in Hirossi-ma and Naga-sagi, ending the war and the occupation, thousands of Korean slaves in Japanese munitions factories cried black tears and died in misery far from home, but none from Enduring Pine Village, such was its auspicious nature.

The villagers wondered later, of course, about the turn of Fortune’s wheel. Had they grown too complacent, full stomachs forgetting what it

is like to be hungry? During the colonial period, everything Korean was forbidden, but villagers had gone into their homes and done their rites to the Korean gods in secret and at great risk. Now, as free men, the younger magistrates had been known to neglect San-shin's shrine, especially during the period they were preoccupied with maneuvering Enduring Pine Village to become the county seat. Further, these same upstart magistrates, seduced by promises of education and Western-style medicine, welcomed the white missionaries, who openly declared their hatred of Korean gods; before anything else, the first thing the whitemen did to "help" the villagers was to destroy San-shin's shrine.

Starting on 6.25, bombs fell from the sky. The North Korean soldiers seized Enduring Pine Village's males—young and old—for their army, killing anyone who resisted, including sobbing mothers and grandmothers.

South Korean forces recaptured the village, but then the Communists took it again. The villagers were forced to flee once, twice, three times. During the Armistice, the Red soldiers retreated north through the village. What people came back to: at the village's east end, the Shim family—father, mother, sons, daughters, the lastborn five-year-old twin sons—were found floating in macabre poses, rag dolls flung against a wall. The elder Shim, hedging his bets, had assisted both the Communists and the ROK governments—depending on which flag flew from the pole in front of town hall—so no one was sure who had tied them to a fence and shot them. More corpses unburied themselves from a hasty grave behind the high school. Starving soldiers had even broken into the mission and murdered two of the white nuns.

War changes everything. Many others never returned—killed, frozen, or starved to death. Neighbors settled feuds by turning people in as Red sympathizers, real or not. Of the ancestral yangban families, only a handful remained. Enduring Pine Village's new inhabitants were refugees from the north or carpetbaggers—scoundrels and opportunists, or those with something to hide. No one knew, for instance, where Cooking Oil Auntie's family had come from. They had appeared at the village gates almost a decade after the 6.25 War, speaking with a strange, harsh accent even though they insisted, somewhat haughtily, that they were from Seoul.

What did the future hold? The rice production had dwindled so much that during droughts, rice had to be imported from other parts of Korea. Every year, the soil grew poorer, more oily chemicals needed to be applied to the fields (and washed out into the rivers during the monsoon rains).

A few years before, Korea's president, himself from a rice-growing village, came up with an idea to preserve Enduring Pine Village, like its neighbor, River Circle Village, as a tourist site, where the increasingly urban population might come to watch rice being grown the traditional way. The government had gone so far as to spread asphalt, six lanes wide, over still-arable land, to accommodate the tour buses and cars. But then a new president came into office, and the plans were scrapped. The expanse of asphalt sat abandoned, an immovable black sea on the southern end of the village.

Nowadays, many of the farmers left their farms and instead boarded a bus on the Days of Moon that took them to the battery factory in the new Satellite Suburb Village of Ho-Chun, where they would work for the week and return home on the weekends, carrying their chemical-saturated workclothes in drawstring sacks, their fingertips burnt clean of prints by the corrosives they handled.

As a child, Kyung-sook had been regaled with tales of the majestic courts, the educated literati of the old Chosun dynasty. She knew that her great-grandfather was buried in a special site at the foot of the sacred Horse Ear Mountain. She had been shown his headstone, a pagoda-like chinsa ornament marking his scholar-official credentials, the biography of his life—his schooling, his passing the Civil Service Exam, his government rank—all displayed in the gray stone.

This place was much more than just a random rice-farming hamlet, Kyung-sook's parents told her, it was once an important trade and governmental center. But stories of the past meant little to Kyung-sook.



“I saw the Five-daughter Kim Granny coming out of the rice cake shop,” Cooking Oil Auntie remarked, sticking her head into Kyung-sook's stall.

Kyung-sook, small rake in hand, continued smoothing the mountain

of salted shrimp before her. The tiny, curled bodies pressed against the lip of the barrel.

“Oh, goodness, I just ran in here without even a ‘good morning,’ didn’t I?”

“Suit yourself,” Kyung-sook said.

“Well, ‘Good morning, Shrimp Auntie.’ There. Anyway, you’re not my superior in age are you? We can skip the formalities, don’t you think?”

Cooking Oil Auntie settled her wide ongdongi onto the upturned apple crate Kyung-sook used for a seat.

“Now, did you hear me? The Five-daughter Kim Granny was buying ceremonial rice cakes.”

“What’s so odd about that? She was just over at the fishmonger’s saying it’s time for the yearly chesa.”

“Oh, yes, Kim Granny makes a lot of noise about the ancestor offerings, but everyone knows the cakes are an appeasement for the last-one’s spirit.”

“The last-one?”

“The last-one, the fifth daughter of Kim the junkman. You must remember—he didn’t even bother to learn his daughters’ names, he just called ‘em One, Two, Three, Four, and Five.”

Kyung-sook almost jumped. A familiar name, unearthed like a forgotten kimchi pot.

“You mean—Yongsu?”

“Unh, Yongsu, the one with the boy’s name.” Cooking Oil Auntie nodded, eying a display of baby-finger shrimp, the kind you served with beer. “None of the daughters married very well in that wretched family, but Necessary Dragon—”

“She was my friend,” Kyung-sook interrupted. “In my childhood season.”

“Oh moh!” Cooking Oil Auntie sat up. “You don’t say! Well, Pig Intestine Sausage Auntie told me that Alder Pass shaman told the family that her spirit demanded they hold a yearly appeasement ceremony.”

“That’s claptrap, a shaman wanting to make quick money,” Kyung-sook said. “I don’t think she’s dead. There’s never been any word.”

“Of course she’s dead. She left the village unmarried, and never came

S O M E B O D Y ' S   D A U G H T E R

back to check on her parents, even for their hwangap, when they reached that most venerable age of sixty.”

Kyung-sook started smoothing the next barrel’s shrimp.

“What I would guess,” Cooking Oil Auntie mused, “is that she froze to death as a beggar some winter. Or maybe she met her end with those Yankee soldiers on the army base—that was the direction she was heading when she left, supposedly. If that were my daughter, I’d do an appeasement ceremony, too: people who meet a bad end always leave behind restless spirits.”

Kyung-sook wondered how many years it had been since she’d last seen Yongsu. Twenty? Thirty? Her childhood friend, the one she admirably called Older Sister, would have fifty years on her now.

“Ai-gu,” Kyung-sook sighed. “The spring breezes always make me sleepy.” She moved as if she wanted to sit down.

Cooking Oil Auntie took the hint. On the way out, she pretended to be swatting at a fly and palmed a few sweet curls of the baby-finger shrimp. She hummed as she walked back to her stall, the heels of her slipper-shoes raising a cloud of dust.

Kyung-sook’s hands suddenly started trembling. That memory, jumping out at her like that, over a chasm of so many years. It made her wonder, what else of her life had she forgotten—or made herself forget?