

BOUND

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

ENGLISH

MAY 2018

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Home. I explored this idea for the first time in an autobiographical work I wrote as an undergraduate student for a creative writing course. I wrote a collection of moments about growing up after having immigrated to Hawai'i from South Korea at ten months old and the challenges I faced learning another language. Within these segments, I considered the notion of home and how we construct our ideas about who we are or who we should be based on our relation to home.

During this time, I was influenced by works such as David Mura's *A Nisei Daughter* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* as I was drawn not only to their subject matter but their level of craft. For instance, I enjoyed the simplicity of language in both pieces and how that simplicity allowed for nuance within the story. The sentences were not particularly long or ornate, but their compactness helped to create direct and straightforward writing that allowed for themes to be conveyed effectively. Yet, another part of me enjoys the oftentimes meandering and humor-filled writing of authors such as David Sedaris and the long and descriptive writing of William Faulkner. Their use of extensive description is not only interesting to read but useful in characterizing settings or characters. Despite this, I think my writing style is one that perhaps leans closer to that of Ernest Hemingway, who typically writes in unadorned prose which contains many layers of meaning. Writing my thesis has been a long push and pull between these two types of styles, as I came to terms with and learned to appreciate my own style as a writer. Ultimately, what mattered most was creating the story I envisioned, and so I worked to hone in on the heart of the piece, which is about home, identity, and growing up.

In writing my thesis, I was particularly influenced by works such as Karen Tei Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* and R. Zamora Linmark's *Leche*, which explore similar topics of

home and identity. Both stories center around a protagonist who returns to their birthplace with the same purpose of finding their identities within the countries they consider to be “home.” However, these characters quickly learn that accomplishing these goals are not so simple. For instance, *Circle K Cycles* examines closely the experiences of Japanese immigrants living in Brazil who move to Japan in search of work. The novel explores their desire for cultural belonging in a place that seems all too foreign to them. Yamashita discusses the need to fit in and mimic native Japanese as a means to appear authentically Japanese. Despite these efforts, however, she observes that she still felt a continual need to prove her authenticity. This question of authenticity is one that Linmark’s protagonist Vince in *Leche* also aims to accomplish during his journey to the Philippines. What begins as an exciting trip soon turns into one filled with confusion and inner turmoil as Vince becomes unable to find what he is looking for, being told by those around him that he can never truly be Filipino.

Reading these works, I realized that many of the questions that these characters pose are those that I have thought about over the years growing up in Hawai‘i. The first recollection I have of truly thinking about this most likely occurred around the time I was a senior in high school when I took a Japanese class and was required to answer the question: Where are you from? My answer, to my surprise, bewildered many of my peers as they had believed I was both born and raised here in Hawai‘i. Somehow, the fact of my being born in Korea, despite only living there for a few months, made it seem as if I was not truly “local.” From then on, I always felt uneasy answering that simple question, and it made me think about this pressure or expectation to choose one over the other: the place I live now or the country where I was born.

The questions that had lingered in my mind had to do with the subject of liminality, more specifically, finding a means to navigate liminal spaces. I became attuned to this connection

during my graduate coursework. I was influenced by theorists such as Homi Bhabha who explore the liminal space, which he describes essentially as a stairwell. This image illustrated so well my struggle to designate my identity and straddle the line between being Korean and being American. It offered me a different lens through which I could reflect on and examine my experiences, an exploration which essentially makes up my story *Bound* through the perspective of Josie. Through her journey, Josie attempts to traverse the liminal space and not only come to terms with her brother's death but also her identity.

Through writing this piece, I have also come to rethink many of these questions. How can writing be a tool for exploration and reflection? In many ways, creating and developing this story was as much a creative endeavor as it was a critical and personal one. I found the writing process at many times almost therapeutic as it allowed me the opportunity to think about my own experiences. Writing my piece sometimes felt similar to what I imagine a client undergoes during therapy sessions--constantly questioning, reflecting, and exploring. However, I also found the process particularly challenging. As I will soon discuss, writing the piece at times felt too intimate a process. However, thinking on this process now, I believe that there is no better tool for reflection and thinking than the act of writing.

The idea for my thesis was partly created before my own trip to South Korea, which took place in the summer of 2017. I wanted to explore the ideas of home and returning to one's roots in my work, but I was not certain at the time where the story would go. What I did know was that I wanted my story to be a coming-of-age story about a character named Josie who goes back to her birthplace after her brother's death.

In many ways, my experiences are reflected in Josie's. At the time of writing this piece, many of my peers and close friends had either gotten married or were moving away from the

island to start their professional careers. Like Josie, they were undergoing great transitions in their life. Likewise, my story is not only about home but also about growing up and finding oneself in the face of this transition.

The experiences during my trip felt just as new and, at times, even jarring, even though it was not my first time visiting the country. It was challenging not to feel like a foreigner despite being the same ethnicity as those who walked the streets. Yet in a lot of ways, being in the company of friends who were just as jarred by these experiences was reassuring. It allowed for reflective conversations about our experiences, which greatly helped me in writing my story. During my trip, I did not put much pen to paper. Instead, I spent much of the time observing the city and its people, noticing their styles and mannerisms. Though seemingly counterintuitive, I found that this was a much more productive use of my time, as it gave me the opportunity to experience the country without the burden of forcing myself to write. The entirety of plot did not come into full fruition until well after returning to Hawai'i where I had time to reflect on my experiences in Korea.

I settled on my work's title early on, which is unusual considering that I normally have difficulty in generating possible working titles. I found the task easier this time because I had a clear theme from the beginning. At first, I had in mind the title "Homebound." Simple and to the point. I thought that this would adequately capture the overall theme of my work. However, I considered whether or not this title was too straightforward and thus thought of other possibilities, but I found myself returning to the word "homebound" and considered its last half. "Bound" opened opportunities for different meanings. For instance, the word could be used to describe a movement toward something, a different place or location. Not only that, the word could also refer to being restricted, confined, or trapped.

These dual meanings fit well within my story and were appropriate in describing Josie and the conflicts she faces during her journey. Firstly, the title “Bound” worked in the literal sense of the story being about a journey to a destination. In order to undergo growth, Josie must make the return to her birthplace. On the other hand, while her journey requires that she venture out beyond the island she had grown up on, Josie cannot help but feel a sense of confinement. For Josie, Korea is the place that could never truly be her home, and yet she must return there to be able to come to terms with David’s death. She not only feels a sense of isolation from the people who walk the streets of Seoul but from her own grief and inability to fully cope with her brother’s death. In these ways, Josie is bound both to her insecurities and to the past. Thus, with all its nuances and connotations, I ultimately decided to go forward with the title “Bound” for my piece.

Next, I had to decide whether to write a novella or a series of short stories. Almost immediately, I knew that I wanted my story to have a clear beginning to end that was, for the most part, chronological. For one thing, this would have made it easier for both me and readers to keep track of events that occurred within the story. However, I did also consider putting together a collection of short stories written in the point of view of several characters rather than a novella that followed a singular storyline; the opportunity of creating a multitude of compelling characters and being able to give each of them a specific “screen time” has always interested me.

I also knew that writing a collection of short stories would have involved becoming more invested in each character, which at the time I was not. Moreover, I was concerned with how writing a collection of short stories might have diluted the overall effect I wanted for the story. Instead, I opted to write a novella told from one perspective. This was a matter of breadth versus

depth, and I knew that choosing one form over the other would have come with its own set of advantages and challenges.

My decision to write a novella was easier when I realized that I identified most with Josie's story, that it was her journey I wanted to focus on in the piece. With this focus, I not only found the task of building and developing my protagonist to be rewarding, but I also found that following a more linear and consistent storyline was much easier for me to manage since Josie's recollections that are interspersed at various points throughout the story.

I also found myself with the difficult dilemma of choosing between a first-person and third-person narrative. In fact, this desire for both had actually led me, in my earlier drafts, to utilize both. I had a fondness for narratives written in third-person point of view as I felt it allowed the most freedom in terms of how to tell my story. Therefore, most of these first drafts were written in third-person, following closely Josie's journey. But in between these scenes were short segments written in first-person of diary entries and flashbacks throughout the piece. Whereas third-person allows for a distance, first-person allows for intimacy, so I felt that writing these moments with this point of view would help the reader delve inside Josie's head.

This switching of perspectives throughout the piece, however, proved to be difficult. Each perspective required a different headspace to write them. There would frequently be moments where I had difficulty in producing pages as a result of not feeling fully adjusted to these switches. After some thought and consideration of the piece in its entirety, it seemed that writing solely from one point of view would be more effective.

In the end, I elected to rewrite the story in third-person, believing that having flexibility was more important. Writing the piece from this perspective gave me, the writer, more distance from my protagonist. I have often shied away from writing stories in first-person because of the

way it could make me personally and emotionally invested in the characters. My reluctance to becoming more invested partly stems from a desire not to become too attached to the characters. For this particular story, Josie's character was imbued with parts of my own personality and those of close friends whom I have known for many years. Because of this, writing scenes in the first-person point of view was challenging, as I had to draw the line that separated reality from fiction. Reflecting now, however, I do wonder, with the level of introspection throughout the piece, how it might have turned out differently had I chosen to write from a different point of view.

The use of memory was another important consideration. How I would incorporate flashbacks into the piece? I was never the type of writer to designate set chapters throughout a story, as I thought it too restricting and halting. Instead, I prefer the transition from different scenes to be more fluid. To accomplish this, I divide scenes through the use of asterisks, which serve as momentary pauses between moments. In this piece, I include dream sequences and flashbacks within these pauses. In doing so, there is not only a fluidity on paper but a seeming enmeshing of the present and the past within the story. For Josie, events that occurred in the past affect her as much as those that occur in the present. As a result, she is unable to separate the two for most of her journey.

After finishing several initial drafts, I saw that I had difficulty in grappling with the different storylines of my piece. On the one hand, I wanted my character to go on this journey to find herself in her birthplace while dealing with the conflicts involving her friend Nikki, but I also wanted Josie to be able to come to terms with her brother's death. It was challenging weaving these points and conflicts throughout the story and required a balancing act. It took

many attempts to frame the story in a way that gave enough attention to each of the storylines I was developing.

In the beginning stages of this project, I had originally set the story just after Josie's brother's accident, which in turn focused the story on Josie's feelings about David's death. The story had begun with Josie's high school graduation and with her finding out about the accident a few days after. Moreover, I had David's character move away to Korea upon his own high school graduation rather than having him simply go on a trip, which became another source of conflict for Josie in the story. However, I soon found that I had focused too much on detailing Josie's emotions. As a result, her trip to Korea was not included in the story until well past the halfway point of the piece. I knew this was an issue. To address this, I had the story instead take place five years after her brother's death and begin with Josie's flight to Korea. Having David's death occur in the past rather than the present allowed me to shift the focus to Josie's trip, which greatly helped with the issue of framing.

It is not too often that I have been able to work on one project from start to finish. With the nature of the graduate courses--which expose students to varying styles of writing and stories--I would usually commit to a work only for a certain period of time, then quickly move on to writing another next story without completing it. In some ways, this was beneficial in that it allowed me to experiment with different types of writing within a shorter time frame. However, as a result, I sometimes felt that I was losing out on the opportunity of crafting a complete story with well-developed plots and characters. Writing my master's thesis gave me the chance to focus my efforts in fostering these aspects of writing and hone my own skills as a writer.

The process of writing my thesis was grueling. Many days were challenging and at times unproductive. I learned not only about my writing but myself as a writer during this process. One of the most challenging aspects of completing my project was creating a set of habits I could rely on to get myself to write, especially on days when I felt particularly frustrated with my writing. In a sense, the biggest challenge was writing when the writer in me deemed me unfit to write. However, with an extensive project such as this, it was important that I followed a reasonable time frame to complete a certain amount of words or pages. It is a process that is still going through trial and error, but I experimented with various ways to accomplish this, from beginning my writing early in the morning rather than the evening and not looking at the time as I wrote my story. Many times, I found that certain methods worked better than others and that some days required me to do something different.

What was especially rewarding through writing my thesis was feedback I received, and revising and polishing my work. Receiving comments and being able to think about aspects of my story I had not considered allowed me to work on developing and rounding out the characters I had created. There was also now a focused attention to detail, particularly regarding facts and information. Writing a longer piece, I now had to think about how to deliver information and consider where to place it within the story. This was both a difficult and fruitful experience as it not only gave me the opportunity to practice reviewing my own work with a keen eye but also the works of others. I have found that as a result of going through this process I have also improved at giving feedback to my peers on their writing, especially within my workshop class, and also to my clients whom I work with at the Writing Center. Having now finished this story, I envision eventually revisiting the piece and focusing more on the characters I have created. As character-focused as the story is, I believe I can still enrich these characters to make the piece

more character-driven. While I enjoy stories with intriguing plots, the characters are what truly attract me to stories.

BOUND

5:00 AM. Josie's gaze seemed to puncture the clock every morning before she came to full consciousness. A long-instilled habit probably. Those terrible and grueling mornings, one would think to be able to adjust after all that time. But Josie could never do it, even after twelve years of schooling. Twelve years of waking up at 5:00 AM and getting dressed. Twelve years of going through a two-hour commute. For Josie, getting up on a Thursday was just as hard as getting up on a Monday, and she always woke with a start, with strands of damp hair stuck to her neck. As she lay still in her bed, she thought about her frequent dream of a porcelain vase cracking on a cold, wooden floor, the blue and white pieces cutting upon impact and shooting across a perfect canvas. But thinking of it now seemed to make her joints stiff. Despite the lack of sunlight, the room was thick with moisture but Josie felt no urgent desire to remove herself from her bed.

The bed offered Josie a strange sort of comfort. The comfort of not moving. It would have made sense to stretch her limbs and release any tension that had gathered itself through the night, but against all reason, Josie remained in bed, covers and all, thinking about broken vases.

She kept her eyes fixated on the analog clock, and for a moment she let herself think about the fact that she graduated only a few days ago. Her cheeks still felt stiff from all that smiling she did that night. The football field was packed with new high school grads, their enormous families, and countless flower petals ornamenting the grass. The lei that bedecked Josie from her shoulders all the way to the tips of her nose remained hung over her lamps. Upon arriving home, her mother made it no secret that she wanted to dump the flowers, but Josie was adamant about keeping every single one she'd received. The lei were fresh and many of them too luxurious to throw out. Josie's mother had rolled her eyes at her. She couldn't see the value in

keeping something that was going to wither out within a matter of days. That was the reason why they never had plants in the apartment. Too much hassle, her mother reasoned. And it was true, the lei would last about another five days, at the most. But lei weren't meant to be trashed like some crappy, old textbooks (*those* Josie made sure to throw away). They were gifts given by her friends and family, and Josie was going to make sure to enjoy them while they lasted.

The soft scent of plumeria lingered in her room, with some petals spilled gently onto the floor. She then looked at the packed suitcase that sat next to the pile of flower petals. As a way to celebrate her graduation, Josie planned to go on a weeklong trip to Korea with her longtime friends Gina and Nikki. Their flight wasn't for a couple hours, although the duration of the flight itself was far from a few hours. Josie groaned. It took about a good ten hours to get there from Hawai'i, and Josie could still remember her discomfort during her last flight. The last time she'd been to Korea was five years ago to visit her family, a trip she'd made every summer as long as she could remember. But that time, Josie didn't go just to visit family, she went to attend her brother's funeral. David had gone off on summer break a week earlier than Josie and flew to Korea to visit their relatives ahead of her. Josie was supposed to meet up with him after her school break started, but David's trip came to an abrupt end after he got into a car accident. No doubt he probably wanted to drive after just getting his license. But driving in Korea was a different story, and David was everything but careful. The crash killed him instantly, and Josie never saw David again.

As her thoughts roamed to David and then back to the flowers in her room, Josie suddenly pictured white lilies. There were so many of them surrounding David's portrait. Josie began to feel a surge swelling in her gut thinking about David's face, and she swiftly shook her head. She hadn't gone back there since David died, and the thought of returning after all these

years made her feel sick. When Gina and Nikki suggested that they take their graduation trip to Korea, Josie couldn't bring herself to tell them no. They were thrilled about it, to say the least, with a draft of their itinerary already in hand. Josie didn't want to ruin it for them. But most of all, she didn't want to ruin things with Nikki after she had just gotten back to being on good terms with her after their fight. Thinking of this, Josie soon found the warmth of her sheets unbearable and kicked the blanket off her bed, hunching forward while rubbing her temples. "God, stop thinking about it, already." Just then, a piercing *ding* came from her phone. Looking at the screen, it only took Josie a second to recognize who it was.

"GOOD MORNING! ARE YOU READY..." Not even reading the entire thing, Josie could easily tell it was from Gina. Josie chuckled. In all the years she had known Gina, she never knew her to be capable of waking up early. She must have been pretty excited to have been up at this time. As Josie went to reply to Gina, the familiar sound of the front door creaking echoed in the hallway. Her mother had just gone to get the morning papers. Even with her laptop and tablet, Josie's mother still had a subscription for newspapers to be delivered to their apartment. Light slowly penetrated her dewy window as her mother's footsteps pattered softly outside. They soon grew louder as she approached Josie's room. She peeked her head through the door.

"Josie?" she whispered.

"Yeah?"

"You up already? Flight's not until later, you know." As Josie looked closely at her mother, she could see her mother's eyes squinted like a newborn babe's and the faint lines that were set deep into the side of her face, the signs of a heavy night's sleep.

"I know. Just can't help waking up early."

"You all packed up?"

“Yeah, I think I’m all set.”

“All right. Well, we head out eleven, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

After sitting for a few more moments, Josie finally rose from her bed and got ready.

“Ready?” Her mother didn’t shift her gaze, and for a moment Josie thought she saw a flicker of worry. It was the same passing look she gave after finding out Josie was going back to Korea. But whatever thoughts she had, her mother didn’t say anything about them. Instead, she nodded her head quietly and Josie didn’t quite understand her worry at the time, why her mother looked so uneasy, but then she thought about David.

“Try to enjoy yourself,” her mother said. Josie retrieved her luggage from the trunk and rolled it onto the curb, eyeing the airport’s entrance. Josie turned to her mother one last time.

“I’ll try.” Josie smiled.

“Off you go, then. I’ll join you in a couple days.”

“All right, see you soon.”

“Call me!” And with that, her mother raised the window and drove off.

With her luggage at her side, Josie stood stunned at the sight of bodies walking past her. Everyone had somewhere to go, people to see, and in the middle of it all was Josie who couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed. The airport gave Josie as much anxiety as it gave her excitement. For all the measures she’d taken in packing her things, Josie could never help but feel like she’d forgotten something, or worse, packed something that wasn’t supposed to be on the plane. The security guards that roamed nearby didn’t make her feel any better. It was hard to tell what was

going on in their heads. Occasionally, they'd give a smile that didn't quite reach their eyes, and Josie would wonder whether she should smile back. But whatever they were thinking behind those listless eyes, Josie prayed it didn't have anything to do with her.

To her relief, Josie found Gina and Nikki relatively quickly near the check-in kiosks.

"Hey! You made it!" Gina approached Josie and swung her arms around her.

"You guys wait long?" Josie asked.

"No, we just got here." Gina pulled back.

Josie looked behind Gina to see Nikki looking back at her with a tentative nod and smile.

"Hey," Nikki said.

"Hey." Josie hugged Nikki awkwardly and gave her the same nervous smile. It was good to see Nikki in a somewhat pleasant mood. "Should we check in?"

As they worked the kiosks, Josie told them about how she was worried for her luggage and the two laughed.

"Eh, why're you worrying so much Jo?" Gina combed her hands through her newly dyed blond hair. "What, you got something you're not supposed to?" She chuckled.

"Yeah, Jo. Why you stressing?" Nikki asked.

Josie smiled wryly. "Well, don't you guys ever worry something could happen? Like, I'm pretty sure I packed my liquids right, and I think I didn't put anything I was supposed to, but—"

"Jo, hey." Gina rested a hand on Josie's shoulder. "Stop worrying. You always stress out too much. It's going to be fine." Although she knew they were probably right, Josie felt a twinge of irritation at their seeming lack of concern. Compared to Josie, Gina and Nikki were much more laidback and outgoing. It was part of the reason why Josie wanted to be their friends when they were kids. There was something about the way they could bring people to them, and Josie

found herself attracted to that quality seeing those two for the first time in their class in the third grade. And maybe opposites really did attract, because for all the efforts Josie made to be invisible, they somehow became friends after that. After a couple of years she asked why they wanted to be friends with her. “Cause you no give us hard time, that’s why,” they replied.

But it didn’t take long for Josie to discover that with their personalities was also a knack for getting into trouble. It drove Josie crazy most of the times, the way they could do things so impulsively, and it didn’t help that they were a group of three. Gina and Nikki’s personalities meshed too well, which usually made Josie the odd one out. This difference in dispositions clashed especially with Nikki who had a more aggressive personality than Gina and was the reason for the fight they had days before Graduation.

At some point, Nikki had found out that Josie wasn’t keen on going back to Korea and yelled at her for not saying anything. Josie didn’t want to talk about it, at least not with Graduation so soon, and insisted it wasn’t true. But Josie wasn’t a good liar, and Nikki knew it.

“It’s because of David, isn’t it?” Nikki had suddenly asked.

“What?” Josie didn’t know where this was coming from, but she’d started to get upset herself.

“Jo, it’s been five years. I don’t know what to do or fucking say anymore. David’s dead, and you just need to accept it already.”

Josie had started crying at some point, but the last thing she remembered from that day was the look of regret on Nikki’s face. Even though Josie knew Nikki often said things without thinking, she still felt hurt by her words, and Nikki knew she couldn’t take them back. It was amazing and a little sad how something built for so long could be wrecked within a few seconds, and it didn’t take much to tear it all down. They saw each other only briefly at Graduation,

exchanging lei and nervous embraces. They didn't talk or see each other again until this moment. Seeing Nikki now with her smile, Josie could tell things weren't quite the same as before. She couldn't tell what Nikki was thinking, but Josie decided that she was going to make the most of this trip and maybe, just maybe fix things with Nikki.

"Okay, okay. I'll try to stop worrying." Josie pulled the tag that printed from the kiosk and wrapped it around her luggage handle.

After the three of them checked in their luggage, they proceeded to go into the TSA line, which Josie was pleased to find it a short simple process. Unlike the previous times she had gone through these checks, Josie wasn't asked to take off her shoes or remove her laptop from her bag. "Maybe they're being lenient since we're leaving the U.S.?" Gina asked.

Nikki and Josie shrugged, not having any sort of answer. Josie watched with some anxiety as her bag traveled through the whirring machines, half-expecting to be stopped and questioned by the security guard. But when she saw her bag come out without a hitch, she let out a long-held breath. *It's going to be fine*, she reassured herself. *Nothing bad can happen*. She retrieved her bag from the tray and joined Nikki and Gina who were on the other side, and headed toward their gate.

The area soon opened wide, revealing a number of shops and restaurants. In particular, there were a variety of fast food places and coffee shops nearby, the mix of warm, savory, and sweet scents wafting in the air. Despite having woken up early, Josie failed to eat breakfast that morning, and so the idea of getting food became tantalizing the more she passed by them. Fortunately, they found a lot of free time on their hands, and so the girls went to grab a quick bite and some coffee.

With food and drinks in hand, they headed toward the seats by their gate and found that many of the seats were still empty, with only a few people already seated. But this quickly changed as their departure time grew near, with more people trickling in. The skies outside the enormous windows were a deep, clear blue without a speck of white. Josie gazed out a little longer while nibbling on a steaming French fry, knowing that the skies would look much different when she arrived.

She remembered the last time she had visited Korea. The days were bright, but the sun couldn't be seen on most days, hidden by thick, opaque clouds. She didn't know at the time that much of it was the result of heavy pollution, with a lot of the bad air flowing in from the skies over China. It explained why the image of masked people flooded Josie's memories. Josie packed in her own set of masks for this trip per her mother's recommendation, though Josie seriously doubted she would ever need them.

When more people gathered in the waiting area, Josie could hear conversations in Korean, some of which she was able to understand. And then Josie realized that the three of them were some of the few locals there.

“Wow.” Josie blinked.

“What?” Nikki asked.

“I just noticed everyone here is Korean.” By the look of their clothes and even their skin tones, it was easy to tell who were tourists returning back to their home and locals who were from here going on a trip to visit Korea. The tourists that visited Hawai'i, in Josie's opinion, always appeared to be well-dressed, even if they considered themselves to be dressed casually. But their “casual” didn't match Josie's idea of casual. Here, casual meant wearing things like ripped jeans or a pair of sweat pants and a tank top found just off the floor. But the visitors that

came to Hawai'i seemed to like their stylish travel fedoras and everything that wasn't denim. And even when they did dress down, they would top off their outfits with a nice blouse, the kind someone here would wear only if going to a more upscale restaurant. But most of all, they liked their fair honey skin. Put all of those things together, and they stuck out from the crowd like some sort of movie stars.

After people-watching for a few minutes, the girls' seats were called, and by the time Josie knew it, she was buckled in and the plane was taking its ascent.

The ball of glowing vermillion was slowly descending outside just as the plane made its landing. 7:55 PM. The skies were still bright, the sunbeams stretching across the open expanse of the runway. But the air was not warm as Josie expected. In fact, there was a slight chill that nipped at her lips. Josie found the coolness refreshing especially in comparison to the humid weather back home. The heat was sometimes unbearable for Josie, but she didn't realize until she was without the humid air how much she really needed it.

The chill unfortunately came with some inconveniences. Her skin, for one, couldn't seem to take the lack of moisture in the air. Her lips were the first to feel its effects. Upon arriving, Josie could already feel her lips becoming chapped and so the task of fumbling for her lip balm became, to her surprise, one that would become all too familiar by the end of her trip. She'd heard that the air was drier, but she didn't think about how it was going to affect her body. Josie would find within a couple days the skin between her fingers becoming almost scale-like, the dead skin gathering within those small crevices.

Within a few days, patches of flaking dead skin would find itself on parts of her cheeks that normally gathered oil. She looked with horror at these new-formed features, imagining a lizard's skin in their place, and then come to wonder whether she would have preferred the humidity instead. Her skin seemed to dry out no matter how often she applied moisturizer and drank water to keep herself hydrated. And she'd soon find her lip balm worn down to the nub, forcing her to buy two more packs to last for the rest of her trip. But Josie didn't know any of this, shuffling out of the plane.

The girls retrieved their luggage and headed toward the KTX which would take them on an hour-and-a-half ride into Seoul. At this time, the rush hour was over, so the trains were not nearly as packed as they could get in the mornings and early evenings. But even then, the sight of it all was overwhelming. Hawai'i didn't have a transportation system like Korea, so when the girls looked at the subway map, they couldn't help but feel a bit lost. After many confused looks, Nikki eventually led the way, following a familiar group of passengers that were seated near them on the plane, and eventually found the correct platform. Josie was relieved to find that all the signs included translations in English. She was also surprised that they were translated in Japanese and Chinese, though she remembered now that Korea had many visitors from those countries.

"Hey, Gina. You still remember Japanese?" Josie asked.

"Not really, to be honest." Gina flushed.

"But, you took four years of it."

Gina shrugged. "Well, that doesn't mean any of it stayed in my head."

"Eh, but you're Japanese though," Nikki pointed out. "Shouldn't you know some Japanese?"

The two started getting into their usual bickering, and Josie ducked her head, remaining silent. Even though Josie was full Korean, she couldn't say she was fluent at all. To top it off, she and her parents were born in Korea, which made her not knowing the language somehow worse. Unlike her other Korean friends, her parents didn't send her to Korean school growing up. Maybe they didn't see the need for it, after all, how could you forget your native tongue? But that was the case for Josie and soon she forgot most of it by the time she entered fifth grade. Her brother David, on the other hand, didn't forget. He could still speak Korean fluently even after getting through ESL class and talk in Korean with their parents without a mark of clumsiness. Josie always envied that.

As Gina and Nikki continued squabbling, Josie looked at the vast, fast-fleeting cityscape outside the glass window. Dimming twilight and black traffic cables crowded the skies and stretched over countless gray buildings. Under the gleaming sun, even these cold buildings were able to contain a certain charm about them. The way that the sun's rays reflected against their glass windows made it seem at times as if the skies and the buildings were one, shining apricot-toned light onto streets filled with walking workers and students. At one point, the sunlight was eclipsed by a skyscraper.

Looking at this view made Josie think about the times she and David would gaze at the sunset at Waikiki Beach on weekends while waiting for the movie to start. They went to the Sunset on the Beach screenings every weekend, which showed a different movie through a gigantic screen set up near the shoreline. Packed with tourists, it wasn't exactly the best place to be on a weekend. But being able to see the movies with David made wading through the crowded beach worth it. After their parents' divorce, making time to see David became harder

which only became worse as time went on. But going to the beach was something they were able to keep doing even after they started living apart.

They would pack their spam musubis from Seven Eleven and then spend the entire day swimming or catching snails that climbed the walls of Waikiki. Then they would watch the ball of light descending into the ocean, squinting their eyes, and what a grand sight it was. Josie never got sick of doing the same thing every weekend, and the sunset was something she thought was spectacular every time she saw it. But now, Josie couldn't tell if the sun's frayed lights were more beautiful than the windows that reflected them. Maybe the view would be different if they were at a beach.

“Whatchu looking at, Jo?” Nikki asked.

“It's pretty, the sunset.”

Nikki gazed out for a moment. “But not as good as ours, you gotta admit.”

“Hmm, maybe not.” Josie thought for a moment whether to argue back, argue that it was still beautiful, but she said nothing.

Soon, the train's route reached its end and the girls got off, rolling their luggage onto the platforms. Nikki led the way, with her Google Maps in hand, to the place they'd be staying at for the next couple of days. They opted to go for an Airbnb instead of a hotel, being the more affordable option of the two. Of course, money wasn't much of an issue for Nikki who became the proud owner of a Mercedes Benz on her sixteenth birthday and had doctors for parents, but this time Nikki seemed more than willing to try something new. According to her, Airbnb's were now on trend.

Josie didn't realize for a long time the extent to Nikki's wealth, although the car and the number of trips she made during their school breaks should have been huge tip-offs. With the

amount of money her family made, Nikki and her family were able to take multiple trips throughout the year to places like Japan or California. She would even take a trip during those Labor Day or Thanksgiving weekends and be back in school when the week started up again. It went without saying that Nikki had some of the most interesting stories whenever they got back to school. Still, Josie couldn't help catching a slight bit of envy hearing her stories. After all, what kid their age could say they've been to Tokyo Disneyland twelve times?

Luckily for the girls, they wouldn't have to walk too long to get to their apartment since it was located near Seoul Station where they were now exiting. The hardest part in getting to the apartment was having to carry their luggage up and down several flights of stairs to exit the station. As advanced as Seoul seemed to be technologically, there seemed to be a lack of escalators, although Josie supposed it was better for their health. But this wasn't something she was thinking about at the moment.

"Fuck," Gina breathed, "my life. We almost there, Nikki?"

"Exit's right at these stairs," Nikki said a little too quickly. She tried not to show it, but it was apparent that the climb was beginning to take its toll on her too.

But before they knew it, the girls were met with a rush of nipping air which came as a relief to their sweat-filled brows.

"There it is." Nikki pointed ahead to a towering apartment with what looked to be an internet café on the first floor.

Near the apartment was a set of glowing stairs connected to a bridge that illuminated midnight blue and an enormous shopping mall just across the street. As they crossed the street, Gina stopped to take out her phone.

"Wow, that aesthetic." An audible snap shuttered.

“Gina, really?” Josie tugged at Gina’s hoodie.

“I can send it to you!”

Josie rolled her eyes.

When the girls entered their apartment lobby, Nikki messaged their host that they had arrived. A *ding* soon followed.

“Alice says that the security card to access the lobby during after-hours is in the mailbox and that we can just ask the guard to access it,” Nikki read.

“Great! Tell her we said thanks,” Gina said.

“Actually,” Nikki looked up. “Alice is a dude.”

“What? How do you know that?” Josie asked.

“Well, because his profile image is a guy.” The corners of Nikki’s lips curled up. “I guess he really likes fairy tales?”

The three of them shared a smile and rode the elevator after retrieving their card to the sixth floor. They found their door just around the corner of a rather poorly lit hallway, which smelled faintly of alcohol. It was most likely soju, although Josie couldn’t really say for certain since she never drank before. For all she knew, it could’ve been whiskey or vodka. Nikki went to enter their pin number. That was one thing Josie appreciated about apartments here. There was no need for keys. Upon entering the passcode, the door chimed and Nikki turned the handle, which opened with a *click*.

“We finally made it!” Gina cried out. The first thing that hit Josie as she entered the hall was the sterile scent of soap and detergent that came from the bathroom. She wrinkled her nose. It was a familiar odor that always reminded her of her birthplace. The scent pervaded not only bathrooms but also the grand bathhouses that could be found within the city. Josie and her

mother would frequent these bathhouses during their time in Seoul, but for some reason, the smell seemed more acute here than in Hawai'i, and Josie wasn't sure whether she liked it. The smell certainly brought with it a sense of nostalgia for her childhood, but Josie wouldn't say that it gave her any sort of pleasure.

The girls moved their luggage to one side of the living room and inspected the apartment. They soon noticed several dolls in the form of white rabbits lined up against the walls and a poster of a giant red heart next to an appropriately themed clock with numbers printed in reverse.

“Well, I think you were right, Nikki,” Gina said, “He definitely likes his fairy tales.”

Aside from the décor, the apartment consisted of a living room area with two twin mattresses, a TV, and a miniature dining table. In choosing their apartment, the girls made sure so that they would have all the amenities they needed such as connection to the internet, a working laundry machine and dryer, and a refrigerator. It was at times like these that Josie was thankful for Nikki's experience in traveling; she knew exactly what to look for. Along with these necessities, it was important for them to pick a location that was within close distance to other places they would be traveling to for the duration of their trip. Fortunately, they found not only an apartment just five minutes away from a train station, they managed to make sure it was across from Seoul Station, which allowed them the advantage of traveling to some of the city's more popular districts within a reasonably short amount of time.

In addition to the two mattresses was another located in a bedroom just adjacent to the living room. But before inspecting the room, Josie looked to find the apartment's wi-fi router and a portable wi-fi that could be carried with them during their travels. Josie found what must have been the wi-fi password next to the router and typed it into her phone. When she saw that she was connected to the internet, she went to inspect some of the finer details of the apartment.

It was apparent that the place had just been cleaned as there was no dust or dirt to be found on the floors and furniture, yet Josie could tell the place was far from new. The mattresses, for one, were stiff and its sheets worn from age. Josie wondered for a moment how clean the beds were, but before she could do anything, Gina silently laid her bag on top the cleanest looking bed adjacent to the TV. When Gina caught Josie's gaze she mouthed, *Well, you should've moved faster*. Josie shook her head as she grinned.

Next to the living room was a tidy kitchen stocked with utensils, cups, and plates. Interestingly, while there was an ample supply of forks, spoons, and knives, there seemed to be no trace of any chopsticks. Not that this was a big deal. They would be eating out for most of their trip anyways. Alice most likely thought foreigners had no need for chopsticks. The kitchen also contained a tiny laundry machine that could both wash and dry clothes. Josie worried for a moment when she saw that all the buttons were labeled in Korean, but was relieved to see a set of instructions in English just next to it.

"Huh, how funny," Nikki said. Her eyes were darting about the living room.

"What's up?" Josie asked.

"It's a bit smaller than I thought, don't you think? The apartment." Now that Josie looked closely, she could see what Nikki was talking about. The space appeared more compact in comparison to the images they saw online. The rooms that once looked so spacious now appeared tight especially with their luggage on the floor. Josie pursed her lips. There was no way they were going to be able to unpack their things all at the same time. They were going to have to take turns, which, Josie normally wouldn't have minded, but the fact was that Nikki and Gina were more than likely to be glued to their bags during this trip. Suddenly, claiming the lone

bedroom for herself didn't seem like a bad idea. Josie would have plenty of room for her things in there.

"Huh, you're right," Josie said. "It's not nearly as big like in the pictures."

"I guess Alice shot them in the right angles," Gina said. While Nikki and Gina continued to explore the apartment, Josie swiftly peeked inside the bedroom and imagined where each of her things would go. As Josie thought, the bedroom would be able to provide ample space for all her things without overcrowding the room. Her suitcase could fit just alongside the bed while the bedside table was just big enough to fit her clothes and toiletries.

"Oh, no!" Nikki called out.

"What happened?" Josie asked. She quickly retreated away from the bedroom.

"The bathroom's *really* small."

Josie almost felt her eyes roll back. "Yeah, well it's not like we're all showering together."

Nikki looked up and down the bathroom with a frown. "But still, I didn't think it was going to be *this* small. And I thought the wi-fi was bad enough."

"What do you mean?"

"It's been connecting on and off. I heard the internet was supposed to be better here. I'm kind of bummed."

"Oh. Okay," Josie said curtly. The internet was just fine. What was she complaining for? But Josie quickly stopped herself when she saw Nikki looking at her. Josie then took a quick glance at Gina who sat across from her, book in hand, and out of Nikki's view. Gina had a deer caught in headlights kind of look, as if she saw something she wasn't supposed to see, and with

the both of them looking back at her now Josie felt a sudden flush rise from her chest into her cheeks.

“But, if it is really that bad, we should text Alice,” Josie said. “He can probably help us if the internet goes out.”

When Nikki looked to be distracted with something else in the bathroom, she suddenly asked, “You got his number?”

“Yeah, you want me to message him?”

“Nah. Let’s wait. It’s probably my phone that’s the problem.” Nikki managed a smile.

“How long you had that anyway? That phone?” Gina asked. She winked at Josie.

“Oh, this? I had it a long time now. Should’ve asked my folks for another one as a graduation present, but, oh well.”

Nikki closed the bathroom door and as she shuffled to the closet, Gina gave Josie a relieved smile. That was something Gina was good at. Before they became friends, Josie thought Gina was one of those girls who only liked to talk smack about people, which was true in a lot of ways. Gina loved her gossip. Whatever was going on in and outside of school, Gina knew right away.

But underneath that surface was something most people didn’t see which was a sort of softness and loyalty. Gina’s outward personality made it easy for her to be branded as just a loudmouthed kid, but Josie learned for herself that was not it at all. Gina was perceptive and knew how to read people, even if she didn’t always say something about it. Compared to Nikki, who was more high-strung and could even at times be uncaring, Gina was more self-aware of the two and attentive to the people around her. It wasn’t a surprise then when Gina became aware of the tension that flared between Josie and Nikki right before graduation. Gina wasn’t there when

it happened, but sure enough she was able to guess who said what. Looking at her now, Josie smiled back at Gina and whispered, “Thanks.”

Before anyone else got to their bags, Josie managed to retrieve her toiletries and clothes she’d need for the night. But they still needed to figure out who was going to take the bedroom. Gina appeared comfortable on the mattress she’d chosen, so it came down to either Josie or Nikki. Josie liked the idea of having her things organized in one room, but she didn’t want to take it if Nikki did. Whatever temporary peace she managed to make with Nikki seemed ready to break apart at any moment, and Josie didn’t want to make things worse between them on the first night, especially after that cold stare Nikki gave only moments ago. Josie started to feel wary.

“Jo, you can take the bedroom, if you like,” Nikki said.

Josie gawked at her for a moment. “What? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, go for it.” Nikki waved her hand absently.

Without another word, Josie walked into the bedroom with her luggage and flopped onto the mattress, finally resting her head on the pillow. The immediate relief was enough to make her forget about the stiff springs underneath her. The flight was long and Josie was unable to find any respite for the duration of it. Unlike some people, she wasn’t someone who could sleep sitting up no matter how tired she was. When she felt herself get too comfortable on the mattress, Josie rose to get ready for bed and organize her things for the next day. She didn’t want to be hampered in the morning looking for her belongings. After seeing that everything was where she wanted them to be, Josie fell back again, feeling the dull recoil of the springs underneath her. But as tired as she was, Josie couldn’t fall asleep right away.

Josie stared at the strange stains on the ceiling as she thought about what happened outside with Nikki. She then thought about the days before graduation when they fought. Where

did it all go wrong? Josie supposed she should've told her about not wanting to go. Gina noticed it at some point, her hesitation, but Josie couldn't bring herself to tell Nikki, not when she was so excited about the trip.

She remembered Nikki's words flying out like darts, and they'd hit their marks all too well. Hearing her words, Josie felt conflicted. She'd been angry that Nikki would say those things, but a part of her also felt guilty, guilty for not being able to push aside her pain. It had been five years since David's death, and Josie convinced herself it was enough time for her to grieve. But when the time came that she found out about the trip, Josie realized she hadn't gotten over David's death. What could she tell Nikki at point? That no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't get over David? She was upset, but she couldn't bring herself to blame Nikki's frustration.

It was the first time Nikki had gone off on Josie like that. She knew Nikki's tendency to say things without thinking and without regret. But the look of hurt in Nikki's face and the realization that she'd done something irreparable was unmistakable. There was a silent agreement between the two of them not to talk about that day. They'd share smiles as if nothing had happened, but it was really a way for them to avoid conflict. Josie wondered how long it would all last. Things felt as if they were unraveling faster than Josie could bind them, but she hoped somehow they would make it work.

After several attempts at sleep, Josie remembered that she hadn't called her mother yet and proceeded to dial her number.

"Josie?" her mother called out.

"Hey, Mom."

“Josie! You made it!” her mother exclaimed, the relief in her voice apparent.

“Yeah, we arrived a while ago, and now I’m getting ready for bed.” Josie yawned.

“Oh, is that so? You should get some rest, Josie! You must be tired after that flight.”

“I will. I just wanted to let you know I got here safely.”

“Thanks for calling Josie.”

She couldn’t see her mother on the other end of the line, but she imagined that she had a slight grin on her face. “Of course, Mom,” Josie replied, “So I’ll see you in a few days?”

“Yep, I’ll let you know the details but I’ll meet up with you there. Until then, you enjoy yourself, Josie! And tell your friends I said hi!”

Josie smiled faintly. “All right, I will. Good night, Mom.”

“Night!”

The phone clicked.

After a few minutes, Josie finally felt drowsy enough to sleep. As her eyes became heavy, she thought again about Nikki and her guilt-ridden face and what she’d say to her the next morning. And then she thought about David and his wide-set grin.

After a hard sleep, Josie woke up from another dream about vases and trying to find their infinite pieces scattered on the cold floor. It was the same porcelain vase with the blue floral design layered on top an immaculate an ivory base. Some of the broken pieces were underneath a large piece of wooden furniture where Josie couldn’t reach. It was a strange feeling, seeing them break. She saw it happen once when David knocked one over at a neighbor’s house.

David wasn’t paying attention while he was walking through the hallway, and before he knew it, he backed into a three-hundred-dollar family heirloom. Something that looked so smooth and flawless quickly became brittle under the force of the wooden floor as hundreds of

pieces shattered across that hallway. David wasn't one of those kids who cried, but a downpour flooded his face that day as he tried to pick up the pieces while Josie laughed.

“It's not funny, Jo!” David had cried.

“Okay, I'm sorry. Let me help.”

The two of them picked up the pieces, and after showing their efforts, David was forgiven. Josie felt a bit guilty now for having laughed, but she still looked on the memory with fondness.

As Josie sat up, the sunbeams filtered through her windows and the beige curtains and spilled onto the wooden floor. The room felt much warmer now in comparison to the chill of the previous night. It probably had something to do with the heated floors. Despite the apartment's compactness, the heating was one of its more redeemable aspects. Josie wondered whether there was a way to turn off the heat, when she felt a sudden itch in her throat. She coughed painfully and smacked her lips, which made her realize how quickly they'd gotten dry again.

It was hard to tell where her lip balm was amongst all her belongings, but she eventually found it in the lowest depths of her bag, buried beneath her wallet, sunglasses, and passport. But even putting on lip balm didn't bring immediate relief. She could still feel the rough and scratchy surface underneath the smooth gloss and worst of all, the itch. It was all she could do not to nitpick at the ragged skin that started peeling from her lips, but the last thing Josie wanted was to have blood dripping down her chin. Chapped lips were bad but bleeding lips disastrous.

Josie spent the next few moments lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. She would have loved to get more rest, sleep in, but like the previous night her body couldn't seem to fall back asleep. It wasn't any easier to do that what with all the sounds of cars speeding down the road. Being near a train station meant that there was a lot of activity early in the morning. When she

found herself still awake for the next few minutes, she tried to spend some time on her phone checking emails and watching videos. But being on her phone only seemed to make her more awake, and with that Josie finally rose with a heavy grunt to get dressed.

Josie peeked her head outside her room and saw drawn curtains, the traces of dust traversing along the ribbon of sunbeams. Gina and Nikki were still in a deep sleep, their faces seeming to coagulate with oil, which didn't come as a surprise to Josie. For as long as she'd known them, they were both late risers. Josie wasn't sure if they were still jet-lagged, especially Nikki with all the sleep she got on the plane, but she figured it probably wouldn't have made a difference.

Gina and Nikki spent most of their weekends sleeping away the afternoon and waking up past two. How they could sleep so much, Josie wasn't sure. But what she did know was that they weren't the type of people she could count on in the morning. Josie remembered the days she'd try to invite them out for breakfast or go on a hike to see the sunrise on top Koko Head—it was hardly ever a successful venture. Looking at them now, those two probably wouldn't get up for a couple more hours.

“Figures,” Josie sighed.

After applying another layer onto her lips, Josie got ready as she let the balm work its way into dry crevices. She snuck herself into the bathroom like a little kid, tippy-toeing with scrunched shoulders, to take a quick a shower. But it took a little longer than she'd planned because what she didn't expect was the water splashing everywhere from the bathroom floor to the sink and door. It was a disaster. The bathroom, like most in Korea, didn't have a shower stall designated solely for showering—the whole bathroom *was* the stall. It didn't help that the space

inside the bathroom was so tight. This meant Josie had to be more careful than usual with the showerhead. But it had been a while since Josie had done this. She'd forgotten just how difficult this process was and battled with the showerhead, angling it just right so the water wouldn't splash onto her clothes, which were sitting on top the toilet seat just two feet from her.

After a mediocre attempt at showering, Josie swiftly dried herself within the steam room that now was the bathroom. For today, she'd decided to go with her favorite graphic tee with a giraffe print and her reliable set of denim jeans. These were her most comfortable ensemble, and for these next few days, comfort was the most important. Before leaving the bathroom, Josie roughly brushed her coarse, wavy hair and swung open the door to feel a rush of cool air.

Josie checked again to see whether Gina and Nikki had gotten up, but they remained in their dormant state, heavily breathing. Since it would be a while before either of them got up, Josie went back to her room to check for any updates on Facebook. It was a little after twelve back home, so most of her other friends were up and busy with their posts and statuses. Josie viewed and liked about a dozen pictures of beaches and graduation parties and posted a few messages of congratulations for the June babies.

When it seemed that she'd gotten through all the posts, Josie refreshed the page once more, only to see the message: "Josie, we care about you and the memories you share here. We thought you'd like to look back on this post from 5 years ago." Below the message was a photo she hadn't seen in ages: they both looked so young, with their beet-red faces and arms and their sun-bleached hair. But alongside the redness was David's sparkling grin. Josie had taken that picture on one of their weekends out at Waikiki after David's high school graduation party. It was a particularly scorching day, and the two of them had paid the price of not wearing enough sunscreen. The burns lasted about a week, and the brutal tan lines even longer than that. As Josie

looked closer into the screen, she thought about the fact that he'd just turned eighteen and was about to start college. "David." Josie's voice cracked. She felt her eyes gather with water when the door creaked slightly.

"Josie?" A disheveled Gina poked her head through the door, traces of her bleached hair hanging in the opening.

Josie sniffled. "Yeah?"

There was a slight pause. "Can I use some of your shampoo?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Okay, thanks." Gina waited as if to say something, but changed her mind and closed the door lightly.

Josie wiped her face and settled herself before going out to the living room, taking steady breaths. With Gina getting up, it was only a matter of minutes until Nikki also roused herself awake. Gina jerked the curtains violently until they flung fully open, revealing the afternoon-filled light.

"Oh! God!" Gina flinched. "I can't see!"

Nikki laughed. "But I can still see the ugly."

Josie held her breath, and when Gina started cracking up, she did too.

The next hour consisted of Gina and Nikki getting ready and taking turns in the shower. Josie chuckled to herself each time she heard one of them scream in the bathroom; she'd decided to keep the information about the shower to herself. After they finished showering, Gina and Nikki spent the next few minutes fixing their face with makeup, mirrors and brushes in hand, while Josie perused Instagram as she picked at her lips.

"So, how's your lip, Jo?" Nikki asked.

Josie looked up and answered, "It's pretty dry. I don't know what I'm going do." Josie rubbed her lips.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. You got that lip gloss with you?" Nikki began penciling her eyebrows.

"Lip gloss?" Josie asked.

"Yeah, you know. The one I got for you last Christmas."

"I think so. I might have packed it."

"Well, try use that. Supposed to be hydrating, or that's what I heard."

"Really? Thanks for letting me know."

"No problem," Nikki mumbled as she applied lip-gloss.

When the room fell silent, Gina decided to turn on some music as she finished powdering her face. Josie wasn't sure what to think of Nikki's attempt at small talk, but moments like these made her think that things could go back to the way they were, at least, this is what she told herself. After Gina and Nikki finished getting ready, the girls put on their sneakers and left the apartment, beginning their late day in the city.

They started the day eating a late breakfast at a restaurant near the apartment. The air was cool for the time of day, which Josie didn't mind at all. In fact, she liked the way the chill and the warmth from the sun hit her body at the same time. This way, she wasn't too hot or too cold. The place the girls went to was a 24-hour restaurant that specialized in stews and soups and was popular among a late-night crowd in need of some hangover soup. Despite being lunch time, the girls were seated right away, being led by an ahjumma to a table near the back. The menu was reasonably priced, most of their fuller stews being around six to seven dollars and also had a

variety of other staple Korean dishes such as mandoo, naengmyun, and bibimbap. But aside from the prices, Josie was surprised at just how quickly the dishes were served.

“Ho! What was that, like five minutes?” Gina exclaimed.

“I know, right?” Josie said.

“You got spicy tofu soup again Gina?” Nikki asked.

“Yeah, I know,” Gina said almost guiltily. “I wanted to try something else, but this is my fave!”

Back home, the girls usually went out to Korean restaurants during their free time with each of them having a particular dish they liked: Gina with her soft tofu soup and a side of kakkdugi, Nikki with her piping hot bibimbap, and Josie with her cold bowl of naengmyun. After being friends for a while, the girls discovered that Korean food was something they collectively enjoyed. Josie usually liked most things if they weren't from fast food places but she normally ate home cooked Korean meals made by her mother. Gina, interestingly enough, hated Chinese food even though she was part Chinese while Nikki who was half-Korean and half-Japanese preferred Korean food over Japanese food.

As the girls began eating, Josie asked, “So, where do you guys want to go after this?”

“Well, we can go to that shopping district close by. I saw on a blog that there are a *ton* of places we could go!” Nikki got out a detailed itinerary she'd made on her phone and Josie saw that it was packed with shopping and sight-seeing, with some displeasure. The current plan they had equated to lots of walking, and while she knew there'd be walking involved during the trip, she didn't like that they were starting off the trip so jam-packed right away.

If Josie remembered anything from the few times she'd visited the city as a child, walking in Seoul was inevitable, unless you had a car, which in this country wasn't possible

unless you were eighteen. There was no other way to get through the subways, which demanded both walking and climbing quite a number of stairs. Josie sighed. She also didn't like the idea of spending so much money on the first day of their trip, and she knew Nikki and Gina could literally shopped till they dropped if they really wanted to.

“What's wrong, Jo?” Nikki asked.

“This is a lot to do, you know,” Josie said as Nikki's face tensed slightly.

“Well, it's not too often we get to take a trip to another country. Plus, it's to celebrate our graduation, Jo! Let's enjoy it while we can.” Nikki had a point. Josie wasn't sure whether they'd ever get to go on a trip like this again, especially once they'd start college in a few months. But if Josie had to be honest with herself, she would go along with whatever Nikki said if only to avoid upsetting her.

“You're right. Sounds like a plan,” Josie said.

Before heading out, Josie went to go wash her hands in the restroom only to suddenly come across a minty fragrance that nipped inside her nose. She stood confused and almost disoriented for a moment, being transported back to that old bath house, and looked to the woman standing before her. The woman had auburn hair that went just past her shoulders and was neatly dressed, in a clever navy blue blazer and pants. She was looking in the mirror, brushing her teeth vigorously as if she was in a rush to get someplace. Then another woman shortly approached the mirror, took out a small pouch, and proceeded to do the same thing. Josie was baffled.

The sight of seeing someone brush their teeth in a public restroom, let alone during the middle of the day, felt so odd. Josie had a certain level of hygiene which she worked to maintain,

but she wasn't sure if she liked this very much. Somehow, it all felt too intimate, the smell of toothpaste in a public restroom. It was a scent she'd only smell in her own bathroom, so a part of her felt as if she was being exposed.

Josie suddenly realized she was staring and ducked her head as she slowly went to go wash her hands while the women didn't seem to notice her at all. It was then that Nikki suddenly walked through the door. The shock in Nikki's face was apparent, her eyes flashing wide. *I hope they didn't see me making that face*, Josie immediately thought.

"Are they...?" she mouthed.

"Yep," Josie replied.

"Why?"

Josie shrugged stiffly to make as if they weren't obviously talking about the women next to them. "I guess they like clean teeth here."

"Damn." Josie nodded her head in acknowledgement as Nikki walked to the sink next to her. Sounds of brushing echoed throughout the restroom as Josie and Nikki grinned silently to themselves. It was moments like these that Josie felt most comfortable with Nikki. Some days, it'd feel as if Josie were constantly checking a pot of soup on a stove, and Nikki was the pot, always trying to see if something got burned.

When they headed back to their table, Gina had their checks in hand, with the widest possible grin they'd ever seen her with.

"You look happy." Josie said.

"I am! You know why?"

"Why?"

"Cause we no need pay for tip!"

Compared to last night when they arrived, the subway station was much more packed. Many of the people on the train were a mix of businessmen in suits and college students, all of whom for the most part seemed to keep to themselves, listening to music or watching videos on their phones. Some were also chatting away to the companions near them while others were nodding off. During the train ride, Josie saw the interestingly bizarre similarity in some of the passengers' features and styles. The women, for one, seemed to make it a point to emphasize their makeup and use products that were a great deal paler than their natural skin tones. Josie already knew they liked their fair skin, but the tourists back home didn't apply their makeup as thickly as they did now.

Going to work or school rather than the beach, it was clear that the women here had put in more effort on putting on their faces. It almost made Josie feel as if she didn't put enough effort into her own face. But some of the women's faces were so white that they clashed with the natural hue of their necks, which made Josie think of pictures she'd seen of geishas and the napes of their necks.

Like their faces, geishas would paint their necks an immaculate white. But on the napes of their necks, they would run the paint in a 'w' pattern, exposing their natural shade of flesh. Maybe this was a sort of trend that was going on now that Josie didn't know about. Or maybe they simply didn't think about blending their makeup into their necks. Their lips also had a similar way of attracting attention, the cherry-red against a ghostly white. Many of the women sitting across from Josie were wearing either the color of tomatoes or tangerines on their lips, making it look as if they'd been stained by hard candy.

Now taking a closer look at their faces, Josie realized with some shock that the way they applied their makeup wasn't the only thing that was the same—that was just the beginning. Many of the women had the same facial features: a sharply angled nose, high cheek bones, and double eyelids. Josie would normally have thought that this was a coincidence, but seeing all the women sitting in front of her with the same faces, she almost thought with a chill that they looked like the same person.

If different women had taken their seats on the train Josie wondered whether she would be able to tell the difference between them. They wore their hair and clothes similarly like they did with their makeup, no doubt following whatever trend was in for that week. Of these things that Josie observed, she didn't have problem with the styles they were into. Heck, she thought half the time that she'd like to get her hands on the same brand of clothes or try out a certain hairstyle. It was more that there was no variety that bothered Josie. Back home, well-defined brows and cat-eyes were all the rage, but Josie felt that more people were willing to experiment with different looks. Here, Josie rarely saw any variations in their styles, which seemed unfortunate what with all the different brands and products that were available to them.

After a few moments, the train stopped, and the girls got off to head to their next location, passing through waves of white, red, and orange.

If the day came that Josie would ever move to Korea, she guessed it wouldn't take long for her to go broke.

“Wow. Look at that.” Gina stood with wide eyes. “Was it like this when you came here before?” she asked.

“Honestly, not at all,” Josie replied, “At least, not that I remember.”

The first place on their list today was someplace called Myeongdong. Myeongdong was a shopping district packed with fashion brands, luxury department stores, cosmetic shops, and delicious eateries. With one look, Josie could tell that the strip in Waikiki had nothing on this busy district, with its countless stores and restaurants found well above the first floor. Ads with the faces of well-known actors and singers from popular K-Pop groups were plastered along towering buildings beside famous brand names. Josie could only imagine what it would all look like during the night with the signs and buildings lighting up the sleepless sky.

As she stretched her neck to see the countless shops above her, Jose thought just how much Seoul had changed from the last time she'd been here. Many of the places she'd visit with her mom and David were now gone. Josie couldn't recognize most of the shops that lined the streets. Even the teokbokki man and his stall was nowhere to be found, which was disappointing. He'd had the best prices for hearty servings of his freshly made spicy rice cakes, and because the three of them would come back every year the man would give extra portions. But maybe Seoul was always this way, and Josie just wasn't able to see the vastness that was the city, too young to really understand what it was she saw.

Now she knew why David was always so excited to come back. The city was enticing, always changing. It brought with it a freshness and a chance to experience something new. But among all the brightly tinted signs and stores in front of Josie were also buildings in construction, no doubt the first beginnings of new stores, and Josie couldn't help but feel like a stranger to these streets.

She then wondered about what people who lived here thought about all this, these city folk. Did they not think about it at all, seeing their streets change every day? Or did they, like Josie, feel a sense of loss? Her own mother had grown up in the city. Josie never asked her

mother what she thought about the place she'd grown up in; she never felt the need to. Her mother wasn't one for talking about herself in the first place, as if it was something completely irrelevant. This wasn't to say that she was secretive. No, her mother loved chatting. She said anything and everything that came to her mind, everything except the past. But now Josie was curious, imagining the untold stories of her mother and these streets.

Following Gina and Nikki, Josie had to look above her head to see all the stores and restaurants and also keep her eyes forward to make sure she didn't accidentally bump into someone and wander from the group. The combined task of walking and gawking became increasingly difficult with the sheer mass of shoppers that hustled through the streets. They were not shy about shoving and made no apologies, for that matter. Josie had gotten used to it at some point after all the times she visited the city. That didn't mean she ever came to like it.

Many of the people that walked alongside and past her appeared to be visitors from Japan and China. Josie could tell by the flurry of words that flitted around her. Dozens of conversations were being held by countless strangers, but she couldn't get a grasp of anything they said. What words she did catch were certain phrases she'd learned from watching Japanese shows on channel nine. Along with tourists were many college students and a surprising number of high school students near Josie's age. It was easy to tell who these students were since they were still in uniform. Josie personally never liked the idea of uniforms, especially not the ones she had to wear in elementary school. But she caught herself thinking that some of the coats and skirts these kids wore were actually sort of cute.

"Hey, what gives?" Nikki said.

"What?" Gina asked.

“Do they get off early or what?” Nikki squinted her eyes at all the students that passed them by.

“I don’t think so,” Josie said. She looked at the time and realized that it was well before afterschool hours.

Nikki opened her mouth wide, the shock apparent on her face. “So then they’re *ditching?*”

“That must be it,” Gina said.

“What the hell? All of them? They’re not even trying to hide it!”

“But Nikki, you skipped school too,” Josie pointed out.

“What?” Nikki flushed. “I never. When?”

Josie rolled her eyes. “Like, all the time, Nikki. To get coffee?”

“Hey, I got coffee for you too. So don’t make me the bad guy.”

“Okay, but I’m just saying you did the same thing too, so don’t judge, ‘kay?”

Nikki smiled as if to say she got the point but still didn’t really agree and left it at that.

It was a wonder how they were able to walk so openly in their uniforms, but Josie was too busy avoiding the barrage of shoppers to come up with an idea about how they were able to do that without getting caught. It didn’t help that store workers were also in the streets.

They yelled in front of stores to lure in customers, pitching their various promotions and enticing sales of the day. A lot of these sales came in the form of something called “2+1,” which Josie understood as a simple term of “get two, get one free.” Similar deals could be seen for blocks on end with the same addition problem. Most of the clothes that lined the streets were also on sale for about ten-thousand won, which in American currency amounted to just under ten dollars—a pretty good deal, in Josie’s opinion.

Passing by sales people, Josie had to avert her eyes away from them to avoid attracting their attention, but this was difficult to do with so many of them on the streets. At least by the kiosks in the mall back home, Josie could just hide behind a shopper in front of her. But here, it seemed like all the workers knew where to position themselves. Some of the really fervent sales people not only shouted but also clapped loudly to grab the people's attention. There were those who also offered free face masks to those who passed by. Without thinking, Josie began raising her hands to take one until Nikki swiftly grabbed her arm.

"Hey, don't take the face masks," Nikki whispered. She continued holding Josie's arm firmly.

"How come?" Josie asked.

"If you take one, you're obligated to go in the store."

"What? Really?"

"I know, right? They're not exactly 'free,' so don't fall for it. I saw one time on a video of a girl being stopped when she took one. Almost looked like they were gonna drag her in."

"My God." Josie said. She was put out by the idea of it, but Josie supposed that it was the only way these businesses could survive. With so many brands being advertised in close proximity to each other, no doubt it was probably a competitive market. These stores needed to be sure to get as many customers as possible.

"Jo, watch it!" Before she knew it, Gina was yanking her arm to the side as a car honked its horn, whizzing passed them.

"Damn. Cars and people share the road, I guess. Crazy people." Nikki eyed down the car.

"Hey, Jo, you all right?" Gina asked.

“What? Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks,” Josie breathed. David’s body never physically made contact with the car he hit but it may as well have. It all probably happened before he knew what was going on, before he realized just how much he messed up. It was reckless, what David did. And his life ended before he could fight back.

“Why don’t we rest?” Gina suggested.

“What? Are you tired?” Nikki asked.

Gina gave a sharp stare to Nikki who was now pursing her lips. “What do you think, Jo?” Gina asked.

“It’s all right,” Josie replied, “I’m all right.”

Unconvinced, Gina eyed the smoothie stall near them. “You thirsty? I’m thirsty, let’s get something.”

After getting their drinks, the girls found an open bench and sat as they sipped their watermelon smoothies. Josie caught Nikki glancing at her with a worried look several times as they drank in silence but made as if she didn’t notice. It felt awkward bringing up David again after their fight. Josie couldn’t bring herself to, not after what Nikki said. Five years, Josie thought. Five years of talking about David and how sad and depressed she felt about not being able to see him again. It was no wonder Nikki felt frustrated. But she took it all in without saying anything. Nikki was more than happy to be a crutch, provide Josie with all the support she needed, but as reliable as they are, it seemed even crutches could break.

The girls headed into a clothing store afterwards, which played a medley of upbeat songs much too loud for it to be considered background noise. Reminded of the uniforms she saw earlier, Josie looked to a set of skirts in white, black, and beige, that were of similar fashion.

Josie usually wore a small and so she plucked the S-sized white skirt off the rack and headed toward the dressing room. On the way, she passed by Nikki who looked at her with a warm yet somewhat cautious smile. Nikki looked as if she wanted to say something but decided to keep walking. Josie tried on the skirt.

Finding Gina behind a clothing rack, Josie quickly trudged over to her.

“Hey, Gina. Umm, what size are you?” Josie whispered.

“Usually a small or medium,” Gina replied, “Depends on the material though. Why?”

Josie frowned. “Well, I just tried on the skirt and it’s way too small for me.”

“What? Really?” Gina reached in the skirt for the size tag. “But we’re like, the same size.” She looked at Josie’s waist and then at her own.

“You should try the medium.” Nikki approached them carrying her own set of skirts. “Maybe the large too. They like really small waists, I think.”

Josie felt frustration and then embarrassment. She was small for normal standards, at least back in Hawai‘i. In fact, she’d grown up hearing that she’d been too small. “Eat more!” or “Why you so thin?” were the things she’d heard so often that she never worried about being overweight. But for the first time in her life, Josie now actually felt conscious of her weight. She tried to suck in what little fat she had in her stomach.

Josie didn’t realize how clumsy her tongue had gotten until she was paying at the cash register. The worker was a woman in her mid-twenties who wore a neat bun and a warm-tone shade of pink on her lips. After handing her the cash, the woman said something too quick for Josie’s ears and had a look that warranted a reply.

“What was that?” Josie managed in Korean.

The woman repeated the question, but the words felt just as foreign to Josie the second time.

“What?” Josie asked again, feeling her face flush.

Now seeming to understand that Josie was a foreigner, the woman asked in English, “Would you like...” She paused.

Looking at her puzzled expression, Josie could tell the woman had limited knowledge of English, which made her feel even worse. Was she asking whether she wanted the clothes in a bag? Josie quickly played a guessing game in her head to plug in the word in question but felt at a loss for what the woman was asking for. Standing here, Josie felt the urge to say yes to everything the woman asked if it meant being able to leave.

“She wants to know if you want a receipt.”

Josie turned her head and saw Nikki behind her. She felt relieved.

“Dear customer?” the woman kindly said. “Would you like a receipt?”

“Ye—yes? Yes! Please give it to me.” As Josie received her purchase, she turned to Nikki and whispered, “Thanks.”

She smiled back. “No problem.”

Similar interactions at cash registers occurred a few more times that day, with some workers either being somewhat fluent in English and others who were only adept at Korean. The main issue for Josie was figuring out phrases that strayed from the standard cashier question. She now knew the word for *receipt*, so that wasn’t an issue. She also knew when they asked if she wanted her purchase in a bag. But sometimes she would unexpectedly be asked other things like

if she wanted to buy an additional item so that she could get a discount or whether she'd like a sample of something.

It was at times like these that she would try to make herself seem as American as possible and ask for clarification in English instead. Josie found that by doing this cashiers seemed to be somewhat more understanding and make an effort to accommodate her.

Josie felt grateful for having Nikki help her out during these moments, acting as her translator when needed, but she also couldn't help feeling a bit dejected each time that happened. Nikki was better at speaking the language than Josie, and she was only half-Korean. Josie knew that didn't really matter, but somehow she felt the expectation to be better at it because she was full Korean. She was feeling it again now with the cashier in front of her.

"Dear customer?"

"He's asking you to check the merchandise for any damages," Nikki whispered next to her.

The recognition in their eyes of Josie being a foreigner was strangely hurtful and bothered her each time it happened. She couldn't help being reminded of what David had told her when they were younger. "Why don't you try learn more Korean, Jo?" he'd asked. David had asked that teasingly, but it was something Josie never forgot. It was as if she had to justify herself in some way, that it wasn't her fault for forgetting their native language.

"Dear customer?"

Josie felt a lump in her throat as she checked the mug for any cracks. She looked back at the cashier to confirm it was in perfect condition.

"Thank you for shopping with us today. Have a nice day!"

Returning to their apartment, Josie felt relief as she shucked off her shoes in the doorway.

“Hey, thanks for today Nikki,” Josie said.

“It’s no biggie.” Nikki grinned. “They talk real fast, yeah?”

Josie smiled. “Yeah, they do.”

“You a little rusty, huh?”

Josie felt a slight prick. “Just a bit.” She smiled.

“Hey, I’m gonna hit the shower first. That okay whitchu?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Josie coughed and cleared her throat. “Go ahead.”

“You okay, Jo?”

When Josie looked at Nikki, she seemed to linger on these words, as if she was referring to something else. Was this the time? Was this the moment to finally talk about what happened?

“Nikki—” Josie coughed. “I wanted to—” An endless barrage seemed to be occurring within her throat, and Josie tried her best to forcefully stop the coughing fit.

“Hey Gina, you got some water?” Nikki called out.

“I’m fi—fine. My throat’s just been sore.”

“Here Jo, drink this.” Gina handed her a bottle.

Her throat seemed to calm down after drinking some water, but she could still feel a pain that did not fade.

“You okay?” Nikki asked.

Josie nodded her head.

“What were you trying to say earlier?”

“It’s nothing. I forgot what I was going to say. I’ll be in my room.”

Before falling asleep that night, Josie thought about Nikki, their fight, David, and Nikki again. And then she thought about her throat and her patchy face. The air was not being kind to her, she thought, despite the growing humidity. She wasn't sure she'd ever get used to it.

When Josie dreamed about vases again, she saw not the crash but the aftermath. The fragments were strewn on the wooden floor, some pieces large and others miniscule to the eye. She tried to pick up the pieces as gingerly as she could, but still found her hand nipped and scraped by sharp edges. She never had a dust pan in the dream and the fragments always seemed to be never-ending.

The stream of broken parts stretched along the hallway, and at a glance seemed beautiful. But as Josie crawled forward to reach the pieces, the blue and white turned into transparent glass, and she saw David's hand, bruised and bloodied, struggling to pick up the broken fragments. David always had rough hands, but they looked so fragile now, weak. Her eyes followed the scratch marks along his wrist, elbows, shoulders, and neck. But Josie couldn't see past that, couldn't see the expression on David's face that said he wanted it to be over.

Josie woke with a start, the crash of air hitting her lungs, and knocks came at her door.

"Jo? Jo, you awake?" Gina's voice called out.

"Ye—yeah, I am." Josie looked at the time. 9:00 AM. "You guys up already?"

"Nikki wanted to hit the stores as soon as they opened."

Josie chuckled. "All right, I'll be out."

The first store they decided to go to that day was a roadside shop that sold makeup. It was a brand that could be found on multiple blocks, which was something Josie noticed was true for many of the stores in the district. For every couple of yards, there were the same stores. There was nothing different about the stores in these different locations. No special promotions that could be found in one shop and not the other; they all sold the exact same products. Josie supposed this made it easy for visitors to find the stores they were looking for. Nikki and Gina, for one, were thrilled and would visit the same store just a few steps down the block whenever they forgot to buy something on their dreadfully long and ever-so detailed shopping list.

But despite the strangeness of it all, Josie did have to say that the makeup here was a lot cheaper compared to back home.

As she looked at the prices, the most expensive product was a bottle of foundation at around forty-thousand won. From there, the prices dropped, with items like eyeshadows and lipsticks for less than ten-thousand won, which was about three times cheaper than the prices Josie would have usually seen. Cosmetics were actually affordable here, but that probably meant a lot of girls were expected to put on makeup.

Josie noticed it too outside on the streets with all the high school girls she saw. Not one of them went without some kind of makeup. Josie could understand seeing working women having makeup on, but it was weird seeing girls her age look the same way. Maybe it was because a lot of girls in her school usually wore eyeliner, maybe some lip gloss, at the most. Other than that, most of the girls she knew normally went out bare-faced. Putting on too much makeup was actually strange back home, and the girls that did would get funny looks and questions like, "You going somewhere?" But here the opposite seemed to be true, that it was stranger to not wear makeup at all. This suddenly made Josie conscious of her lack of effort on

her face today. She didn't usually care about her face when she went outside, but somehow she felt naked now, as if she was being exposed to the world. She looked down at her shirt and now thought it was possibly the dumbest thing she could've chosen to wear. And worst of all, her hair. As she looked around her, there was hardly anyone with a head full of coarse, wavy hair. Curls were out, straight hair was in. Josie felt like covering her head with a thick hoodie.

“So, you see anything you like?” Gina asked.

“Yeah, surprisingly,” Josie said. “I might just buy a couple things since they're so cheap.” Josie walked around the store a couple times before finally deciding to get some mascara and sauntered to the line behind Nikki.

“Ooh, are you buying something? You usually never buy makeup.” Nikki said

“Well, I am today,” Josie replied proudly.

“Good for you. I gotta say—” Nikki was suddenly interrupted by a group of girls that entered the line behind Josie. They looked to be high schoolers, and although they were speaking at a quick pace, Josie was able to pick up most of their conversation.

“Hey, I was in line first!”

“Whatever, you darkie! You're so dark, you should be behind me. Isn't that right?”

“Hey, but you have a bigger head than I do! That's just as bad!”

“Oh, whatever! You should still be in the back of the line!” The girls laughed at one another as Josie stared with raised brows at Nikki who was busying herself with her phone. What was bizarre wasn't only what was said but the way they said it. The conversation sounded so normal. Josie felt her neck hairs prick up to take the place of cringing, which she didn't want to

do with the girls right behind her. Hearing them, Josie was suddenly reminded of the time David bought what seemed to be a year's worth of sunscreen and BB cream.

“Gotta keep protected from the sun, you know?” David had said.

“Since when do you care so much about that?” Josie had pointed out. When she looked at David's face, it was apparent that his skin was brighter after applying on some skincare products.

“Well, we live in Hawai‘i. I think it's time to make a change.” Josie remembered scoffing what he said. David couldn't have cared less about being “protected from the sun.” Josie laughed recalling this. Why the sudden change? After that, Josie could never figure it out, and she didn't bother asking about it again, as bizarre as she thought it was. He'd wear caps a lot during that time, and even though he'd say it was because of the sun, Josie always thought there was something more that he didn't say.

It was weird thinking about David being in a similar conversation with his own group of guy friends, comparing their skin color. But maybe David did feel self-conscious about his skin. He was more dark-skinned from being outside often. David was part of the soccer team and he'd always liked going to the beach whenever he could. And maybe that was it. Josie knew David was the more “Korean” one between the two of them. Despite his darker skin, his being fluent in their native tongue definitely made him more Korean than Josie who could barely maintain a conversation. But maybe David thought differently about it.

“Oh, man,” Josie whispered.

“What they say?” Nikki asked.

Josie paused and taken aback at what she was about to say. “They were joking about how one of the girls should be in the back since she's so dark-skinned.”

Nikki gasped. “Not even.”

“It’s true.”

“Damn, that’s really messed up,” Nikki said.

“I know.”

“I mean, I knew they liked fair skin but I didn’t think you’d get called out for being a darker shade. Man, Koreans.”

Josie scrunched her face. “What do you mean?”

“Like, it’s pretty sad that Koreans only want light skin. Disappointing, if you ask me.”

Somehow, Josie found herself more irritated than she wanted to be with Nikki. She agreed with Nikki’s point that fair skin wasn’t everything, but the way she said it was a bit cold.

“Nikki.”

“What? It’s true.”

“But I don’t think that’s something you should actually say.”

“Why? I’m part Korean too. I can say this kind of stuff.”

The two of them fell silent, as the girls behind them continued laughing, oblivious to what was ensuing in front of them.

“You have something you wanna say?” Nikki blurted out.

“What?” Josie replied, taken aback.

“I can tell you want to say something. I can tell you’ve been wanting to say something this whole trip.”

“Nikki—”

“Isn’t it true, though?”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Gina, having sensed the commotion, approached them.

“I’ll be outside.” Nikki dumped the items she was holding onto in a basket near the cash register and rushed to the exit.

“What happened?” Gina asked.

Josie sighed. “Same thing that happened before Graduation.”

The rest of the day was carried out in silence between her and Nikki, with any communication that needed to be done exchanged through Gina. They decided to visit a massive clothing store with multiple floors. In some ways, this made it easier to create a distance from Nikki who would be off on another section of the store. She knew Nikki wouldn’t want to talk to her until she was ready, which Josie was fine with since she wasn’t really sure what to say to her either. She only hoped that their silence wouldn’t last as long as it did the first time. Josie then felt guilty toward Gina for being stuck in the middle of something she didn’t ask to be involved in. She felt worse knowing the fact that Gina had to go through it not once but twice. Josie gave Gina an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry,” Josie whispered.

Gina shrugged. “It’s all right.”

They spent a few more hours shopping store to store until the day became late. The signs and buildings started to light up with the setting of the sun, and countless vendors began wheeling in their carts to serve street food for night shoppers. With a number of restaurants nearby, the girls decided to eat dinner at a well-known Korean yakiniku place. Josie and Nikki didn’t exchange glances for the duration of the dinner, despite sitting next to each other, and ate silently, listening to Gina talking about her purchases.

“Should we call it a day?” Gina asked. The exhaustion was starting to creep in on her face, the under-eye circles, and Josie knew the tension between her and Nikki was starting to affect Gina also.

“All right. I’m fine with that,” Josie replied.

“Me too. Let’s go back,” Nikki said curtly.

Despite the bustling life of the streets around them, the girls walked toward the train station in awkward silence, not quite knowing what to do.

It was nightfall by the time they returned to the apartment, and Josie never felt more glad for having a room to herself than at this moment. She stripped off her damp socks, threw her bag to the floor, and fell into her mattress with a heavy sigh. Josie wasn’t sure how she and Nikki were going to fix things. Whatever effort they put in to temporarily repair their friendship was falling apart now.

“Hey Jo.” Gina peeked her head in the room. “You doing all right?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Josie replied. “I’m exhausted.”

“Me too.” Gina paused and seated herself on the mattress, which sank with a squeaky groan. “So, are you going to talk to her?”

“You know Nikki. She’s not going to talk to me until she feels like it.”

“That’s true.”

“So, how is she?”

Gina shrugged. “Well she’s just organizing her things. Other than that, she’s been pretty quiet. I can’t really tell what’s going on in her head.”

“Hmm, sounds like Nikki.”

As if to say something, Gina opened her mouth. But she couldn't seem to find the right words, she pursed her lips and said, "It's going to be okay, Jo."

"I hope so."

"Well, know that I'm here for you too. Okay?"

Josie smiled. "Thanks, Gina."

"No problem. Good night, Jo."

"Night."

Gina clicked the door closed gently as she left. Josie appreciated Gina's efforts, but the thought did begin to form in her mind whether Nikki was talking about her outside. After all, they were friends long before Josie came into the picture. But Josie decided to do away with the thought entirely and felt guilty afterwards for even considering it. There was a reason they were friends for this long.

Josie had seen many of her friends break up in their last year of school, and it only took something simple as a rumor twisted into something nasty and untrue to dissolve whatever bridges were forged between them. So the three of them had an honest discussion early on and agreed that anything that needed to be talked about would be brought up when they were together. But after her first fight between Nikki, Josie realized just how hard that was to do.

It was easy up until that point. Most of the issues they had were usually resolved in a few minutes with a few apologies, while anything involving something Nikki said was usually forgotten with a witty joke and a laugh. And Josie supposed she should have expected this, expected that the uneasy feeling she got every time Nikki made a move to sweep her words under a rug would become a problem, and now it was all coming to a head. Nikki couldn't sweep this under the rug and the both of them knew it.

As Josie sat thinking in her bed, she came away with no clear solution of what to do. After a deep sigh, she typed in a number and called her mother. She picked up in three rings.

“Hi honey, how are you?”

“I’m good, Mom. Sorry for calling so late. You’re still up?”

“I am! I was just watching my drama.”

Josie chuckled. “Is it any good?”

“It sure is. You should watch it when you come back. So, what you do so far?”

“This and that. Mostly shopping.”

“You got anything nice?”

“Yeah, I just bought a few things. It’s pretty cheap here.”

“Of course! You should spend some more money there. So expensive here, that’s why.”

“I’ll do that, Mom.” Josie chuckled. “So are you all packed up?”

“I’m almost done. I been so busy doing this and that. Driving me crazy!”

Josie laughed. “So you’ll call me when you get here?”

“Yep! My flight doesn’t arrive till later, so don’t worry.”

“All right.”

“What’s the weather like, honey?”

“The weather? Well, it’s a bit chilly right now

“By the way, how are your friends? They doing all right?”

This was what Josie was waiting for, but when she opened her mouth she found herself unable to say what she wanted to say. “Yeah,” Josie managed, “They’re fine, Mom.”

“Oh that’s good. Well, tell them I said have a good time!”

“I will.”

“See you soon!”

When the phone clicked, Josie felt a sense of comfort at having heard her mother’s voice. Josie checked her phone one last time before going to sleep. And when she finally fell into a slumber, she dreamed about David.

It was a Friday afternoon the day they came back from their trip. It was business as usual on the H1 freeway, traffic for miles. Her mother’s brows were furrowed, running deep lines across her forehead as she focused on the road ahead of her and the take-out boxes filled with their dinner in the seat next to her. Josie sat in the back seat with David and listened to him breathe slowly. In then out. David always got carsick, especially when traffic was bad and he sat in the backseat.

“Wow,” David breathed. “Traffic sucks.”

“I know. You feeling okay?”

“I mean, the subway was so much faster. Why don’t we have that?” David frowned. “I can’t wait to go back—” He paused.

Josie looked into David’s eyes and saw the look of someone who’d been exposed.

“David, go back where?” There was something that looked like a sense of guilt in his eyes, almost apologetic. David looked down as Josie kept her gaze on him. The two fell silent and eventually looked to the flitting landscape outside their windows.

When she turned to look at her brother again, she saw only his longing as he stared at the window. It seemed as if any minute David would fly off out the window go somewhere far away. She knew it then that the day would come when David would leave this place. This “rock,” as he

too often called it as of late, and Josie knew where he would be headed. And on that day when David would leave, he would never come back. In the end, it seemed David got his wish, but not in the way he or anyone else had ever planned, bound for home.

The sun rays blared more than usual that morning, their intense heat beaming through the curtains. As usual, Gina was up, doing her makeup. Josie stood at the foot of her bed and was mesmerized. She'd always watch in passing, but she never took the time to watch her, really watch her, and this time she did.

Gina's face was like a canvas waiting to be filled. With practiced hands, Gina began layering on foundation and concealer, which made her face look even more flawless and natural. It looked as if her face now glowed. Gina took great care to conceal her blemishes and acne marks that still lingered on her cheeks and her forehead. She then began drawing her eyebrows, filling in hairs as naturally as possible. Most of the girls here drew their brows straight to soften their appearance but Gina followed the natural curve of her brows, tracing a gentle arch.

As Gina began bringing color to her eyes, she looked at Josie and said, "You can use, if you like." She moved her pouch closer to Josie, some of its contents spilling onto the mattress.

"You sure?" Josie asked.

"Sure! Go for it."

Josie didn't particularly care for makeup herself and didn't bring any on this trip save for a stick of lip gloss. When she did wear makeup, she liked putting on eyeliner to define her grey-colored eyes. She did this mostly when she had to perform in her school band. And on especially important days, she might have worn some lip gloss for added effect. Otherwise, she didn't put

on makeup every day like Gina or Nikki and didn't feel the need to. But then she thought of the women she saw the day before and how well put-together they seemed. She never felt so bare, naked in front of so many people. Josie reached for the eyeliner and traced her eyes.

The skies were the clearest they had ever been, clear enough to convince Josie into thinking that there was nothing wrong. Josie's throat was so sore that it made her wonder whether she'd gotten a cold, but that was impossible. Josie hardly got sick. She was the type of person who was either completely healthy or sick to the point of puking for days. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd gotten a cold. Josie drank some water and when Gina came by and complained of a sore throat, Josie knew they had to go shop for masks. The air, it seemed, was becoming thick with dust, although Josie couldn't tell the difference by sight alone.

Interestingly, when they entered the store, there were entire shelves dedicated to masks, ranging in differing shades, shapes, and styles. Josie also decided to grab a bag of cough drops and another tube of lip balm. At the rate Josie was rubbing them on her lips, she was going to need a lot of lip product. Finding the cough drops surprisingly proved to be a bit of a challenge. She browsed the aisles several times before realizing she had been looking at them the whole time. Quite literally translated as "throat candy," Josie had only fixated on the last half of the name and mistaken it as purely confection.

With her items in hand, Josie walked over to pay and momentarily caught Nikki's glance in front of her. As if unsure whether to acknowledge each other, the two of them stood in silence. Josie smiled to try to lessen the tension, but Nikki stood expressionless, motioning for Josie to go first. Josie felt her stomach heave then.

As they had yesterday, Josie and Nikki spent the day apart. Josie tried at several times to get Nikki's attention but found her efforts unsuccessful. As they walked throughout the day, Gina acted as a sort of physical buffer between the two, walking in between them and talking to fill the silence. Josie found it strange and discomfoting not hearing a word from Nikki. It wasn't like her to be so reclusive.

Making purchases proved to be a much easier task for Josie today, with fewer confused looks and use of English. She had a better grasp of the questions after hearing them so many times and it became less awkward for her to ask for clarification in Korean when it was necessary. It was a small achievement, but Josie felt a sense of fulfillment at what she was now able to do. And she felt glad about putting on makeup for today. She didn't feel as bare as she did before. Unconsciously, Josie bit her moistureless lips and winced when she tasted a hint of blood. Sensing the trail of iron, her lips and throat ached, and so she reached for her packet of cough drops and lip balm. They mitigated the pain somewhat, although Josie wasn't sure just how much they made it better.

It was twilight by the time they got back, and Nikki quickly made her advance in retrieving her clothes and heading for the shower, avoiding Josie's eyes as she did so.

"It's going to be okay, Jo," Gina said, rubbing Josie's arm tenderly.

Josie sighed. "Thanks. I'll be in my room if you need me."

"All right you get some rest for tomorrow. It's a long trip, right?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Are you sure you don't want us to come?"

Josie thought about it, about how she would bring it up to Nikki, and then shook her head. "I'm sure. But thank you."

Josie looked to her suitcase and got out her dress for the next day, setting it aside neatly, and then called her mother.

"Hi honey, how's it going?"

"I'm fine. We just got back to the apartment."

"Are you sure? How come your voice sound like that?" she asked.

"It's nothing to worry about. My throat's just been sore."

"Oh, no! Have you been wearing a mask? I told you you're going to need one for the trip."

"I know, Mom. I bought one today."

"Good." Her mother paused. "So, I wanted to talk to you about something."

"What is it?" Josie asked.

"It turns out my flight's been delayed, so you'll have to go to your aunt's house tomorrow on your own. Do you think you can do that?"

Josie panicked for a moment. She felt confident enough to find her way around the city by herself but not the countryside. From what she remembered, the countryside was mostly made up of older people who hardly knew a word of English, which meant that she had to be particularly accurate with her Korean. It had been five years since she'd gone back. How was she going to be able to find her aunt's house? She felt her breath quicken.

"Josie, honey?"

"Mom, I don't know if I can do this."

“That’s all right, honey,” her mother assured her. “I’ll tell you how to get there.”

“No, I mean—” Josie breathed. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Do you not want to go back, honey?” Concern edged her mother’s voice.

“It’s not that.” Josie found herself unable to find the words to explain

“It doesn’t have to be today, Josie. You know that right? You know that your dad and I still love you even if you don’t go.”

Josie exhaled. She knew her mother meant it. She was sad, but in a way relieved of Josie not having come back the last few years and never forced her to go. When Josie told her their plans of making this trip, her mother couldn’t have been more somber. Yet maybe she felt it was time for her to return, and so she helped save however much money she could for her daughter. Josie knew that. “I’ll be there. I’m going.”

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow then. I love you, honey.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

When she hung up the phone, Josie looked once more at the clothes she set aside. And with a heavy breath she lay down, thinking of the day to come, thinking of the people she had not seen in so long.

When she dreamed of vases again, Josie was already picking up the pieces, one by one. As she plucked the fragments from the floor, Josie looked into her hands and saw that they were unscratched, turning them over to each side. It didn’t hurt anymore, and so Josie grabbed the

pieces by the handful, holding them without concern. She followed the river of blue and white down the hallway and expected to see David at its end. But David wasn't there, nor were the pieces. For once in her dreams, Josie had recovered them all.

When Josie finished getting ready, she rechecked the directions she had gotten from her mother and checked the room for anything she'd forgotten. She didn't bother with makeup this time and headed out to the door, seeing Gina and Nikki on the way there.

"Hey, so I'll see you guys later."

"You're leaving already?" Gina asked.

"Yeah, I want to be sure to get there on time."

"Do you want us to come with you?" Nikki asked. She looked at Josie, her eyes gentle. It felt like ages since Nikki had spoken to her.

"It's all right, you guys don't have to. I'll be fine. I might be a little late though coming back since it's in the countryside."

"Are you sure?" Nikki asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Okay, Jo. Tell your folks we said hi."

"I will. And... thanks." Josie smiled.

This time, Nikki smiled back and walked towards her, wrapping her arms around Josie. "Jo," she whispered. "I'm so, so sorry." Nikki's voice quivered.

Josie smiled through forming tears.

"Come back to us, okay?"

“I will. I’ll see you.”

Once when they had gone to the country side, David had complained about how boring it all was, and in many ways it was true, especially for someone like David who thrived on doing things like watching videos and playing video games. There was no internet at their relative’s home, and the television they had was small enough to fit inside a microwave. Any kids that lived in their family’s neighborhood were few and seemingly hidden from view. Aside from cousins, Josie couldn’t remember seeing other kids around their age. But at one point during their trips, they would always return to the countryside where their grandparents and great grandparents were from.

The train ride felt prolonged and Josie couldn’t help falling asleep in her seat, dozing off to the rhythmic *taka taka* of the train. But Josie knew from the moment she opened her eyes when she was finally out of the city. There were no towering buildings in the country side, only bounding fields, roads, and houses. It was a quaint sight compared to the lit and bustling city filled with young people. Here, many of the passengers were around either her parents or grandparents’ age.

The train itself was an older model, which was something she would soon observe about the train station as well. Her train stopped with a heavy screech and Josie rose with an overstretched yawn to exit the car. This was Josie’s first time riding the train out of the city as her family would normally journey to the countryside by car, and so she found herself a bit bewildered at the scene before her.

Everything from the directions and signs to the walls and platforms were heavily worn from age, their colors ashed over with a grayish tint. Josie found it unusual and almost unsettling

getting off at a stop with hardly any people around, which was something she wasn't expecting. She found the feeling of being next to people shoulder to shoulder inconvenient and more often than not stressful, but the lack of human bodies was just as disquieting and gave the train station an eerie atmosphere.

"Josie." A familiar voice called out from behind her.

"Dad?" Josie's father stood, his hands in his jean pockets, with a wide grin on his face. It was the same playful grin David had worn. But despite his cheeriness, Josie could tell her father had aged from the last time she'd seen him. One of the things her father had taken pride in was his particularly youthful face. Her mother had admitted she was envious of it at some point. Looking closer now, Josie could see the lines that set deep in his face, the crow's feet that marked his smiling eyes. There was a weariness that wasn't there even after David died. But maybe he had always felt this way, and the passing years had finally taken their toll.

"Hey, honey. You made it." Her father scooped her in his arms and held her in a tight embrace.

"I didn't know you were picking me up."

"Your Mom called. Figured it was better to be safe than have you get lost."

"Thanks, Dad."

"It's good seeing you, Jo. You've gotten so much older since I last saw you, you know that?"

"Well, you did too, Dad." Josie grinned.

Her father let out a hearty laugh. "Let's go. Your family's waiting."

Her aunt's house was a simple one, containing two bedrooms and a small TV. There was no internet here but plenty of mosquitoes that seemed to find their way inside. The house was surrounded by greenery, by large trees that were most likely planted years before Josie was born and a garden that appeared to be growing some sort of vegetables. As she approached the house, she could smell the scent of food cooking inside, a mixture of doenjang-jjigae, fried fish, and other savory dishes.

“Min-ji-ah! You're here!” A voice came from inside. Soon enough, her aunt opened the door, hurrying out to give her a tight hug. Her embrace was strong and practically lifted her off the ground. “Long time no see. Why didn't you come visit in so long?”

“Sorry Imo,” Josie smiled awkwardly. “I'm here now.”

“Did you eat? It was a long ride from Seoul wasn't it? Come in, come in!” Her aunt wrapped her arms around Josie's shoulders and led her inside. As soon as Josie entered, she saw a table topped with bowls of rice, stew, and a dizzying assortment of meats and side dishes ranging from kimchi and braised potatoes to bean sprouts, seasoned spinach, and steamed perilla leaves.

Soon, a number of her family members began trickling in. She remembered a few of them, namely her uncles and other aunts. She remembered that her mother's side of the family was large in comparison to her father's. Josie wasn't even sure her father knew every one of these relatives. Before she knew it, the house became crowded with moving bodies and hearty laughter around the table. Josie quickly found herself getting stuffed but found it impossible to turn away food her aunt kept putting into her rice bowl.

After they finished eating, Josie followed her father outside to a nearby lake. The lake itself wasn't anything spectacular. But what made it special were the myriad of dragonflies that could be found here.

"You remember coming here when you were younger?" her father asked. "I bet it's too far back for you to remember anything."

"I do remember! We'd visit here all the time."

Josie's father laughed. "Is that so?"

"It's true!"

"Okay, if you say so." As he continued laughing, hints of red glinted near him. Josie looked around her at the dozens of dragonflies that flit about in the air.

"There are so many!"

"I used to catch these, you know, when I was younger?"

"Really?"

"Yeah, that's what we'd do as kids here. Sometimes by the pond, there'd be swarms of them, and I'd catch them with my hands just like that." He clapped his hands swiftly but gently.

"Hey Dad, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why did you decide to come back?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why move here? Why not stay in Hawai'i?"

"Well, for a couple of reasons. Your dad is an old man now, and you know most of our family is here in Korea." Josie's father took a breath. "I missed it here. I missed home."

"But what about Hawai'i? Isn't that home too?"

“It is, Josie. It always will be. But Korea is my home too. And as much I loved it in Hawai‘i, the weather, the people, I needed to come back.”

“Do you like it better here, Dad?”

“It’s different, for sure. I’m sure you’ve realized that too coming back again after so long.” Josie nodded. “But it’s where I grew up and where I feel the most comfortable.”

“We’re all here!” Josie’s aunt called out from behind them.

When Josie turned around, her aunt was not only accompanied by other family members but also her mother.

“Mom,” Josie said.

“Hey honey, I’m here.” She held her in tender embrace.

“Shall we start?” her aunt said.

Josie’s mother took hold of her left hand as her father took her right, and the rest of her family gathered around the mounds, also hand in hand.

“Let us now pray,” her aunt began. “Dear Heavenly Father, we are gathered here today, along with Josie and her mother who took the long journey here, to pay our respects to Min-Ho who has left us much too early.” She paused. “He was so young and so full of promise, but we live in comfort knowing he is in your presence. Please take care of him, Lord. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.”

Josie didn’t realize it but at some point she had begun crying. She thought about David and how he would probably make fun of her now if he saw her. She was an ugly crier, not like those actors in dramas who somehow made even sadness to be something beautiful.

“Hey, Jo.”

When Josie turned around she saw Nikki followed by Gina just behind her.

“What are you guys doing here? I told you guys it was okay.” Josie suddenly found herself covering her face. She’d never cried in front Nikki.

“We know.”

“How did you guys even find the house?”

“We called your Mom up,” Gina said. “Left not too long ago after you.”

Josie went to each of them and wrapped her arms around them.

“Thank you. Both of you.”

“You miss him a lot still, don’t you?” Nikki asked.

“I do,” Josie said. “Every day.”

They stood still in their tight embrace a little while longer as dragonflies surrounded them.

The girls’ last day involved a lot of last-minute packing, checking and re-checking for all of their belongings, and waiting. Nikki and Gina actually took a shorter time getting ready, most likely because being on time for their flight was more important, and quickly put away the last of their things in their bags. They wore their most comfortable clothes and even skipped putting on most of their makeup. Josie did the same also, making sure she at least looked half-way decent. She dabbed on some foundation, for what it was worth, and did a quick comb-through of her lashes with the mascara she bought and left her face at that. As for her feet, Josie didn’t care about wearing her nice pair of sneakers and decided to wear the slippers she’d put on in the bathroom instead. Within a few minutes, the girls were stepping out of their apartment.

“Ready?” Gina asked.

“Yep. Still can’t believe we’re going back now,” Josie said.

“Yeah, same,” Nikki agreed. She looked at Josie and smiled. “As awesome as this trip was, I’m kinda glad we’re going back.”

The girls rolled their luggage down the hallway into the elevators and headed toward the station for their last train ride. The skies were more gray than she’d ever seen them during their trip, the sight of it reminding her of the soreness in her throat. It began to drizzle slightly, the drops pattering, and Josie fell asleep during the flight, dreaming about David and his grin and laughter.

Exiting the plane, Josie immediately felt the humidity that permeated the air. It was hard to imagine that she had ever been used to this feeling of murkiness. Her entire body felt as if she was covered in a thin veil of warm gel that seemed to attach her skin and clothes. She felt the urge to go back in the plane with its cool, parched air. But the thought escaped her as she thought of the blue and white that awaited outside.

The skies appeared brighter than she remembered, the trees’ hues richer and somehow more green. The sight before her was so intensely bright that she felt her eyes instinctively squint. Where the sleepless city had its shades of greys and oranges the island offered lush rainbows of emeralds and azures. But even with this welcoming sight, Josie couldn’t seem to shed the murkiness that surrounded her body even later that night when Josie rested in her bed. For the first time in a long while she didn’t dream about vases. She didn’t dream about their infinite pieces. And she didn’t dream about David, and for once she didn’t wake with a start, only waking to a warmth that lingered.