

Korea

That summer Owen, Justin, Sean, Sonia and I lived together in a house we sublet near campus. I had an internship with the Nashville newspaper. Sean was working as a research assistant for a professor. Sonia and Justin were waiting tables, as was Owen, who was also working an unpaid internship at a small record label. We were all working hard, shopping for groceries and paying the rent, but it nevertheless felt like we were playing house. Sonia in particular really enjoyed cooking dinner and setting the dining room table like we were a family. Sonia and I were supposed to be sharing a room, but all that meant was that I kept my clothes in her closet. I slept in Owen's room. Sonia slept alone.

My parents were in South Korea, where my father had been stationed, and at the beginning of July I was to go for a two-week visit. The night before I left, I was packing in Sonia's room while she watched me, cross-legged on the bed. "How many times have I watched you pack?" she said, more a remark than a question.

"Lots," I said. For the third time I counted the number of pairs of underwear in the bag.

"Do you think you'll have fun?"

I shrugged. "It'll be interesting."

"I wish I was going with you," she said.

"Really?"

"I wish I wasn't staying here," she said. She threw out an arm dramatically, to indicate not just our house but the whole town, the lack of a boyfriend, the crappy waitressing job.

"You'll be fine," I said. "I'll bring you back a present."

"You should sleep in here tonight," she said.

I stopped packing and looked at her. "Why?"

She shrugged, playing with her fingers. "I don't know," she said. She had made the suggestion with certainty but now she sounded unsure. "You're supposed to be living with me."

I laughed. "Maybe you could arm wrestle Owen for me."

She smiled and let it drop. I spent the night with Owen.

My grandmother arrived in Korea the day after I did, and she and I and my mother went on a week-long tour organized by the Department of Defense. One of the first places we went was the DMZ. I remember a long ride, over bumpy roads, through dense greenery. Every once in a while I glimpsed a line of

wire among the trees. We had been required to dress up. Our government didn't want the North Koreans to see us in shorts or jeans.

Once there, the young soldier who was our guide had further instructions. "Do not gesture or wave," he said. "They will take pictures of you for propaganda and say your gesture is obscene. Remember that you are representatives of the United States."

I had never really considered myself in this light before. When people at college asked me where I was from, I often said, "Nowhere." But the North Koreans didn't care what state I grew up in. To them I was just a giant of an American, prone to obscene gestures and the wearing of tennis shoes.

As we filed across the compound, the guide told us that the impressive North Korean headquarters was just a façade, built in competition with the building on our side. When we looked over the border into North Korea, across the lush green fields we could see the outlines of a village. "Fake," the guide said. "It's a propaganda village. No one lives there." I stared at the curved roof of a house, still expecting to see movement. A sign proclaimed that South Korea was a puppet of the imperialist United States.

"It's like a movie set," I said to my mother.

"It really is," she agreed.

Inside the meeting hall there was a table with microphones in the center. The cord that bisected the table was, the guide said, the border. "During the peace talks," he said, "we sat on this side, and they sat on that side. Now." He grinned. "Who wants to cross the border?"

Giggling nervously, an older woman in church clothes led the way around the table. We followed her. Standing in North Korea, I had an uneasy, ready-to-run feeling, like I was about to be arrested. I thought, for some reason of Sonia, and as I did I had a pang of guilt for refusing to spend even one night in the room that was supposed to be ours. I wondered how she was doing. I felt a worry I couldn't explain. My grandmother was asking the guide questions about the war to which she already knew the answers. My mother whispered, "Look."

I followed her eyes. Pressed to the small square windows that lined the building were the faces of North Korean soldiers. They didn't look angry. Their faces, for the most part, were blank beneath their stiff caps. But they looked at us as though they couldn't look away, and once I saw them there, I couldn't look away either. I didn't experience any communion with them, their unfamiliar uniforms, their unsmiling faces. Instead I felt my own foreignness more strongly than I ever had in my life. Nothing about me was normal.

I was so strange that even though they could see me on the other side of the glass, they couldn't believe I was real.

My grandfather had been killed in the early days of the Korean War. He was standing by a river, looking at something through binoculars, when a sniper shot him. As we rode the train to the southern part of the peninsula, I stared out the window at green mountains, workers in the rice paddies, all of it so much what I had expected to see and yet somehow so startling. My grandmother tried to remember the name of the river where my grandfather had been killed. She asked our various guides. She consulted maps. She grew increasingly frustrated.

On the last night of the tour, we were back north in Seoul. We went to a dinner in a hotel. They announced that Korean War veterans on the tour would be honored with certificates. We were sitting at a table with five other people, strangers we had never spoken to until that night. "My husband was a veteran," my grandmother said loudly to them.

One of them, an older man, nodded at her politely.

"And we're off," my mother said under her breath. "All it takes is one glass of wine."

"He was killed," my grandmother said, "beside a river."

"What river?" the man asked. "I'm a veteran."

"I don't know." My grandmother's voice was shaky. "I seem to have gotten the name wrong."

"You should go tell them," the man's wife said. She pointed at the organizers up by the podium. "They should give you a certificate."

My grandmother nodded. She had a fierceness to her. She didn't pause to debate the question. She pushed herself to her feet and marched over to a man in Army dress uniform.

My mother sighed. She sipped her own glass of wine. She never talked much about her father, who was killed when she was only one. I watched my grandmother gesture as she talked to the officer. He was nodding, frowning slightly. "I wonder what it would have been like," I said, "if he had lived."

"What what would have been like?" my mother asked. Her voice was sharp.

"Their relationship, you know. Would she have still loved him this much?"

"I don't know," my mother said softly. "Don't ask her that."

My grandmother came back to the table. She sat down with an air of satisfaction and whipped her napkin open across her lap.

"All taken care of?" my mother asked.

“They’re going to give me a certificate,” she said.

My mother nodded. There was a silence for a moment. Then my mother suddenly said, “Here’s to love.” She lifted her glass. I couldn’t tell if she was being ironic.

“To love,” my grandmother said. She was once-widowed, twice-divorced. Two of her four children were now also divorced. Within two years, my own parents’ split would make it three out of four, besting the national average.

“To love,” I said. I think we meant it. We clinked our glasses together.

When we got back up to the room, there was a message from my father. He had been trying to reach us for three days. Sonia had called for me. Her father had had a heart attack, walking between his office and his car. He was dead.

I couldn’t get to New Mexico in time for the funeral. I would have gone to Clovis anyway, but when I finally reached Sonia from Korea, the day after the funeral, she told me in a dull voice that she was headed back to Tennessee. “I don’t like it here,” she said, like a child.

“Sonia, I’m so sorry I’m not with you,” I said.

“Oh,” she began, but then she just let her voice trail away.

When I hugged my own father goodbye in the airport, I said, as I had been planning to all the way to Seoul, “Love ya, Dad.” It had been some time since I’d said I loved him, and I felt self-conscious about even this casual version.

“What’s the matter?” he said. “Are you afraid I’m going to die?”

I stepped back. “Yeah,” I said.

He grinned at me and squeezed my shoulder. “Someday,” he said. “Not today.”

All the way back to America, I thought of Mr. Gray. I wanted to know, but had known I couldn’t ask, at precisely what moment Sonia’s father had died, at precisely what moment she had heard. I couldn’t stop thinking that, if I could pinpoint those moments, I could map them against my own state of mind, thoughts of Sonia that had arrived unbidden, like when I felt worried at the DMZ. Somehow it seemed to me that if I had been thinking of her at the moment when she first knew, then my own guilt at not having been there would be lessened.

I felt oddly nervous waiting to get off the plane. The flight had been long, and I hadn’t slept much, and I had that groggy disorientation that comes with

traveling between countries, and being off the earth for hours. But that wasn't why I was almost afraid to see Sonia. I hoped, and felt disloyal for hoping, that she wouldn't be there with Owen to pick me up. I was worried I wouldn't be able to rouse myself to provide the support and comfort I knew she would need.

But when I came through the gate and scanned the crowd waiting there, I saw no one I knew. I felt lost, standing there searching the faces again and again. "Excuse me," a man behind me said, and I realized I was blocking traffic. I followed everybody else to the baggage claim. I thought I saw Owen running toward me, but it was someone else's boyfriend. He jogged past me to sweep another girl into a hug.

I stood in a daze beside the baggage conveyor and watched the belt go round and round. My bag passed me, and I chased it along the belt, bumping into people. I was so addled it didn't occur to me that it would come round again.

When Owen finally arrived, he found me trying not to fall asleep on a bench near the doors, my head propped up on my hand. "Hi," I said.

He stood at a cautious distance. "Don't be mad," he said.

I shook my head to let him know I wasn't. "Do you know with the time difference it's still the same day I left Korea? It's like I went back in time."

"Well, you didn't," he said. He reached for my bag. "Come on, let's go."

"What, no kiss?" I said. He bent swiftly to kiss me on the forehead. "Let's go," he said again. He hoisted my bag, ignoring me when I said it had wheels, and strode off, full of purpose. I lagged behind. He was making me feel even more tired.

In the car I leaned my head against the window and closed my eyes while he negotiated the parking garage and paid the attendant. Once we were on the highway I turned to look at him. "How's Sonia?"

He shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"I thought she might come with you."

He shook his head. "She wanted to pick you up. That's why I was late."

"I don't understand."

"We were arguing about it."

I laughed. "Why couldn't you both come?"

He shrugged again.

"So tell me what happened."

He gave me a weird look. "What do you mean?"

"How did she find out about her father?"

"Her mother called," he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, what?”

“Tell me what happened.”

He sighed. “We were all watching TV. The guys were. And then she called us into the kitchen to show us that somebody had loaded the dishwasher wrong. The glasses were right side up, so they were all full of dirty water. She took one out and she was holding it, and that’s when the phone rang. Justin gave it to her. I don’t know why, we all just stood there watching her like we knew something was up. She said, ‘What?’ and she had this really weird look on her face, like she was trying not to laugh. Then we could hear her mother screaming, but not what she was saying, and Sonia just kept saying, ‘What? What?’ She let the glass in her hand turn over and all this water spilled and she didn’t even notice. She gave me the phone, and she walked out of the room. Okay?”

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Poor Sonia,” I said.

“It was awful,” he said. “She totally freaked out. Not that she didn’t have a reason to, but . . . She was in her room throwing all her clothes on the bed, going on and on about how she had nothing to wear. She couldn’t deal with the plane ticket, so I just had to do it. Justin and Sean didn’t know what to do. I had to put the ticket on my dad’s credit card.”

“I’m sure she’ll pay you back,” I said.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” he said. “I’m just saying it was awful. She kept wanting me to call you, and I tried over and over. She even came and woke me up in the middle of the night wanting me to call you. But I couldn’t get you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But thanks for taking care of her. I know she’s not always your favorite person.”

“I couldn’t get you,” he said again, like he was angry about it. “You weren’t here.”

When we got back to the house, it was eerily quiet. I couldn’t remember a weekend afternoon since we had moved in when the television hadn’t been on, Owen and Justin and Sean camped out in front of a sporting event, Justin eating Cool Whip out of the container with a spoon. But Justin and Sean weren’t home, and the door to Sonia’s bedroom was closed. Owen dropped my bag beside the couch and disappeared into his room without a word. I knocked on Sonia’s door, and then, when there was no answer, I opened it.

I thought at first she was sleeping. The bed had that tangled look of not having been made in days. Sonia's hair was a mess. There were pillow lines across her cheek. I straightened out the blanket, and Sonia opened her eyes and looked at me. "I'm not sleeping," she said.

I sat beside her and smoothed her hair back from her face.

"I just don't want to get out of bed," she said. "That's normal, right?"

I nodded.

"This isn't working out," she said.

"What's not?"

She shook her head and pushed herself up to a sitting position. "How was your trip?" she said.

"Fine."

She nodded slowly. "Did you bring me a present?"

"Of course," I said.

"I knew you would," she said.

I hugged her. "I'm so sorry," I said.

She didn't sob against my shoulder, as I expected she would. Instead she patted my back and pulled away. She smoothed the blanket across her lap. "The funeral was nice," she said.

"I'm glad."

"Well, really, I don't know," she said. "I wasn't there for all of it."

"Oh." I caught her hand. She squeezed mine, and again pulled away.

"It was an open casket," she said. "And his mustache was gone. I guess he shaved it this summer. No one ever told me."

I nodded. I didn't know what to say.

"Someone had to carry me out," Sonia said. "I don't even know who it was. My mother said I'd been very rude." Now her voice, which had been flat and calm, sharpened. "Before that she kept telling people we'll be all right, because she and I are as close as sisters."

I nodded again.

"We're not as close as sisters," she said. "Not you and me. Her."

"I know."

"Are we close as sisters?" she asked. "You and me? Are we?"

"Of course," I said. I was struggling not to cry.

"Yeah," she said. "That's what I thought."

"Oh Sonia," I said. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there with you."

"You know," she said without rancor. "I really do wish you had been."

"I'm sorry."

She nodded, her head bowed. She seemed reluctant to look at me. But when I reached again, cautiously, for her hand, she let me take it. This time she didn't pull away.

For the rest of that summer, Sonia mostly slept. I brought things to her on trays like a nursemaid. In the first week she wanted only hot chocolate with little marshmallows, even though it was 90 degrees outside. She didn't want to talk. She didn't want to tell me about the funeral. She just wanted me to sit in the room. Sometimes she would doze off, and then start awake, calling my name in a panic. I began to feel I couldn't leave the house at night, not even for a movie, and by mid-August Owen had had enough. One night, when she protested against his suggestion that we go out to dinner, he snapped at her, and she threw a couch pillow at him and fled from the room. "God, Owen," I said. "Her father just died."

He folded his arms across his chest and glared at the wall. I was glad, a week later, when we all moved back into the dorms.