Non so la ragione, ma voglio trovarla

이유는 모르겠지만, 찾고싶단다

by

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Class of 2017

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters

Middletown, Connecticut

April, 2017
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INTRODUCTION

In Korean, there is a word called \( \text{눈치} \) (noon-chi), which means the ability of someone to catch on to the subtle non-verbal cues of others. \( \text{눈치} \) can be used to inform one's behavior in social situations. For this reason, \( \text{눈치} \) is useful for someone like me who wishes to blend into multiple different cultures. I have heard that a person can have as many different personalities as the number of languages that they speak. Indeed, my cheerful, expressive, and somewhat absent-minded American persona can seem strikingly at odds with my reserved and respectful Korean one. I imagine that this dual persona, or the existence of my two cultural masks, as I like to say, is the product of excellent \( \text{눈치} \) when it comes to cultural norms. I am able to interpret and mimic unconscious body language in order to ascertain and successfully display traits that are seen as desirable in a certain culture. But when so much of me can change depending on the desires of others, what can I claim as my own?

Perhaps because I myself do not know the nature of my own cultural identity, I have a difficult time communicating it to others. Admittedly, the art of communication itself is a struggle for me. The first assumption that people make about me is that I am fluent in the Korean language. I am not. In the international school that I attended since I was four years old, speaking Korean was strictly prohibited. It was primarily done out of consideration for children of other nationalities and not for the benefit of native Korean speakers. As a result, English is not my first language, but it is my only fluent one.
I must admit that while I am curious to learn new things, I rarely take them to completion. I yearn to know more about myself, but I shy away from learning too much. In terms of languages, I have gone on to learn Spanish, Italian, and Attic Greek, but have never returned to Korean. In terms of cultures, I have never felt like I have belonged anywhere. Instead of taking the time to ask myself why I might be feeling misplaced, I flee the ill-fitting culture to try and seek solace in another. The title, *Non so la ragione, ma voglio trovarla* (and its Korean counterpart), reflect the baffled sentiment of wanting to discover what I have no words to explain.

"Where is home for you?" curious Americans have asked me after I fled Korea. There was an easy but not quite truthful answer: "Korea." I hated saying it. On one level, I didn't consider Korea to be my home because I was afraid of being labeled a fob. Fob, an acronym for Fresh Off the Boat (from Asia), is used to describe a stereotypical Asian who has seemingly just moved to the United States. Her fobiness is apparent in her lack of awareness, or inability to adapt to, American cultural norms. I initially arrived at my small boarding school in rural Pennsylvania with full confidence in my ability to dispense with perceptions of myself as a fob. After all, I had attended an international school for eleven years, hoping and dreaming excitedly for this very day. Unfortunately, everyone at my boarding school automatically assumed that I, just like all the other Koreans there, would spend my days whispering and giggling down the corridors in Korean while blatantly ignoring everyone else. As it were, no one knew quite what to make of me. The other Koreans recoiled from the way that I would wave and scream, "Hello!" from across the street, instead of politely inclining my head and murmuring, "안녕하세요?" Everyone else just stared at me—they didn't know why I was trying to talk to them, or

1 알면서 하세요 (an-yeong-ha-sae-yo): standard formal greeting that literally means "are you in good peace?"
why I spoke English so well, or why I didn't eat smelly Asian food (even though I secretly did). I tried to tell myself that I was happy, but whenever I dared to ask myself why, I was met with a quiet sense of confusion and resentment. I realized that I often hid the truth from myself, in order to hide it from others. "Now home is wherever I'm not," I once vocalized to my high school academic advisor in an attempt to communicate my thoughts regarding immigration to the United States. I was met by a look of confusion. I didn't elaborate—I didn't know if I would be able to. Instead, I began to dream of new places to call home. Freshman year of college, I chose Italy.

"Perché vuoi imparare l'italiano?" Italians asked me when I escaped to Italy for the first time. I again learned to recite the not-entirely-true answer: "Mi piacciono la cultura, il cibo, e la moda." Out of deference to my dissatisfaction however, I did make a sincere attempt to communicate the more truthful reason. "Non so la ragione, ma voglio trovarla." But I could say no more. I had formulated an intention to be more truthful to myself, but I still lacked the means to elucidate, both to myself and to others, why I had chosen to flee to Italy. I just had a vague sense that I would learn something about myself.

Upon much reflection, I can reveal that I had been interested in conducting a social experiment on myself. When I first began to speak Italian, I noticed that I was acting shy and withdrawn. Did that mean I was only shy to speak Korean because I was unfamiliar with the language? If I followed that train of thought to completion, my American mask would have to be my real self, whereas my Korean mask would have to be a suppression of my real self. The suppression had to be a product of the inadequacy of my verbal language abilities, instead of being a product of my excellent 눈. But I thought that I

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2 *Perché vuoi imparare l'italiano?* "Why do you want to study Italian?"
3 *Mi piacciono la cultura, il cibo, e la moda.* "I like the culture, the food, and the fashion."
4 *Non so la ragione, ma voglio trovarla.* "I don't know the reason, but I want to find it."
could debunk this theory if I went to Italy and surrounded myself with the cultural norms there. I might become expressive with my hands as I spoke, instead of holding them neatly in front of me, as I often did in Korea. I might develop a third, distinctly Italian mask, and reaffirm that I had excellent 눈치.

Perhaps I was too afraid to pursue the answer. I ended up getting completely sidetracked in my experiment by discovering an immense love for everything that Italy was. I had grown up in the smoggy, industrial, and fast paced city of Seoul. Thus, I had never known what natural beauty looked like, let alone experienced the feeling of getting my breath taken away by a perfectly picturesque landscape. I also finally found, by falling in love with Italian culture, a newfound appreciation for the Korean one. It was hard to continue loving one and rejecting the other, as the two cultures shared a surprising number of similarities. Both cultures demonstrated respect for their families and towards the elderly, used metric and temperature units that made sense, and discriminated against tip culture, air conditioners, and drying machines, for instance. All of a sudden, America, the culture that I had first fled to, fell below both Italy and Korea in appeal.

To reiterate, when I was in Korea, I desperately wanted to move to America. Now that I am in America, I desperately want to move to Italy. Because I have never felt a genuine sense of belonging, I dream of finding a culture that I can adapt and blend into perfectly; one that I can accept wholeheartedly and one that will accept me in return. I understand on a purely rational level that this dream culture does not exist. But I can't stop myself from optimistically hoping that I will find it elsewhere. I suppose it is because I hate being truthful to myself.

The challenge that I posed to myself in my thesis is this: I don't know who I am or where I belong, but I want to find out. In order to properly do so, I must not lie to
myself. I must continue my pursuit of the answer, no matter what I discover, and I am not allowed to flee from what I find. I ask myself two questions, inspired directly by my neglected social experiment in Italy:

How does language function as a medium of self-expression?

How does one come to terms with the issue of multiple cultural identities?

I sought answers to these questions by conducting in-person interviews with other immigrants to the United States. I wanted to ask other people firsthand how they had made sense of their cultural identities, with the hope that I could formulate a less confusing and more truthful philosophy that worked for my own. I asked to meet my interviewees in person so that I could bring my [r̩ l̞] along and hopefully gain information beyond what was simply spoken. I conducted a total of twenty IRB-approved interviews, each about an hour in length. I chose to present six, on the grounds of selective diversity. Listed in order of appearance: LEONARDO is a twenty-six-year-old Italian man who first came to the US six years ago to pursue a degree in acting. HAENA (Heh-nah) is a thirty-year-old Korean woman who immigrated with her parents at age eight. KYUNG-MIN (K’young-min) is a twenty-four-year-old Korean man who also immigrated at age eight, but his parents did not immigrate with him. HAN is a seventy-five-year-old Korean man who left his country in 1968, when Korea was still reeling from the aftermath of the Korean War. JISOO (Jee-soo) is a thirty-two-year-old Korean woman whose family took her out of Korea just as she was about to graduate high school. KLARISSA is a fifty-year-old Italian woman who moved to America at the start of the 2016-2017 academic year (the current year of writing) and is still plainly

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5 I submitted a proposal of my research to the Institutional Review Board, which was established in order to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects. The board agreed that there were no circumstances that might lead to the perception of coercion or undue pressure on the part of my participants, etc.
homesick. I limited the nationalities of the interviewees to Korean or Italian because I wanted to retain some degree of familiarity with the country of origin. I initially accepted interviewees of all nationalities, but found myself asking too many historical questions, which slowed the process of the interview.

My thesis does not qualify as a social psychology study because of my emphasis on the diversity of environmental factors. I cannot claim to be presenting scientific findings that are grounded in data, but I can happily say that this was never my intention to begin with. On the contrary, I reject the notion that my interviewees are to be reduced to points on a data sheet or examples of a general trend. I am sharing the personal lives, thoughts, and rationalizations of a series of unique individuals who are to be seen as the authority figures of their own lives. For this reason, the first half of each interview will focus almost exclusively on the interviewee's personal background, with as little intrusion on my part as possible. Only after I have become acclimated to the interviewee will I start to weave myself into the narrative and begin to think about how their experiences might shed light on my own.

Each of the six chapters focuses on one interviewee and one central idea, such as the tendency to romanticize a foreign culture in Chapter One. Each chapter begins with a title and an illustration that captures the essence of an interviewee without bearing an exact resemblance, in order to preserve their anonymity. Names and other personal identifiers have also been modified. Three distinct sections follow the illustration: a personal anecdote that hints at the central idea of the chapter, the interview itself, and finally my reflection on what it is that I have learned from the interview and what I hope to uncover next. A note on chronology: the personal anecdotes are pulled from the remote past—from the time when I still found it perfectly acceptable to run from culture
to culture. The interviews took place between the summer of 2016 and the winter of 2017. The reflections were written after the formal conclusion of the interviews and therefore reflect crystallized processes of thought that are not always apparent in the other two sections.

Two quick disclaimers: firstly, I have taken liberties in the omission and rearrangement of content for the sake of clarity and brevity. Some of the omitted content is included in the Appendix. Secondly, in order to better address the question of language as a medium of self-expression, I asked each interviewee to rank their own language abilities on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 meaning no language and 5 meaning native fluency. I must state that these are absolutely subjective measurements.

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6 Klarissa's interview is an exception—hers was conducted in the early spring of 2017.
Chapter 1

LEONARDO:
I'm a Free Spirit, I Need to Go

Long before I escaped Korea for boarding school in America, I enjoyed ephemeral escapades in the form of Disney princess movies. "Who is that girl I see, staring straight back at me?" I used to wail as a child, spinning myself around the posts of my canopy bed. "Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun, wandering free..." I would warble underwater in the swimming pool. The thought of breaking free was romantic for a young optimist such as myself. How would I ever reach my full potential if I were stuck in a place where I did not belong? I dreamed of starting my life over in a new world full of limitless possibilities. In my fevered imagination, this was America; the perfect ideal world that contained everything Korea lacked.

7 Mulan, "Reflection."
8 The Little Mermaid, "Part of Your World."
When a young Italian man named Leonardo said I could find him at Starbucks, I wondered if I was dealing with someone whose romanticism rivaled my own. As we waited in line for our coffees, he told me that he had come to the US in order to pursue a BFA in acting. After that, he wanted to work towards an O-1, which he described as an artist's visa. He said that he really wanted to stay in New York or Los Angeles for as long as he was allowed to, which made me briefly wonder what sort of forces would hold him back. But his confident attitude discouraged further entertainment of the thought.

As we settled into our seats, I asked him where he had learned to speak English.

"In New York, for a summer camp in musical theatre," he said, running a hand through his wind-tossed curls. "It was very hard," he recollected with a smile. "Thank god there was a friend, Marco. He was Italian as well. And during class I was like, 'Uh, Marco man, what are they saying?' 'I don't know.' And I'm like, 'Fuck!' " Leonardo shook his head and chuckled to himself.

"The language barrier is devastating, you know. 'Cause you don't know how to communicate. You go by intentions, you read people's intentions. And you understand that someone is coming to you angrily and you're like, 'Okay, sorry! I did something wrong!' Or sometimes people can read your intention wrong, and you're like, 'Ah, no! I wasn't... I didn't mean to!' "

You read people's intentions. It sounded like Leonardo was talking aboutnoon-chi. Of course! If you are stranded in a country where you cannot communicate through words, then the only method left to you is noon-chi—in the ability to read what another person is trying to communicate to you through body language and facial expressions.

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9 Los Angeles: Where he is currently pursuing his Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA).
I seized the opportunity to ask the language question I intended to ask of all my interviewees. What was Leonardo's perceived level of fluency in the English language on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 meaning no language, and 5 meaning native fluency?

"4.5 for English," he said almost immediately, and "5 for Italian, of course."

I asked him if he had any tips for achieving the level of fluency that he had.

"I realized that for me, the best way to learn a language was to speak it every day. So, for me the best way was to come to LA and do it," he said. "In New York it was more like trying to understand what they were saying? I could pick up some words from the sentence and understand the context at least. Then, someone told me to watch movies subtitled, so I said okay, alright, let's do it. And then, you know, it was cool, but at the same time, you just see it. You have to speak it, you have to do it."

Leonardo spoke with such passion and conviction that I was ready to drop myself off in a part of Italy to follow his example.

"I realized when I was in New York I didn't learn that much because I was living with Italians, basically," he continued. "I was speaking Italian most of my time, except for when I was in class. But then I came here, to LA, where I was the only Italian. The only way for me to get through was speaking English. I didn't care about making mistakes. I think that really helped me. Because there are a lot of friends of mine that feel they are getting judged a lot, sometimes when they make errors, you know? Honestly, I'm one of those people that doesn't give a fuck. Very Italian. But... so that helped me get out of my mind, removing myself from the way, so I could just absorb knowledge.

"Every day I would learn five new words, and I'm like, 'Awesome!' I heard them, I said them, I read them, they're in my body. So I don't need to repeat them every time, I just know them."
He also wanted to credit his education in acting, saying, "I was reading plays, and I was always acting, and I was always acting in English, so I had to do it. I had to make sense of what I was saying, I had to say the words with the right intention, and make sure that I was being understood." Leonardo's hand gestures became particularly energetic at this point. "I was 'clipping my consonants!' And 'rounding my vowels!' " he laughed, presumably in imitation of an instructor. "'Cause that's another problem. The pronunciation of everything. I'm lucky because I got VPS, you know, voice production. You can learn new dialects, and learn how this works, basically," he said, gesturing to his mouth, tongue, and throat. "It's really cool. And it's really hard."

It dawned on me that when Leonardo said certain words, such as "cool," or "guys," he spoke with little to no accent at all. The hint of an Italian accent still flavored the majority of his speech, but the amount of work and effort that had gone into erasing his Italian accent was clear.

"I think for me the will to learn helped me learn. It's so much easier," Leonardo added. "So that's basically how. And now I can tell that I'm bilingual, basically. Which is awesome."

A wave of excitement hit me at the word bilingual. "Do you feel yourself taking on a new identity when speaking one language versus another?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes! Yes, and it's been a struggle recently so much!" he agreed, matching my enthusiasm. His smile ebbed a little as he said, "Because I... it's almost as if now, the way I'm doing, it's... wrong? So I have to adapt myself. You have to think about that I'm doing acting. So I have to then go for characters that are American. 'Cause otherwise I'm never going to get jobs, if-- I'm not going to get as much if I just play Italian." He said quickly. "You find yourself having two personalities, one that is super Italian, and then
the one that, yeah, knows English, and I'm myself, but if I have to play the character, of
course I have to split. And now I'm in the situation in which," Leonardo sighed, "Who am I? You know? So I feel like everything separate right now is me. I'm this right now, and I don't see it as a problem, it's just a thing."

"What's your Italian personality like?" I asked, following up on the who am I aspect of his response.

"I think it's just culture, it's just different people, you know? But as a personality thing, I just feel more relaxed, because I can speak Italian, I can just relax into it. Here, I feel like I always need to be... my brain always needs to be working and working and working. It's very stressful sometimes. The fact that I can't relax into it. It's an intense stress. Yep. But it's fine. The personality thing, I try not to be," Leonardo smiled sheepishly, "as touchy, and as vulgar, as loud, and as full as... whatever, pasta." He chuckled, and I burst into incredulous laughter.

"Did you just say full of pasta?" I demanded, clutching my sides.

He nodded, still chuckling. "Yeah, so you know, people cannot– don't just look at me and say, 'What the fuck is this guy doing?' " He chuckled again. " 'Cause I should like, you know, sometimes, people don't take it the right way. Eh... they're not used to all this..." he spread his arms and waved them as he said, "...contact."

I nodded thoughtfully. Perhaps the concept of multiple cultural identities was incorrect. Leonardo suggested that it was less about changing his personality and more about tailoring his behaviors and mannerisms to the norms of the society that surrounded him. 再一次, I suppose.
I felt caged by society's expectations and restrictions on my behavior, both in Korea and in America. Leonardo seemed aware of America's cage, but he insisted that it was not a problem. I wondered why. Did Italy have a cage as well?

"Do you ever feel the converse?" I asked, in order to address this issue. "Do you ever find yourself doing something American in Italy? And then is someone ever like, 'What are you doing?'

Leonardo nodded. "Yes! In Italy, if you see people walking down the street, and you don't want to talk to them, you say 'Hi.' Period. 'Ciao.' Basta. That's it. 'Ciao.' And you keep on walk. Here, people say, 'Hey, what's up, how are you doing?' " Leonardo then began a series of furious hand gestures. His carefully concealed Italian accent revealed itself triumphantly. "They shoot you, they shoot you all this questions, and I'm like, 'Do I have to answer? Or not? 'Cause I don't know! Hey what's u-- s-so you want to talk with me? H-how you doing?' They just walk away, and I'm like..." he dropped his jaw and widened his eyes in mock surprise. "'...Okay, so that was it!' And that's the thing that sometimes I go back home and I do it. I say 'Ciao, come sta?' And they're like, 'Why are you asking me how I am?' And I'm like, 'Oh, uh... d... d... forget about it!' That's something that happens."

"How do Italians receive American culture in general?" I asked when our giggled had subsided.

"There's a lot of different perspective, it depends where you are," he replied. "I have a feeling in general that if you live in Italy, and you just lived in Italy, never been to America, and just hear from the TV or from the news, you think about America as people that eat hamburgers all the time, just do war with everyone, they have flags on
like, everything, they're very patriotic, they have the American dream, you just want to make money and just be like, 'Wow! I'm the best!' And that's it."

He had me laughing hysterically again.

"That's from someone that lives in Italy and never traveled," he emphasized. "Me, I came here and I realized a lot of things. I think there is no problem with anyone and anything, you know? It's just different. History has been different, you know, Italy has thousands of years of history, you know? Thousands! And... America only has like... what, six hundred? Four hundred? I don't know! What was it? 1492? Was it?"

We paused the interview to consult Google.

"The mentality of America, sometimes... it's very... closed? Towards immigrants?" Leonardo pitched when we picked up again. 'Cause... honestly, sometimes I feel very... judged, or—" Leonardo stopped midsentence. "Fortunately about Italy you can say anything but good food, good wine, charming people... it's cool! I like it! You know, I'm Italian, oh fuck yeah!" He took a sip of his Starbucks coffee before continuing. "But at the same time, you know, I have friends from other countries that don't have such nice stereotypes, and it's sad, because they get picked on. I don't know, it's weird. You know, there's like this race issue right now—I love that you're actually talking about it. Immigration... it's race. It's all connected."

I was curious as to why Leonardo had left Italy in the first place.

"The mentality is very old. My town is weird. It's like this weird ancient town. And... let's say that I'm a free spirit, and I felt like I needed to get out of that system. I'm not the only one that travels outside of the Italy, to find work or do stuff," he said. "I have a lot of friends that are actually getting out. In Italy, there's something called 'la fuga di

\footnote{10 1492: the arrival of Christopher Columbus.}
cervelli,' which means the escape of the... brains? You know, like the minds? Heads? It's a metaphor. 'Cause everyone is trying to go out and find new places."

Leonardo explained further that he had specifically chosen to come to the United States because the "place to be right now" for film is Los Angeles. "I want to get an agent, I want to get a manager, and then do art," he explained. "Maybe if I have to go to Europe to act, cool. Acting is travelling a lot, and I love travelling, so I'm actually excited. If I have to go to Italy to shoot a movie, I'll be so happy. I'd do it in a heartbeat. If I have to go to Asia, Japan, that I've never been, fuck yeah, let's do it. I just see myself taking every chance that comes to me that feels right. Hopefully, you know, if I do enough, then I can get my O-1, and keep on going."

"What do you miss most about Italy when you are in America and vice versa?"

"When I'm in America, I miss the food, the wine, the people, my friends, my family." He paused, then chuckled. "Let me put them in order. My family, my friends, wine. Hmm... maybe wine is number one. My dad is a wine maker, so I have to love wine. It's running in my blood." He chuckled at his own silliness. "But then when I'm in Italy, I miss... doing stuff. Like working, creating. There is a lack of creativeness in Italy right now. Everyone is struggling so much, because there is no work. So being an artist doesn't really make sense, 'cause you know, you're broke all the time. You know, in the beginning you're always broke. And then you make it and you make money. That's the future. So you need to have a second job that pays the bill. In Italy, just to find that second job is so hard. There's no hope to make dreams, there's no space for dreams."

It appears that the American Dream, as corny and as trite as it is, is still alive in the minds of foreigners. People still believe that freedom, individualism, and idealism can be found here in America.
"When I'm in Italy, I miss... I don't know how to say it. That momentum, that you're always doing, that you're always going up," he continued to say. "When I'm in America, I miss rest. Like sleeping, chilling for a little bit, 'cause I am a machine when I come here: too-toom too-toom too-toom too-toom—there's something to do. And it's cool, you know, because I'm doing what I love, but at the same time, I need a break. Italy is that break for me."

I contemplated bringing up the warning bells that rang inside my head. At Wesleyan University, there is always so much to do, and I am typically happy to be doing what I do. But there often comes a time, near the end of a semester, when I am absolutely debilitating by the sheer amount of things that I want to get done. It is entirely too easy for someone like Leonardo or myself to optimistically push ourselves beyond our limit in America. But I wasn't going to be the one to explain this to Leonardo.

Meanwhile, Leonardo had also lapsed into thought. "I'm thinking what about America I miss when I'm in Italy. Honestly, it's just that feeling of always doing. And there's space for dreams here. That's the reason why I came here, honestly. Because all the other reasons would put me back in Italy. Now I'm trying to follow my dreams, so I'm here." I thought back to all he had previously said in his comparisons between America and Italy and saw that this was true. He had indicated preference for everything Italian over American, but fundamentally, he did not view Italy to be the land of opportunities that America was fabled to be.

"How do your parents feel about you coming out here to follow your dreams?" I asked, wondering if Leonardo's parental figures were as conservative as mine.

Leonardo's facial expression softened into one of muted happiness, as one looks when he is in love or expressing gratitude. "My mom was the initiator of the whole
process, 'cause she always had a huge passion for arts. She said, 'You have to get out,' anywhere, so it was me picking, and I chose. So she's always been supportive. My dad... I'm lucky. Because my dad has the wine business, he makes money. So he's my financer, my donor. He's my angel donor." Leonardo cracked a grin that caused the laugh wrinkles around his eyes to stretch across his cheeks. "So I'm lucky for that. It's a huge cost, but he can afford it, so he's very supportive. He knows that if I'm working my butt off, then he's going to be there for me, you know? At least financially, for now. Of course when I graduate, I need to make my own stuff. It's normal... life starts then."

"Wow. Have they always been this supportive?" I asked with a tint of jealousy.

"My dad wanted me to keep on going with the business and stay in the family business," Leonardo offered. "But he saw me as a free spirit. I'm a free spirit, I need to go, and it's over for me. So he allowed me to go and just follow what I love doing. He didn't get that when he was young. So now that he can allow it to me, he's making it happen. And I love him," Leonardo emphasized, holding out his hand as if to say, 'pause on this phrase'. "'Cause you know, in Italy, it's like that. If you have a family business that is working, you work in the family business and you keep it running so it never dies. There's always gonna be food on the table for the people, for the family and the friends around you. That's the culture. So yeah. My parents are very supportive and I love them."

Leonardo lapsed into silence for a brief moment, a memory tugging like a smile on the corners of his mouth. "I say, 'Dad, I'm gonna do both: I'm going to be an actor and I'm going to work the family business.' He's like, 'Fantastic.' I love wine, we have connections here in LA with the wine. If I had to help him out and be working here for him and do acting, I'll do it."
Listening to Leonardo talk about America made me realize how disillusioned I had become with the country. But of course America couldn't match up to everything that a (self-proclaimed) caged and misunderstood child needed it to be. My disappointment with America was inevitable because of the way that I construed it in my head. I had to be careful of doing the same to Italy—of course Italy also had cultural constraints and of course it would also fail to deliver everything that a (self-proclaimed) disillusioned yet stubbornly hopeful optimist needed it to be. Leonardo construed America the same way that I had when I first landed here. Thanks to that, I was able to see through him a reflection of my own faulty optimism. Now, I want to know what an alternative view of America looks like. What would I discover by interviewing someone who came to America either against their will or by surprise?
"Dude, Jessica," my thirteen-year-old sister complained, barging into my room one day when I was home for break. She was still in her school uniform. "Because you went to boarding school in America, Mom won't let me go. She keeps saying one daughter leaving was bad enough."

Guilt stabbed my heart. "I'm sorry," I said quietly. The words didn't do my emotions justice.

My sister hovered sullenly at the doorway, reluctant to leave. I was sorry that I couldn't be more reassuring to her in the moment. I was sorry that I was abandoning her just as she was reaching adolescence—she would never need me as much as she would in these next few years. But I couldn't be sorry that I'd left, so I didn't know what else I could say.
The anxious, wan, and determined face of my little sister flitted through my head, as Haena unceremoniously dropped herself into the chair opposite from mine with a sigh. I could tell immediately that Haena had spent a sizable portion of her life in the United States—the influence was apparent in her relaxed posture and in her mellow and sunny aura. She was also dressed in classic American apparel: plastic flip flops, sunglasses, and a striped, sleeveless maxi dress. She heaved a gigantic purse off her shoulder and various baby bottles, diapers, wipes, and who-knows-what-else rattled as they collectively hit the ground.

Haena was brought over to the United States by her parents when she was eight years old. She was too young to fully grasp what was happening to her—she initially thought that she and her family were on vacation. She was surprised that they ended up staying.

I asked her to tell me about her language acquisition process. In colloquial, upbeat, and unaccented English, Haena explained that she didn't know a single word of English when she first arrived to the United States. Although she found school difficult in the beginning, she was fortunate enough to have had an "amazing" second grade teacher. In fact, this teacher was the reason why Haena had decided to become an English teacher herself.

"And like... that was pretty much the beginning?" Haena concluded, at a loss for what else to say.

I was brimming with anticipation to hear about the three generations of immigrants in Haena's family. "Have you ever experienced lingual or cultural clashes, either with your parents or with your children?" I asked excitedly.
"Oo, tough question," Haena remarked, rolling her eyes up in thought. "I have to think about it. Ummmmmm?" she propped an elbow onto the table and sank her weight into it. "I definitely think that the American culture is different than the Korean culture. And there's a lot of things that do clash. Like..." Haena paused for a few more seconds. "Can't really think of one off the top of my head. It'll come back to me!" Haena removed her elbow and sat up straight. I hid my disappointment with a smile.

"Okay, what language do you speak with your parents?" I asked, backpedaling with a simpler question.

"I always speak Korean with my parents," Haena responded eagerly. "I still speak it now. Just never lost it, 'cause I always had to speak it with my parents. Once I learned English, my sister and I started translating all the stuff for them in Korean and they never let, like... told... I... they told me not to speak English when I got home, so that just helped keep, I think, the Korean language?"

"What language do you and your sister talk in?"

"Uh... mixed. Korean and English. My sister more of the Korean, I do more of the English, and then she'll... some of the things that I don't really understand, she'll say it to me in English. She does the Korean and I do the... Konglish,\(^{11}\) I guess. Mixed." Haena let out a laugh. "Always been that way. Yeah. I speak a little more English to my parents now. Just a few... few words. Few words that I've already forgotten in Korean, and only comes out in English, but back then, it was just straight up one hundred percent Korean. I'm more confident in English, because, like, now, that's what I'm used to and that's

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\(^{11}\) Konglish: the language that results when you mix Korean and English together. For example, inserting an English word into a sentence that is otherwise spoken in Korean because the speaker doesn't know the Korean equivalent of the English word, or because the word in one language has connotations that work better to convey a certain meaning.
what I mostly speak, so. And Korean I'm a little shakier, but other than that, pretty much the same." She laughed again.

I found myself cocking my head farther and farther to the left, something that I habitually do when I am listening to someone who is not making a lot of sense. I was trying very hard not to think condescendingly of Haena, but I was afraid that I was not doing a very good job at it. To clarify how Haena felt about her language abilities, I asked her how she would rank her fluency of the English language on a scale of 0 to 5. She said 5. Then I asked her to rank her fluency of Korean and she slowly let out a 2.5. This was much lower than I had expected of someone with traditionally Korean parents.

"What do you think is the reason why your sister 'does the Korean,' whereas you 'do the Konglish'?

"'Cause I think in high school, when I was going through puberty, I wanted to be American. Like, you know, fit in. You know the term twinkie? Yellow on the outside, white on the inside? Yeah. My sister was... a fob. You know fob? Fresh Off the Boat?"

I immediately cringed at the memory of the word. I also noted the automatic link that Haena had forged between 'fluent Korean speaker' and 'fob'. It saddened me, but I couldn't say that I was very surprised.

"So she was very fobby," Haena continued, oblivious to my discomfort. "Always hung out with the Koreans, she never really-- 'cause she came here when she was like... the puberty stage. So she was in middle school. I think it was harder for her to emerge and fit into the American culture? Just because she was in that awkward teenage stage. It's hard in one language, but trying to do that and learning a new language I feel like was really, really hard. So, she was always fobby. Didn't really want to speak English, just hung out with the Korean kids, spoke in Korean with them, and all that stuff."
"I... when you're little, when you're in second grade, you don't know anything. Color of skin, or what people look like doesn't really matter, you just hang out with... everybody. Back then, I was the only Korean kid. There was nobody else to hang out with. So I couldn't even talk to anybody in Korean. I don't know how my sister kind of... found all the Korean kids? I... did not."

It seemed like Haena was crediting her fluency of English to an all English-speaking environment. The explanation resonated with what Leonardo had said about American friends accelerating his English language growth.

"So, I was the twinkie," Haena concluded.

Again, I noticed the way that gaining fluency in a language bled naturally into an assumption about cultural identity. It couldn't actually be that simple though, could it?

"In high school... I had... identity crisis maybe? A little bit? 'Cause I wanted to be so American, I didn't want anything to do with Korean," Haena reiterated. "But then in college, I think that's when things turned. Especially my trip to Yonsei University was a big turning point—I did my study abroad in college back in Korea," Haena explained.

I realized that Haena must have never gone back to Korea since leaving it at age eight. What a bizarre thought—she had gone on a legitimate study abroad experience in her own home country.

"My dad told me—I wanted to do it in Australia—but my dad told me to go back to Korea 'cause that's where I came from, to remember, and to know the culture, and to just re... like... learn everything when I go there. So that's why I went to Korea," Haena concluded, quite cheerfully.

"And what was it like?"

"Oh, it was nice! The locals like to drink," Haena confided, laughing.
I smiled, and hid my surprise. The locals. I hadn't realized the extent to which Haena dissociated herself from Koreans who lived in Korea.

"Yeah, it was nice, and they were just trying to learn our culture, like the American culture. They were asking us a lot of... just what it's like in America. I felt like they were like, 'Wow!' Like they were envious! Or they were just, 'Wow,' fascinated! That us, Korean kids living here, and speaking English so well, and acting like Americans!

"So yeah. Like wow! Korea is full of culture! Korea is awesome! Having my dad come and show me everything during the summertime, it was a blast. And, at an age where I could understand all of that I think really, really was helpful in meshing Korean and American together, and I want that for my kids now. I want to take them to Korea and show them all the stuff that my dad showed me, and mesh that like, yes, you are Korean and American, and you can do both. So. That's my goal for my own kids!"

Meshing Korean and American? What was she talking about? My head slid further down to the left. My Korean mask and my American mask were completely dissociate from each other. This was confusing enough to wrap my head around without considering what my real identity would be if I ground my Korean and American masks together into one. How would Haena ever discover what was underneath a blended mask? Was it possible that she had no clue? I believed that my real identity was not what I showed through my masks. But was Haena saying that her identity was her mask?

"Can you talk more about your plans for meshing Korean and American in your kids?" I asked quizzically.

"My daughter doesn't speak English," Haena began. She laughed at the look on my face. "We're trying! We'll see how this goes and if it doesn't work out well, we'll try it differently with our second. But... we haven't spoken a word of English to her or like
really taught her any English. We started with Korean. We figured she'd get all the Korean now, and then once she gets to school, she'll get all the English, and she'll learn it. That's our experiment with this one."

I listened to Haena speak about her plan to speak less English at home and her hope that her daughter would be motivated to retain the Korean language. As for the topic of meshing identities, Haena never returned to it. Perhaps she didn't quite know how to answer the question. Or perhaps, in her mind, she had already answered it. Did mixing languages really automatically result in a meshing of cultures?

When I lived in Korea, I learned English and rejected Korean culture. Now that I live in America and have forgotten most of my Korean, I want to return to my Korean heritage. Am I unnecessarily complicating my own life? I can't even fathom what it would look like for me at this stage to go about mixing my languages and cultures into one. As I glumly chewed on these thoughts, Haena chatted amiably about how she had met her husband, what her wedding had been like, and how happy she had been to show her American friends the beautiful Korean ceremony.12

"Speaking of friends, if a friend of yours told you that they wanted to move to the United States, what would you tell them?" I asked, rousing myself and steering us back on track.

My question seemed to catch Haena off guard. "What would I tell them? I'd say yeah, come over!" she responded automatically, as she thought about what to say next. "Um, I knew a couple of those kids who came here, like here in America, for student exchange," she began.

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12 See the Appendix for this scene.
I realized then that I had made an erroneous assumption about Haena even having friends who lived in Korea. She was referring to the same "locals" that she had met during her study abroad, as if she had never been back to Korea since. She probably hadn't, I gathered.

"They were saying how it was.. how they tried to fit in. But there's enough Korean people there that they didn't have to speak English. At all. So I thought that was pretty interesting. 'Cause I told them, don't... try not to hang out with them and try to hang out with... other people. But they just kind of gravitated towards the Korean people that spoke Korean. So yes. I would recommend them to come to America, but get the full experience, not an experience like them. It was different for me, when I went to Korea, because I could speak Korean going there."

It dawned on me that Haena was comparing a "local" Korean coming to the United States with her Korean-American self going "back" to Korea. Why couldn't I remember that Haena had lived in the United States for almost all of her life and had only visited Korea once after she had left it at age eight? I had to work to remember this, instead of continuing to impose my own experience onto her.

"Like, I was comfortable with both of the languages," Haena continued on. "I don't know what it would be like if I... like if I went to Italy or something and didn't even know a word or just a few phrases. I think I would probably be scared too?"

But wasn't that what happened when you came to the United States for the first time? I asked Haena silently, despite knowing that the question was out of line. Was she extraordinarily simple, or was I extraordinarily judgmental? I felt like I might explode from the stress of holding it in.
"But I would say... just try," Haena concluded with a nervous laugh. "Yeah, I don't know," she admitted cheerfully. "I grew up here, I lived here, came back here."

"Was it a conscious choice to come back here?" I asked carefully.

"Sort of?" Haena replied, looking confused again.

My heart sunk. What had I assumed this time?

"I wanted to teach English in Korea right after college... my mom said no. She said to get a job, like a real job, in the States. She didn't think that was a real job, teaching English in Korea."

I suppose it hadn't been Haena's choice to make. But! How confusing! Having to yield to the desires of one's parents was something I would have expected of a more...obby Korean.

"So she said no, you need to get a job here, as a teacher, since you got a teaching degree, you need to establish that," Haena continued. "So we had an argument, because I wanted to travel. I wanted to get out of here. 'Cause I was here all my life. I wanted to either move to California, or like somewhere out west for a little while, and do like the whole twenties, figure yourself out thing. But I did not do that."

I had been mulling over the idea that Haena occupied a grey space between both languages and cultures without being fully cognizant of what that space may look like. She referred to it as being "mixed." It occurred to me now that Haena may have spent her entire life feeling indifferent about her cultural identity because she did not see it as something she had the agency to change. Her identity was not of her own choosing; it was just something that had happened to her. Perhaps I could forgive her for her apathy regarding her own cultural identity, but could I forgive myself for my aggression towards her?
Just then, Haena's infant daughter, who was being looked after by Haena's husband in the next room, started to wail. We had to put the interview on hold. When Haena came back, she had a few questions of her own to ask me. She wanted to know what my cultural background was like, and when I had moved to the United States. She was just as shocked by my explanations as I had been about hers. She absolutely could not get over the idea that I had taken my cultural identity and my life into my own hands by sending myself off to boarding school—by researching schools, reaching out for advice, and filling out applications all by myself. She made several loud exclamations and demanded to know if my parents were fine with all of that. I shook my head.

"My mom and I fought... a lot. Yeah, it was pretty bad," I said simply. "나 여기 있으면 depression 빠져서 자살할 거야." If I stay here, I'm going to fall into depression and kill myself, I had blurted to my mother at one particularly low point. My mother had gone still and responded in turn, "너 가버리면 내가 우울증 걸러서 죽어버릴 거야." And I'm going to fall into depression and kill myself if you go.

My cheeks flushed in remorse as I looked back upon my decision to flee Korea and by extension my mother, my sister, and the rest of my family. Had I made too strong of a statement back then? Should regret the ties that I have since lost with my family?

"How did you convince her to let you go?" Haena asked, still reeling from the notion that I had successfully overridden my mother's desires.

"Not very... rationally," I responded quietly. "My mother and I are both extremely stubborn people—I get it from her, I think. My stubbornness won out over hers in the end... that was all. It wasn't like I could properly explain to her the complicated reasons that I could barely elucidate in English, let alone in Korean."
So when Haena admitted to having fought with her mother about moving to Korea after graduating college, I thought that we would finally find a moment of common ground. But Haena just continued right along to say: "I really respect my mom's choices or decisions or things that she tells me to do. And usually, I don't say it to her, or admit it to her..." she paused to cup her hand to her mouth and whispered to me confidentially, "...but moms are right!" She laughed, and leaned back in her chair with a happy sigh. "So, and I wouldn't have met my husband, and, all of these other things wouldn't have fallen in place, if I wasn't here that first year. That's when I met the coworker, the one who introduced me to my husband, and that snowballs into all this stuff. You know? So I guess..." she leaned forward again and whispered, "I'll never tell her, but she was right!"

I offered her a tight smile. It was all I could muster when my insides were churning with a myriad of unpleasant feelings.

Catching my eye, Haena turned pensive again for a moment. "I guess..." she added quickly, "...I don't know, it might have been different... I would have... figured myself out, or like, learned... maybe, to be more... my own, or be more independent, if I was... somewhere else, back then? I don't know. I'll never... know." She laughed again, and the thoughtful look on her face dissolved.

"What are your plans for the future?" I asked in words. Are you happy with where you are now? my heart screamed in its silent language.

"Oh!" Haena exclaimed, seeming surprised yet again. "Um, I have no idea. I don't have any... future goals... yet," Haena admitted, seeming stumped. "I haven't thought—I've been going day by day... we have a newborn at home. So, day by day." Haena laughed, and shook her head. "Actually, feeding by feeding, really."
When I think back on my interview with Haena, I remember an overwhelming frustration and anger. It began with my inability to let Haena speak for herself. I continuously imposed my experience on top of everything she said and as a result felt alternatively hurt, confused, or surprised. In response to the question that I asked at the end of Chapter One, I learned next to nothing; I am seemingly incapable of learning something from someone whose experience differs so vastly from my own.

That is a lie. I did discover a few things. I learned that I struggle immensely against admitting truths to myself. I could have had Haena's blithely unexamined life if I had not made the decision to move to the United States. But I did not want to admit that I had complicated my own life by doing so. Further, I struggled against the idea that it is impossible for me to ever perfectly belong in either Korean culture or in American culture. I am "mixed," just like she is "mixed." Finally, I hate conceding that I had been selfish to run away from my family.

I cannot understand why I felt so antagonistic towards Haena as I waged a battle within myself. It was clearly an internal conflict, so why was my first instinct to act condescendingly towards Haena? It is such childish behavior to irrationally blame someone else and I very much dislike that I engage in it. I almost don't want to pursue the question. I don't know if I'm going to like the answer. But I would be contradicting the purpose of my thesis if I stopped.
I had a phase about a year ago when I would spend a good portion of my waking hours wondering if I was depressed. My American roommate at the time tried to convince me that I shouldn't be afraid to admit it to myself—admitting that I had a problem was the first step towards self-acceptance and love. But I do like myself, I insisted. So did I really feel the heavy weight on my chest, the dark shadows at the edges of my vision, and the atemporal sluggishness of time itself? My Korean boyfriend insisted that these questions were irrelevant. I couldn't allow myself to ruminate on depression, claim it as my reality, and give in to it. I had to push these thought aside, or I would fall behind on course work. Never had I seen with more clarity the contradictory nature of my two cultures. What was I to do when American culture and Korean culture shouted at me from opposite sides of the road at the same time? I felt caught in the
headlights—my mind was screaming at me to run—but my muscles were locked tightly into place.

As I waited for Kyung-min at the entrance of a public library, I scrolled through the résumé that Kyung-min had voluntarily emailed to me in advance. I learned that Kyung-min graduated college in three years with two majors by taking on about seven classes per semester. He gained immediate admission into a graduate program at an Ivy League university, which he had since completed. And when he walked through the front doors of the public library, I could tell that he was not someone who had ignored his social life in pursuit of his academic goals. His hair oozed confidence at a forty-five-degree angle from his forehead—it didn't look as if it would yield even if I were to press down on it with both of my hands. A large, expensive-looking watch sparkled out of the sleeve of his blazer as he extended his hand for a shake. He also offered me a lazy, lopsided grin. It was the grin of a man who consciously exuded confidence over the fine symmetry of his facial features.

Something about his aura—maybe it was the three piece suit—prompted me to begin the interview as soon as we were seated, as to avoid wasting time. "Can you describe the circumstances around your arrival to the United States?" I asked, clicking the recorder on.

"I came in the year 2000. So... I was eight," he drawled. "It was almost..." he paused, and considered his words carefully, "...an accident. Originally, my older sister, who is five years older than me, was supposed to come study in the US. And I was going to stay in Korea, and, you know, live like a normal Korean kid. My parents were only planning on sending one of us, mostly because of financial reasons—it is very, very expensive."
His voice turned grave. "My sister said she didn't want to go to the US; I said I did want to go, only because I thought we were actually—she meant like going on a vacation. I was like yeah, sure, the US seems fun." He took a sip of water and added, "I actually went to the US once before that, on a vacation. So I thought we were going again, for fun."

I nodded and remembered how Haena had made the same assumption regarding her own permanent vacation to the United States. Incidentally, she had been eight years old as well.

"So I sort of accidentally arrived with my mom to the US and found out that I would be going to school here from now on. She left," he said with a dry chuckle, "for Korea, alone, about a week after that. I ended up living with my aunt from that point on. That's how it began."

I blinked. His mother had just… left?

"How much English did you know at that point?" I asked, filing the topic of his mother away for later.

"I didn't even know the alphabet," Kyung-min replied in the same humorless tone.

"So zero."

I paused, but he didn't continue.

"What has your language acquisition process been like?"

"I began by going to... well, I obviously was enrolled in a school, with a lot of international students. After school, I had to go to one of those academies that provided supplemental help for English; ESL. That's where I learned my basic skills related to speaking, writing, and listening. But I think the biggest help was that I was very fortunate to have met a friend, at the first school that I was at; an American who was kind enough
to be my friend despite the language barrier. Just having a friend who spoke English helped my English grow quickly."

I nodded. All three interviewees were in agreement on the importance of peers who force you to practice speaking English.

"On a scale of 0-5, with 0 being no language, and 5 being native fluency, where would you rate your level of English?"

"Probably 5. I hope," he responded with a chuckle and another lopsided grin.

"And of Korean?"

"Do you feel like your cultural identity has shifted at any point since you arrived to the US?" I asked, specifically hoping to see an identity shift that accompanied the deterioration of Korean language since college.

Kyung-min was silent for a long time. "No?" he finally ventured. "Only because... I'm not certain whether I can identify myself as American, nor Korean," he said into the silence. "So, there was nothing to change, because there was nothing from the beginning."

Something clicked in an unpleasant manner. It felt a little like recalling the details of an unpleasant dream. Why does not being able to fully claim either culture necessarily mean that you have nothing?

"Can you say a little more about that?" I asked with a frown.

"Sure. I think I came to America a little too early to understand myself as a certain type of person, of a certain identity," Kyung-min elaborated. "I grew up going back and forth—Korea during the summer, winter—that I could never assume a full Korean
identity, nor a full American identity. In Asian American literature about immigration, there is a concept called the Third Space, where some people feel as though they are neither this nor that, right? They almost feel like they are stuck in like a... abyss of some kind."

Here it was: the Third Space, an academic concept that perfectly encapsulated what I had sensed about Haena. But there was something about the concept that hit home for myself as well. It didn't really matter whether I believed I had two separate masks with something latent underneath, or if Haena assumed she had a single fused identity that was inherently obscure; the crux of the problem for both of us was an inability to perfectly align our sense of self to a fixed, geographical space. It was good to know that scholarship agreed with my intuitions. But the question that I was begging to know was: what next?

"I think I just became more conscious of it as I grew older and I learned more, and I became more educated," Kyung-min continued, as if to prove my point that just reading about a problem doesn't always provide an answer. "That's sort of where I have always been... I don't ever think I had an identity that I could say that I had, but changed," Kyung-min concluded, stating another expertly crafted summary.

But I still needed to know what came next.

"Are you... comfortable in the Third Space?" I ventured tentatively, hoping to hear how Kyung-min had made peace with his being stuck there.

There was a wary look in his eye as he contemplated me. "Yeah? I think so. I'm happy with who I... am. I never felt the need to identify myself as... something? So... yep. I can call myself a person of my own. So I'm comfortable in that regard."
Another concluding sentence, given much sooner than the last. I had insulted him by insinuating there was something wrong with the way he currently was.

"Do you miss anything about Korea?" I asked, tactfully changing topics.

Kyung-min looked away and sighed. "It's strange, because…” he paused to choose his words carefully. "I never really lived in Korea long enough to feel like I'm Korean... as much as my family believes that they are Korean. Right? But my entire family is there, so I feel like I have this attachment to Korea that I can't explain, only because those are like my roots, but... I don't miss anything about Korea. I feel a lot more at home when I'm in America, except for the fact that my actual family is in Korea. It's more about missing my family, and my ties to my family, rather than to the country."

*Missing my family, and my ties to my family, rather than to the country.* This was an epiphany statement for me. I often leap to the conclusion that since I clash with my family, and my family is Korean, I therefore clash with all of Korea. But my family is not representative of Korea as a whole, so it was good to be reminded of the limited and therefore inaccurate nature of my perceptions of Korea.

"Have you received any differential treatments because of the way that you look?" I asked, wondering if others may have hindered Kyung-min's feeling "at home" in the US.

Kyung-min shot me another stern look, one that seemed to ask if I was insulting his fine features. "Not much. Definitely not as much as I know my other minority friends have gone through in their lives. I think I was always very fortunate to have been an athlete, to have grown up as someone very popular. Relative to most other Asian-Americans, I never had trouble fitting in, my teachers respected me, nobody ever really made fun of the way I looked, because... the stereotype is obviously that the popular kids are also the bullies... I was sort of the bully, growing up." He chuckled. "I was always
fortunate in that regard, so no. I never had any trouble with my looks. But that's probably an exception. I was fortunate."

I took a moment to digest this. Something about his usage of the word "fortunate" rubbed me the wrong way. The connotations of the word made it sound as if he had become popular by chance, and that he was respected by teachers for reasons he could not explain, and that he had somehow accidentally found himself bullying others. Surely... surely there was more effort and agency involved than he was willing to admit?

"I was wondering if you could tell me a little about your current immigration process?" I asked, remembering a somewhat inappropriate joke he had made previously about needing to marry a girl with a US passport.

"Yeah. I was always a foreign student visa. But I'm no longer a student. So. I have a work visa that allows me to work here. Yeah. That's it," he said tersely.

"Would you be willing to explain a little bit more?" I asked in a careful tone, heightening my 눈치 (noon-chi) senses to pick up on any signs of distress.

"It's like a lottery system. Unless I obtain a Green Card, I'm never guaranteed to be able to stay in the US," he explained in the same tone of voice. "Hopefully, I'll get sponsorship from my company to apply for a Green Card. If I don't, I'll be forced to go back to Korea, and I'll have to serve in the army." This is a very sensitive topic for Koreans, and for Korea as a country. Because to avoid military service duty is very, very much frowned upon in Korea. It's not something that is talked about a lot. Frankly... I don't really care how it's viewed in Korea, because I never really identified as... Korean,"

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13 Because South Korea is still technically at war with North Korea, there is a mandatory military draft for all Korean male citizens between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five. In Korean culture, a boy is not considered to be a man until he has been discharged.
Kyung-min drawled. "But, if I was any more Korean, I think I would have probably gone to the army as soon as I graduated high school."

He took a sip of water and leaned back in his seat for the first time. He clearly thought that some sort of formal barrier had been broken between us and was feeling a lot more comfortable in my presence. "But I didn't, because I never wanted to go, right?" he said bluntly. "So, we'll see. I mean, my parents are pretty stressed out about it, because they know how serious the situation is. But they also know they can't really say anything to me about it, because ultimately it's my life choice. It's me going to the army, not them; there's only so much they can do." He made a face that looked vaguely like suppressed disdain. "I know that they really want me to just go, fulfill the duty, get it over with. But... you know. If I can avoid it as a whole, that's what I wanna do."

It felt like a good time to return to the topic of the absence of his mother. "You said you travel to Korea to visit your family a lot—have they ever visited you here?"

"My mom visited me two months ago, because I haven't been to Korea in close to three years now. She knows I'm very, very busy and that I don't really wanna go back." He looked at me and seemed to debate whether or not to tell me something.

I sent silent waves of encouragement in his direction.

"It's the first time that she came to America since my high school graduation," he admitted. "None of my family came to my college graduation, or to my graduate school graduation. They don't really like to come to America for some reason." He paused and stared into his water cup. "It is kinda far," he said ruefully. This was the proper moment for a concluding sentence. "But... yeah. Yeah," he muttered half-heartedly.

I knew I had to tread with extreme caution moving forward from here. "If a friend of yours from Korea told you that they wanted to move to the US, in the way that you
I asked, giving him an out if he wanted to retreat back into generalities.

"I wouldn't recommend it. Because where I am now came at a great cost. I... had... I developed insomnia from when I was in about fifth grade, all the way up until about the end of college. I couldn't sleep for more than like two to three hours at a time, mostly because... it came out of stress, right? I was constantly stressed, I was constantly afraid that I wouldn't be able to keep up my family's expectations of me. It cost a lot to send me over here. So I was experiencing immense pressure to achieve. To succeed. And that led to a series of bad things, beginning with insomnia."

He made a pained face, but his eyes weren't focused in my direction. I got the impression that he wanted to continue talking, but was having difficulty getting words past his own defenses.

I sat in silence and waited.

"In high school, I got diagnosed with a... depression, which continued. I- I saw a psychologist and a therapist all the way throughout college, but it was also something I couldn't tell most of my friends, because it's frowned upon in Korean culture to have any sort of thing that's not normal, not conventional."

He spoke in a measured, emotionless tone that was discordant with the timbre of his 속마음, his heart talk.¹⁴ "I definitely could not tell my very much conservative parents that I was suffering from depression. So I actually, whenever I went to go see the psychologist, I had to draw money from the ATM, and then pay the therapist in cash,

¹⁴ 속마음 (sock-mah-eum): 속 (sock) means inner, and 마음 (mah-eum) means heart, but it also carries connotations of 'feeling', 'wish' and 'mind.' Thus, in Korean, the heart is capable of expressing desires and thoughts independently from the brain. My father often complains that my mother does not understand his 속마음 (sock-mah-eum), and that she takes his words too literally. Thus, 속마음 means the suppressed or secret desire that someone may be holding in his heart, but cannot or will not communicate directly through words. I like to think of it as the inaudible talk of the heart.
because I couldn't show the transaction on my credit card; that would show that I was visiting a hospital. So my mom actually... still to this day doesn't know.

"I had a huge fight once, senior year of college, where for the first time ever, she pulled out my debit card history and she found that I had pretty regular increments where I was withdrawing like thousand to two thousand bucks. She thought that I was spending it on my then girlfriend. That was partially true, but most of the money that I was spending on my ex-girlfriend was through the money that I was making at college. Through campus jobs and things like that. Most of that money was going to... you know, making myself... better. Right? Mentally."

My stomach churned with raw feeling. Hearing him talk about depression made me remember, strangely enough, the first time that I went snorkeling in the ocean. I had peered curiously over the edge of a continental shelf and had seen an abrupt drop of warmth and light into a lonely abyss of unending darkness. A strong instinct for survival had propelled me backwards, for fear of something sinister leaping up to grab me and drag me down into the depths. But the next day, I had returned, and had stayed a little longer with my head poking cautiously over the drop. My preoccupation with depression had felt just like this—I had hovered over the edge, waiting to see if something would drag me down. But nothing ever had, so I had never taken the plunge. Korea attempted to guilt me into coming back to shore, quoting my responsibilities on land, whereas America told me not to blame myself if the current floated me a little farther out. Was the Third Space telling me not to worry about needing to swim in either direction, but rather telling me to settle down right where I was? How was that even possible, considering the necessity of interactions with Korean parents and American friends? I was back in the middle of the road, caught in the headlights once again.
"In an ideal situation, how would you have liked for your parents to respond?" I asked quietly.

"I remember once... I got really, really frustrated with my mom... I was talking to her on the phone and I was asking her why she couldn't just ask me sometimes... just how I am doing. You know? The first question that she always asked me on the phone was: 'How's school,' 'How are your grades,' 'Are you applying to graduate school,' 'What are you thinking about doing,' 'Are you going to get a job,' right? It was all things that related to money, and job, career, school."

His voice was picking up in force and in speed, but not necessarily in emotion. It was his heart talk that conveyed an undertone of tightly reigned in anger.

"It was all around that and never once has she asked me: 'Are you happy,' or, 'Who are your friends,' 'Who do you like to hang out with,' 'What's one of your hobbies,' right? So, my mom, or rather, all my immediate family members actually don't know much about me, because they were never really curious to know."

I was hit by a wave of loneliness. As I had predicted, in an ideal situation, parents would join Kyung-min and me in the Third Space by blending Korean and American cultures together on our behalf. But how does one go about explaining that to a parent? I was convinced for the longest time that my mother did not comprehend the meaning of the word "compromise," because of her utter incapability to yield to my desires. But as I grow older, I see that my mother has compromised her entire life—she yields to the desires of her parents, her parents-in-law, and her husband as a matter of necessity. And what she cannot understand is the nature of a daughter's demand for her mother to yield.

"When my best friend... died, in my senior year of high school, that's when my depression began. I was at a really bad place in my life. I actually attempted to tell my
mom, 'Hey, like... it's... you know, I'm going through a lot right now.' I was hoping she would say, 'Hey, do you wanna just come to Korea for a week? Do you want me to come visit you?' But what she said was, 'Everybody's going through hard times.' Right? Like, just because you are, doesn't mean that I'm not. So that made me automatically... not open up any more. Right? I knew that she didn't want to hear about it. I wanted to tell her, 'Hey, my best friend—you know him too—he passed away.' But I couldn't. An-and that's when the depression really hit its rock bottom. So in an ideal situation definitely, I would have wanted my parents to pay attention to me, rather than what I accomplish."

Kyung-min and I sat in silence, contemplating each other. He still had on his three piece suit, and his hair was just as rigid as ever. But he looked all of a sudden like an uncertain but determined young man trying to find a foothold in the adult world. The well-established, professional CEO swagger he had worn into the library had quietly melted away.

"You mentioned that you had a sister," I said, wanting to spend a little more time with this Kyung-min. "What is your relationship like with her?"

"She was always sort of like the... more supportive mother," he said with a small smile. "We're five years apart, so she in many ways assumed the role of a mother. My mother only just retired this past year from her career; my dad always worked. I lived with my grandmother, from the time I was born until I came to America, so I actually never lived with my parents. Ever. Because they were both, you know, working parents. So, whenever I would visit Korea, my sister was the one who made me breakfast, lunch, dinner. I was able to open up to her, because she's my sister, so I could talk to her about personal things. But... she's married now, she has a family of hers to maintain, grow. I feel like I've also reached an age where I can no longer just... call her every time I'm
struggling, every time I'm stressed, because... I feel like I need to be an adult. Right? So we've grown apart a little bit... only because we have our own lives to take care of now. But... it's okay."

He must have been quite lonely. "Can you tell me more about your life here now? What's your job, and how do you feel about it?" I asked as my final question.

"I work as an education consultant. My specialties are in college admissions."

I noticed the re-emergence of the swagger, which immediately muffled and silenced the volume of the heart talk. I quietly bid it goodbye.

"I do leadership coaching, specifically in the area of managing stress and developing the right study habits. Those were things that I studied up on a lot over the last two years or so, because it's something that I suffered a lot from, growing up. I know that it's something that more high schoolers go through each year. Sleep deprivation, depression rates, teenage suicide rates, all of those things are going up, around the world, every year. I wanted to sort of help... prevent that. So that's what I'm going into a lot these days; I do a lot of seminars around Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and Westchester New York. That's what I plan on doing, at least for the next several years, if it's allowed. I'm pretty happy with where I am because I'm doing something that I care about."

The smile he offered me stretched across both cheeks.

Thanks to Kyung-min's willingness to be honest with me, I learned that when Korea and America (or rather, my Korean family and my American friends) tug me in different directions, I have a difficult time determining which direction to travel towards. The problem is that I will inevitably disappoint one by choosing to pursue the other. I try to postpone the journey for as long as I can by wavering indecisively between the two
paths. But when push comes to shove, I will suddenly relinquish my authority on behalf of one individual or culture, and fall arbitrarily in that direction. This allows me to blame potentially adverse effects on the sea-monster that pulled me down a certain path. The answer to my question in Chapter Two is that I will do almost anything to avoid placing the blame on myself, including transforming innocent bystanders like Haena into sea-monsters.

Kyung-min seems to believe that the only solution is to accept that I am permanently stuck in the middle. But his own mother does not accept this solution and frankly, neither would mine. In addition, I am afraid of loitering in the middle of the road because it reminds me of when I would endlessly question whether or not I was allowed to fall into depression. Isn't there an alternative solution somewhere else?
Whenever I am in need of inspiration, I look to my maternal grandfather. During the Korean War, my grandfather's childhood village was under suspicion for housing North Korean refugees. One fateful day, armed forces herded villagers indiscriminately into the courtyard of my great-grandfather's estate. My great-grandfather shielded his eldest son with his body, and my grandfather, the sole survivor of the massacre that morning, hid under the corpse of his father until nightfall.

Today, he is the happiest person that I know, and his happiness is especially remarkable to me because of the horror that he lived through.

Han arrived at the lobby of our meeting spot at three o'clock on the dot. He presented himself with a jovial grin that instantly evoked the image of my dear grandfather in my mind's eye. He set his briefcase down on the table between us and out
came a mountain of newspaper clippings and disposable camera photographs. He narrated the relevance of each in an enthusiastic but leisurely manner. The fragmentary nature of his sentences revealed a lack of formal education in the English language, but despite the flaws in his grammar, his meaning was quite clear.

When I turned the recorder on, I asked him to explain why he had left Korea for the United States.

"So... 1968. There was a... very tough time," Han said, slowly and with purpose.

"Our family was so poor. Not only my family. Is most... whole country was poor. After war. I lost my dad, during the Korean War. So I grew up without the dad, after eight years old. And I made it all myself. Whenever I had time, delivering the newspapers, helping, assisting, making some errand, pick it up the food, whatever. I need some work to do, for my survival.

"Was a Colonel Antony, he was a air force pilot. One day, he came to me and asked me, 'You wanna... come to the United States?' So I said, 'It's impossible, how?' How could be? To go to the United States? So actually, he'll sign for it. I told him I will be think about it. I was just constantly struggling... school educations, money, everyday living, and jobs. Not consistent, not steady. So I try to contact him and he already left. From Korea. He left a little note with his address. That time no telephone numbers, no telephones. Very rare, anyway, in our country. And... I sent him a simple letters—I can able to write a very simple English. And he reply me in a couple months later. He say he loved to sign for me. He sent me the form, and I fill up this, the forms, whatever. Then embassy called, I got the line up, and came to the United States.

"What did your family think about you leaving?"

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15 'Our country' is a literal translation of '우리나라' (oo-ree-nah-rah), which is a popular term for 'Korea' among Koreans. The sentiment behind it is similar to that of 'Mother Russia' for Russians.
"That time, everybody thought I was cheating. Because you've got no way to go to America! That time was after war. And everybody thought that I was a crazy. I don't have no... you know, family good background. You know what I mean? Most citizen cannot even think about [going to America]. Only thing that time was very royal family. [Royal] kid can come in America for education. And we had a lot of orphanage, poor Korean war orphanage, they had a lot of kid. They came to United States and... adopted. But the... so I told... I'm going to the United States, whole my family thinks... nuts! You crazy? How are you...?" Han chuckled at the memory. "So then, last minute, and I got the visas. I say goodbye, I show them all the paperwork, and passports, and everything. So they start to believe. Then I left the country.

"I came to Boston. Boston city, Massachusetts. Colonel Antony, he was a stationed in Boston area. Then also his family is over there. So I came to Boston, and... I was really kind of weird. I left our country, and I had a good memory, and a bad memories. Bad times and a good time. I left the country and I learned the United States, now this gonna be my life. New challenge. And I'm gonna have... so many problems. Because of language, and no family, and no friends, except... Colonel Antony. Uh... I teared a lot. And... I was a scary, and so many things. But. Once arrive, I was a working on apple farm. And I sang a lot of a Korean song. I used to sang a lot. Then uh... cry a lot. I started the... missing all the family back in Korea.

"That time, luckily, I had one friend. He was a Boston college professor. So, I called him, and he started to help me out. He tried the lining up some communities. Some Korean communities, not community at all. They only about forty students, from Korea, and they all... their backgrounds is a very royal. Korean royal family kid. I was there one day and I was a shock. Everybody approach me, 'How did you get... United States?' [they
asked.] I said such and such, and they said, 'What's your parents' name?' So why are you asking my parents' name? Because they all royal family, they knows each other. All forty parents of students, all Korean royal family. I'm really very straightforward guy. 'Who's he your parents?' [they asked.] I said, 'Yeah, my parents... I don't have no dad. I don't have no parents.' 'How did you get to the United States?' [they asked.] So I told them exactly how it happened. 'So what did you do at the Korea?' [they asked.] And I told them. I was a very little upset. I told them—I didn't realize they were very royal family background—I did it the labor work. Korean radio stations. And whatever. They started to ignore me after that. So... I never associated with those people. After that then, I'm just still all my work myself.

"I didn't know what I'm doing at the classroom. The professor comes in and this is speak out and just walk out. So I was wasting my time. I started the looking for job myself. Luckily I got the... cleaning restaurant in a bar. I tried to get in and try to get the open up the my ears." Han grinned and cupped his ears with his hands in imitation of his words. "To hear all the English language. So that's first job I got. Every time I cleaning up the floors or whatever, I'm always close to the bar and the people hanging out. Talking loud noise, screaming, cussing... whatever. So I listening everything. It's kind of weird, all the bad words picking up first! Always. Any language. You know always the bad words." Han chuckled to himself. "Then I started memorize even all this slug words. Anything. After working and even at the restaurant, I open up the my dictionary, and wrote down. Open up the dictionary and try to find the things they talking about.

"So it was a very tough time, but the... very regret, and I want to go back to Korea. Badly. But the Korea, that point, I have to think about it and I have to give up my country! So this is my new country, this is my new place. Only way I can survive. So I
drop whole thing and just concentrate. Even—any dirty... is nothing wrong with cleaning up the floors or whatever. So long as I can open up the my ears and hear in all the language barriers. About a couple of weeks later, I'm started able to communicate slowly, little by little. So I did a lot of very fast progress myself."

My head reeled from all of the difficulties that Han had encountered in his lifetime. The most surreal aspect of listening to him was that nothing in his tone asked for my pity or my empathy. The emphasis of each anecdote was not on his predicament, but on his ability to triumph over all that was dealt him.

"I was in Boston, all they have a huge mansion. Household. The wall was. All build up with the rock. So some of those house, pass by, was all rock falling down and everything. Knock the door, 'I'm looking for job. Can I fix the your walls?' Couple house said, 'Go ahead, do it.' I started the pick up all the rock and I try to restack them. Then one day, one gentleman driving by, and he saw me about the one week. Every morning he was a pass—driving by. One day he just get off and he said are you looking for job? I told him, 'Yes of course.' Then he said, 'Can you work my company?' So what kind of work is it? He said he's a landscapers. Specialize in all tree. Knock the trees down and all that stuff. I said no problem. That time I was young. He hired me and he took me to his house and introduce his whole family.

"Of course I have no family but the Colonel Antony. He was a military personnel, so he go to all over the country. Different stations and all that. [The landscaper] took care of me in a lot of different area. One day, he told me he was World War II, German POW. You know what the POW means? A Prisoner Of War. He got the POW and he landed Boston Massachusetts. Then he was by himself. That time he didn't have a no
English. Whatev. He doesn't know even say 'yes,' 'no.' Nothing. He was a pure German. POW. I think he saw me, and he was... remember his background. His past."

I was starting to get the sense that Colonel Antony had abruptly withdrawn from Han's life instead of accepting responsibility for meddling with it.

"So [German POW] tried to help me out. Even he offer me to learn his business and run together. I was interest, but every time I work... he put me on a twenty feet tall tree! The ladder. He asked me to trim the branches or whatever. I don't know what to do! But then he taught me everything. How to raise the roses, and flowers, a lot of different good stuff. Really appreciate what he done for me. After that, every time I go to Boston, I call him and visit, and say hello to him. I'm always, always appreciating.

"Catering business wasn't even... I looking at the jobs through the yellow page. I went through all the different categories. And I saw... 'catering?' I was a interest, I didn't know what was a catering. Our country have no catering, ever. So I call, get the job, and they hire me as a part time. He call me, and party going to be down, on the Massachusetts Ave. He told me show up in the six o'clock evening.

"I showed up, and I walk in. Inside, was amazing. Is just like a palace! With all the table setting. The scene was exactly... was a scene in all American movie with the ballroom dance and beautiful mansion. I saw it and I was a surprise, what is that!

"After that, is the party going on, and mixing drinks, and serving. That days, I just made my mind. This job is, I gotta do it. After that, I stopped all my education. I called the company. 'Can you hire me as a full time? Do you have any full time job? I got nothing to lose.' Then they ask me, 'What do you... profession?' I don't have no profession. So they asked me to working on the warehouse, and helping drivers, and whatever. So, thank you.
"I started working three dollar twenty-five cents. Per hour. Then, about two months, I became a manager. Warehouse manager. I keep getting promoted. Two year later, I became," Han chuckled, "a vice president, of operations. Then, two year later, another title. Procure man. VP. Which means purchasing for whole company. Assets and all that. So that's very important jobs. I took that, and started working on all the purchasing on all the catering need and company operations and everything, I was very fortunate."

"Fortunate?" I repeated quizzically. "Of course I work very hard," Han reaffirmed. "But all the opportunities came, all together. My principle is, I was always thinking positive. Arrive no negatives. When the bad things coming, I'll accept it. Positively. Not negatively. So that's most important. I'm thinking everything is positively."

So whereas I lied to myself and denied that an event was bad to begin with, Han acknowledged its difficult nature but then was able to put a positive spin onto it.

"That time I had, I realize, it's American Dream. So I see some dreams myself. What I'm accomplishing, and what I'm doing, I'm learning every day. Appreciate all the opportunity they provide me. So I can enjoy, I learn, then I can share, with all the new people, new employees.

"I was working on the company very good and I was promoting a lot of new employees coming in. We hired. Some of these people came in from South America, the European, and from Asia. Everybody have a different talents. Only thing they have a problems with is language barriers. First things they came normally everybody working bottom position. Like a dishwash. Janitory works or whatever.

"One gentleman one day, he asked me to get some of my personal pictures. I gave it to him and he just... hand drawing my face, and put it on the cake, my face. And celebrated my birthday for me at the company. I asked him what do you profession,
what do you been doing? He said he was artist. Making all this sculptures, and so many things. I set up a specially art departments. So he can able to make all different sculptures. Centerpiece for the party. So even special function going on, I ask him to make a small scale of a US Capitol. So he made lovely domes, beautiful, sculpture made, he painted it and everything. We used at the centerpiece on the buffet station. All the senate, the congress, all the people was so excited and happy. So he became very successfully, made all different. So he... dishwasher to I promote him at director of art department."

He gave me some more examples of non-English speaking immigrants who he had helped to get noticed. Each of them had gone on to become quite successful.

"So I promote a lot of different area, different people. I was a very positive, and I was fair with the people, and I promoted... get the grow together. Succeed together."

"Did you ever do this with another Korean?" I was curious to know.

"Uh... I did that with some Korean, very beginning. I wanna help... tried to help Korean immigrant. I failed that, actually," Han said, scratching his chin. "I hired least about forty people. And actually, all these people turned out... house theft! They walking out lot of stuff, from the company! So because Korean people, they never seen such gorgeous stuff. I got the big complaint from all different people. I tried to set up different systems, but they never worked. So I started moving out Korean people. Hired them, take one week, took about forty people. Takes about one year to get all those people out from our company. It was not easy. Some people don't wanna leave! Yeah. I failed with the Korean people. Even I was Korean. Tried. My intention was to try to help them. But I failed. They're leaving a really bad image and reputations. Only a couple Korean people were there. Rest of them... I fired them all."

This was the first time that Han had talked about a failure, I realized.
"So it was a tough. After I fired them, they call my wife, and they making all the stories. I'm going out with all American girls every day. It's a bad gossip, tell my wife whole kind of problems. But then my wife just tell them, 'Don't worry about it what my husband is up to, you just worry about your family.'" He chuckled appreciatively. "So, it was a lot of episode. I did really mean to. I try to help Korean immigrant, but I failed that part of it."

Han held a pensive look on his face. "Kinda when I talk to a lot of Koreans, it's very sometimes uncomfortable. I cannot speak. I speak Korean, think I'm a fluently, speak Korean, right? But sometimes is not. Because they changing so many different dialogue. I was back in 1960's Korean language. The version now is... how many years? About, more than fifty years different."

I thought that was a very good point, but wondered if the discrimination that he'd experienced early on from Koreans of royal families didn't also play a role in creating this mental block.

I asked him to rank his fluency in both languages.

"About half and half," he replied. "So sometime I'm more convenient, a lot easier to approach with American people. In front of Koreans, sometimes I just kinda..." he made of motion of forward movement with his body, but no words came out of his mouth. "And I'm hesitating. I don't talk straight. I just listening, most of the time. Some reason. So I'm not the Korean anymore, maybe." He chuckled.

"How would you identify yourself, if not Korean?"

"I am Korean blood, but I identify myself, I'm more Americanized. Yeah. More Americanized. Unwilling, actually." He cracked another merry grin.

"Are you happy with where you are now?"
"Oh yeah, I'm very happy, yeah," Han affirmed immediately. "Very happy what I done, what I accomplish. I'm very happy what I'm doing right now, too. I can still contributing my knowledge. Very fortunate. I can still communicate with a lot of American catering and hospitality industries. I can able to part of it. And I'm very grateful."

I heard truth in the silence of contradictory heart talk.

I found Han's story to be truly inspirational. Out of respect for the experiences of my grandparents' generation, how dare I wallow the misery of my circumstances instead of fighting to move forward?

I have a habit of turning people into sea-monsters to avoid placing the blame on myself when disappointing important people in my life. Further, I call myself an optimist, but I am only able to maintain my optimistic point of view by lying to myself about the truth of the situation.

I learned from Han that an alternative solution may be to "accept [the bad things coming]. Positively." In other words, instead of rejecting the situation outright, I should first accept the situation for what it truly is. Secondly, I should put a positive spin on that true assessment of the situation. Deciding to come to the United States was a difficult choice for a fifteen-year-old to stubbornly make alone. Admitting that is the first step. The second step is to focus on what has been to my advantage since making my decision, instead of focusing on my regrets and losses. So I commence by asking myself: how, like Han, am I also fortunate?
I know how to remove all visible character traits and emotions detectable by 눈치 (noon-chi) from the outward projection of myself. The ability to tuck the rest of myself behind an inscrutable mask is critical when I am with my family. My paternal grandmother has progressed into the final stage of Parkinson's disease and often has difficulty swallowing her food. Occasionally, her gag reflex will trigger a coughing fit that sprays what has been in her mouth onto the dishes on the table and into my hair. I cannot react in any way, because expressing any sign of disgust would wound my grandmother's pride. "먹어," my grandmother would warble at me. Eat. I complied.

"앉아," Jisoo's mother commanded her daughter, pointing to the couch opposite mine. Sit. Jisoo removed her hand from the crook of her mother's arm and sat. "내 딸은
Why is she interviewing my daughter? (Not an exact translation, as I did not record her words at the time.)

The one who dragged our family to the US is me. My daughter is not a first generation immigrant. (Also not an exact translation.)

Korean babies are counted to be one year old at the moment of birth, to take the gestation period into account. In addition, all Koreans age one year on New Year’s Day, regardless of the actual date of birth. Therefore, someone’s Korean age is roughly a year more than his or her American age, but the exact difference is dependent on the month of birth and the month at the time of interest. (Ex. I am born in February, so from January 1 to my birthday in February, my Korean age is two years more than my American age.)
I nodded in understanding.

"So I was pretty good at reading, writing, grammar, and vocab, but didn't speak. Almost not at all. So yeah. It was a little bit tough to graduate... my English was the only... obstacle," she said, laughing.

It sounded like a genuinely happy laugh, but I found the placement of it to be quite odd. I asked her what kinds of activities she would do outside of school.

"I didn't get into so much about intramural, you know, sports, or any other after school programs," she admitted. "Since I was already," she sighed ruefully, "old enough to know that life is hard when there are four adults at a household, but only two older ones are making money for the living."

She went on to explain, somewhat elusively, that her parents had expected both Jisoo and her older brother to start working full time immediately, even though they were both still finishing high school.

"I think it was a pretty good experience," Jisoo said brightly. "I learned more out of class while working, 'cause so many kind customers taught me how to fix my pronunciations, how to speak better, or good manners."

She smiled at me, but I was boiling inside, imagining the patronizing lectures of her "kind" customers.

I asked her to rate her current English and Korean fluency from a scale of 0-5.

"For Korean, definitely 10 out of 10. Oh! Out of 5? Sorry, 5," she said, laughing at herself. "English? I'll say... 3," she announced after a pause. "I'll say I'm pretty good at what I use daily basis. I am working as a veterinary assistant at this moment, so, in that field, I don't have that many problems, other than scientific terms that I don't really

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19 See Appendix for the story of how Jisoo was almost failed for not being able to speak English fluently enough.
get—that's why I'm still in vet tech program. And daily routine conversations, I don't think I have that much problems at all. Why, do you see any issues?" she asked, laughing.

"No!" I protested, shaking my head frantically. "The reason why I asked was because I'm so impressed with your English! I was wondering if you could tell me what factors most contributed to your acquisition of the English language?"

Jisoo paused to think. "Soon after I moved to the US, I was in an environment that I had to work to support, or be helpful for, my family's living. So I was kind of forced to be exposed to non-Korean people. If there weren't any push or pressure that let me get exposed, I think it would have taken so much longer [to be comfortable with English]. 'Cause, I was pretty shy, like typical... very introvert person. But in my case, it took about four to five years to feel comfortable to speak English."

"What changed at that point?" I asked curiously.

"At that time I had so many good people telling me I'm doing pretty good job keeping up but don't have to speak perfect English. They were telling me, 'You are immigrant who came to US after you're all grown up.' My friends really comforted me pretty well, since then, I guess, I just let myself go. If I don't speak English well, so be it." She smiled, and her eyes crinkled with mirth. "I'm not native American. If you don't understand me, too bad, ask me again!" Jisoo said, amidst a large fit of laughter. "I'm Korean, I would do so much better if I could speak it in Korean!" She nodded, and her laughter subsided.

"But, yep. Since then, I didn't have that much stress about me not being able to speak English as native Americans would do. Soon as I forgot about that stress and pressure, that's when I noticed I'm learning faster, without the stress! I would be more active, talking to somebody else first, instead of waiting for somebody to talk to me."
I remembered what Leonardo had said about getting himself "out of [his] mind, removing [himself] from the way, so [he] could just absorb knowledge."

"Did you feel any sort of shift in your identity along with your acquisition of the English language?" I asked hopefully.

Jisoo nodded. "Definitely I was hundred percent Korean, until, I guess... I felt a little bit more comfortable speaking in English, and then, I think I slowly changed? 'Cause I have my older brother, my mom and my dad. They're definitely not better at speaking in English. They spent most of the time inside their house, most of their friends and co-workers are Korean. But in my case, since I was the youngest, I was exposed to the non-Korean speakers the most. The more I get exposed to non-Korean speakers, my way of thinking, and the way I see things, the way I think of an object," she paused and frowned, trying to find the best way to elucidate her thoughts, "I guess I change it? 'Cause, my parents and my brother complain about my attitude. Because it's not Korean. Which... I never thought about. I was a little shocked, when I heard it."

It seemed like Jisoo's conception of herself began with the remarks of others—the complaints of her family members were what first caused her to realize that she was not one hundred percent Korean anymore.

"What do they mean?" I asked, hoping for more concrete details.

"I was little... self...ish?" Jisoo said, cocking her head and continuing to smile. "And I would think..." she trailed off, and paused to think deeply. "In Korea, when you become an adult, your priority is family," she said, in a serious and quiet tone. "Not yourself. Even when you get married, it's not... just wedding of two individuals. It's a uniting of two different families." She paused again. "This is my current issue," she said, making eye contact with me. "I have my boyfriend, I'm engaged, to be married."
"Congratulations, I saw the ring," I replied.

"Thank you!" Jisoo replied happily. "My boyfriend came to the US when he was in seventh grade. But, the location where he moved, there weren't any Koreans around. And my boyfriend, he, when he gets angry, or when he's in hurry, he would speak in English first." She paused, and stared me again in the eye. "In my case, I would speak in Korean. I would hang around more with his friends, and my non-Korean speaker friends, or even Koreans that were born in here, or don't speak much Korean. I guess... I... absorbed?" she tilted her head and smiled in puzzlement. "The way of their behaviors, their aspects, I'll say. More of a Americanized way than traditional Korean way? Which... I still don't get it," she admitted with a laugh.

"If I asked you to explain the difference, what would you say?"

"I don't think selfish is the right term for it," Jisoo said, gently but firmly. She paused. "So this complaint popped out while I was having a little fight... with my parents." She winced slightly.

I could tell that it hurt her to admit that she had taken a stance against her parents. She didn't specify what exactly the argument had been about, but I guessed that it concerned a desire of Jisoo's that didn't align well with the desires of her parents.

"In Korea, you do what your parents tell you to do. Until you get married. Or even after you get married!" she, said, smiling. Interjecting her cheer all of a sudden made me realize how low and serious her tone had become.

I think I knew what she meant. As a child, I used to scramble over a cabinet in my room and drop down into a crevice behind my closet, because it was the only hiding spot in my house that my mother couldn't forcefully drag me out from. Oftentimes, I was running away from a visitor to my home—a private tutor perhaps, or a family
member that I didn't particularly want to greet. "나와!" my mother commanded me sharply. Out! I shrank away from her groping hands. "싫어," I bleated as pitiably as I knew how. Don't want to. "이런 자기적인 아이가 다 갖나? 안 돼, 나와야 돼," my mother reprimanded. How can you be so selfish? No, you must come out. "싫어. 싫어. 싫어," I sniffled as I was led to wherever it was that I was obligated to go.

"It's hard to keep a distance from your family. Really, you wouldn't have your personal time with traditional Korean parents," Jisoo said. "My parents are very strongly typical Korean parents." She faced me with a smile on her lips and a steely look in her eye.

This combination made me feel slightly uncomfortable.

"FYI, I never spent a night outside house. Until now." She paused for effect. "I'm now thirty-two."

"Oh!" I found myself exclaiming, in a mixture of surprise and horror. And I dared to complain about my own mother. "You don't look it at all!" I said with a laugh, to deflect my own feelings of discomfort.

Jisoo laughed with me. "Yeah, I'm pretty old!" she exclaimed in her cheerful tone of voice. "I'm not allowed," she continued, dropping right back into the low tone of voice that simmered with repressed emotion. "To spend night. Outside the house. Until I get married." Her flinty eyes betrayed her anger and her resentment. "So I haven't been to out of country without my family, I haven't been travelling more than a day. I never been to... hanging out time with my friends. Because I'm not allowed to."

She laughed, unnerving me further. Her heart talk was all over the place. It was quite unsettling to listen to the way that it lashed out and retreated.
"It's very typical," she informed me lightly. "But, those non-Korean, or Americanized friends, you know," she said, "after they're eighteen they're pretty much... not kicked out, but they decide to live away from family most of the time. Spend their college time in a dorm. Afterwards, it's on their own."

I nodded empathetically. Exposure to the independence of Jisoo's peers retroactively caused Jisoo to reflect on the lack of her own. I imagine that this was the impetus behind Jisoo's disastrous attempt at flexing her own wings of independence.

"So, since I'm living in the US, and I'm planning to spend my life in the US—I'm not planning to go back to Korea..."

Jisoo's rueful heart talk told me not to pass up on these statements.

"How did that decision come up?" I asked.

Jisoo paused to choose her words carefully. "Even if you don't have any degree higher, like college degrees or any specialty job, you can still make a living out of your true labor, here," she said elusively. Her voice dropped down to a whisper and her face pinched, as if in pain. "In Korea, it's impossible," she said softly. "You're going to be homeless."

The sorrow of her heart talk left me speechless.

"If you don't have any specialty, if you don't have any college degree, nobody will hire you."

If I was correct about Jisoo's earlier implication, Jisoo's parents had ordered their daughter to begin working instead of pursuing a college degree, which had ended up barring Jisoo from ever returning to Korea. That would explained the sorrow I found buried in her heart.
"That does happening with my friends too," Jisoo whispered. "So once I realized... the hurtful truth about... real life," she paused to laugh, "I think I realized pretty early. 'Cause I was maybe twenty...two... when I realized..." she jolted upright with a bright smile. "Yep! United States it is!" she declared with a merry laugh. The smile slid off her face. "Yeah. Since then... I don't think I've thought about going back to Korea."

It was as if Jisoo couldn't tell when or for how long she wanted to show me what was underneath her mask of happy optimism. She would smile through the most troubling sentences, drop her mask abruptly and expose the timbre of her heart talk, then retreat behind her mask again with a statement that made light of the situation. The dizzying sequence of this performance left me deeply insecure about when to smile, when to drop the smile, and when to give an expression of empathy. I always felt one step behind, even with my 조치 (noon-chi) cranked up to the highest level of sensitivity.

"I think I'm pretty lucky to have my job, the field that I wanted to work for my whole life," she said, retreating behind her mask for a minute. "And... I have my family, everyone healthy, and I'm able to study what I want to do, still at this age. Without my family support, my boyfriend support, it wouldn't be possible," she said mechanically, with a merry laugh. "I'm living in the US, away from all those issues and problems in Korea... all my other Korean friends are experiencing." The mask dropped. "You know, I spent my whole eighteen years of my life in Korea. I have all my friends left in Korea. So I do keep in touch with them, maybe once a month, just to ask them how they're doing, and... most of the news aren't exciting or good. It's tough to make living in Korea." The mask slammed back on. "So I think I'm pretty lucky!"
"If one of your friends told you that they wanted to come live in the United States, what would you tell them?" I asked, feeling breathless from the emotional pace of our conversation.

Jisoo sat quietly, with her hands clasped neatly in her lap. "I would tell them to prepare well," she said slowly. "Cause it wasn't easy. Definitely wasn't easy." She locked eyes with me with a serious but otherwise blank expression. "Definitely learn to speak. Learn to speak and learn how to express yourself. Outside of the Korea, you don't have to retain your emotion inside you."

I almost gasped out loud. Was it true then? In America, you don't need a mask?

"You know the attitude of these people, in the US, they don't feel a shame crying, they don't feel a shame about complaining things. Really nobody accuse them while they express their emotions publically. It's very different from Korea. You don't speak to the elders the way you speak to your friends. And, emotional expression is pretty restricted in Korea, especially in public. Have you heard about... 남자는 세 번 울다?

I had not, but I attempted a literal translation. "As in... males cry three times?"

Jisoo nodded approvingly. "Yes. In their lifetime. Mhmm. When you are born, and when your parents pass away, and when you lose your country. There're very specific three conditions... it's that strict. It's not really acceptable—you're not going to see any adult crying in the middle of the street. Like, it never ever happens in Korea. 'Cause it's kind of taboo."

I nodded. Now the emotional repression of both Jisoo and Kyung-min made absolute sense. I could also personally relate to the importance of having a mask to hide behind in Korea. I had automatically assumed that I would have to hide myself behind a culturally imposed mask in America too, but now I see that this is not the case.
"What personality traits do you think would help your friend in the United States?"

"Being shy wouldn't help. Definitely wouldn't help," Jisoo said automatically. "As long as you have your shell around you, if you don't break it, you will not be able to overcome whatever is outside of shell." Her voice dropped down to a whisper again.

"That's my brother's case. He's trying to break out though. He is really trying, but, given his natural personality... he's shy, he likes to spend time himself. Reading, drink beers, game... stuff," Jisoo trailed off with a laugh. "On top of that, being Korean doesn't help."

Jisoo erupted into a fit of laughter.

I giggled along, wary of the moment that the laughter might abruptly stop.

"Since he did spend... pretty good time as an adult in Korea, he does have this Korean... mind. That's why it's me versus my brother and my parents."

Jisoo let out another peal of laughter. It was shorter this time—I only managed to crack a smile before the moment was over.

"Yeah, when we discuss or argue something, it's always me versus... my family. Because they say," this laugh was limp and empty, "I would think more unorganized way? Western way, I guess. And they're more of a Korean way."

She looked at her hands forlornly.

"Do you feel this dichotomy inside?" I burst out, addressing her heart talk. "It's what people are telling you, but what do you feel?"

Jisoo's head snapped up in surprise. "I... hmm... that's a really good question," she stammered, her eyes widening a fraction. She paused to reflect thoroughly. "Should be, must be... both," she said slowly. "Because human... human... are... affected... by other's opinion as well."

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I understood only too well what she meant by this. In Korean culture, other people's opinions are always much more important than your own. Even the notion that you could have an opinion that was completely removed from the groping hands of culture was unheard of. "Should I go visit my boyfriend in New York this weekend?" I once asked an American classmate. "Well... do you want to go?" she asked in return. "I don't know. He wants me to," I said indecisively. She gave me a look. "Yeah, but what do you want, regardless of what he wants?" she repeated. "Well... I want what he wants, too," I replied, somewhat defensively. "That sounds kind of unhealthy," she told me in a judgmental tone that clammed me up immediately.

"So... I did pretty hard, to try to change myself, my personality. Cause other people... like seeing me shy, introvert, good girl. But doesn't really..." Jisoo heaved a heavy sigh, "...help you, to build your own... life."

My stomach dropped and a frantic flurry of emotions shot up my spine. This statement had hit a little too close to home for my liking. The mask, who am I underneath the mask? I always want to show people what they want to see; I let them build my mask. But does this help me discover who I am underneath that mask? No, it does not—I do not know who I am underneath my mask.

"Sorry, getting little too deep and dark," Jisoo apologized, seeing the expression on my face.

"No, I... I get you," I stammered, laughing.

Jisoo gave me a slow nod, maintaining steady eye contact with me as she did. She understood all that I had not said.

Did I have heart talk as well?
"Yeah. So once you get out of college, it... you can feel it. On your skin. Being a nice, good girl... it doesn't help it to... grow. As much as you... may think." Her face clenched again with the pain of keeping her emotions under control.

"I think I was a pretty good girl listening to my parents. I wouldn't do anything they don't want. I wouldn't do anything... that were... unacceptable for my age." She averted her face slightly, but maintained eye contact. The pain on her face drew deep creases across her cheeks. "I regret that. I regret that." She closed her eyes and inhaled shakily. The wrinkles of regret subsided somewhat. "But in other hand, you would have... pretty good reputation around you, which will help you. And... hiding yourself... it's actually... a good skill, once you start your adulthood. You're going to need it, time to time."

I felt numb with horror. "Are you... happy with where you are now?" I asked quietly. Jisoo nodded mechanically. "I think so. Yeah. I am happy. I am happy 'cause... with all those... troubles, issues, difficulties, obstacles... I'm here, I'm doing what I like to do, I met my guy, my parents are there... what could I... complain."

The demonstration of Jisoo's regret was painful for me to watch because I could envision, with striking clarity, an alternate universe in which I caved to my mother's demands and remained in Korea by her side. I could have lived those years plagued by the angry prickles of Jisoo's regrets under my skin, unable to escape from the mask of tranquility on my face.

On the other hand, it was strangely consoling to be provided such a visceral glimpse into an alternate life. After all, I now realize that I could have easily regretted that life just the same. I asked at the end of Chapter Four how I might be better off for choosing to leave Korea. Well, I have had years to practice the art of exerting my own opinions and
desires. Jisoo did not have those years and she was already thirty years old. Her mask was cracking under the stress.

I must admit that I am still not entirely comfortable with flexing my muscles of autonomy. Perhaps it would be too idealistic to believe that I ever will. I was taught from early childhood onwards to acquiesce to the commands of others because it didn't matter what I wanted to do; I had to do what others told me to do. And I had to hide my displeasure behind a mask as I did so. But in America, people for the most part leave me to do as I please, and even encourage me to express myself. There is no reason to wear a mask, nor to relinquish my autonomy on their behalf. It is wrong of me to create sea-monsters out of them. I may not be comfortable with exerting my opinions and desires, but it appears that I need to get better at doing so. Especially since I expect to continue living in the US. Unless forcing myself to behave in this specific manner would put me right back at the root of the problem? I should not be so concerned with assimilating into American culture. I should be asking myself the degree of autonomy that I personally am comfortable flexing, regardless of what I think America's suggestion for me is. So, what level of self-expression versus cultural acceptance is good enough?
Chapter 6

KLARISSA: Communication; to Share

My incredibly strong desire to belong in and be accepted by Italy drew me back there one Spring Break. Unfortunately, my hope to assimilate was thwarted by my travel companion Sarah, who possessed no sense of 눈치 (noon-chi) to speak of. I sincerely believed at the time that it was her fault Italians would mutter "turiste americane" behind our backs. For example, she did not perceive how leisurely everyone strolled about in Italy—even the speed of our walk could give us away. I would see the condescending looks that Italians would give her as she barreled past them, screaming, "Me skoo-zie!" And I would chase after her, face burning with embarrassment, as I begged for her to slow down. She would apologize and do as I requested. But a minute later, she had forgotten to stay conscious and had sped up once again to her city trot.

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20 A Google search of turiste americane betrays the negative connotation of these words. The top stories describe an incident in which two American tourists decided to vandalize the Colosseum, take a selfie in front of it, then post the photo onto social media.
I wandered the empty halls of the Italian studies department at a college in New York, wondering which office was Klarissa's. "Mi scusi, dov'è l'ufficio di Klarissa?" I rehearsed nervously under my breath. I was so preoccupied that I turned a corner and almost ran straight into a woman that I immediately recognized as Klarissa from her faculty photo online. She gave me a startled but energetic greeting, and apologized for not shaking my hand, as she had not dried them in the bathroom. I grinned and reassured her that I understood. She perceived the truth behind my statement and nodded to herself. As we walked into her office, Klarissa offered "complimenti" on my outfit, running expert and appreciative eyes over the repetition of forest green on my shoes, bag, and sweater. Klarissa herself was impeccably dressed in a tailored and tasteful designer dress, but I only had eyes for the incredible volume of ash brown hair at each side of her face. I wistfully watched it flounce about as Klarissa led me around her spacious office and out onto a balcony with a pleasant view. I told her that my university professors would be incredibly jealous of this space. "Yes, I am very lucky!" she exclaimed.

I was surprised to learn, as we settled down at a round table with pine green accents, that Klarissa had arrived a mere seven months ago—she had only begun teaching in the US at the start of the current academic year.

"I come from a very peaceful town in Tuscany," she began.

My smile turned wistful and hers turned pained in response.

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21 I bet that if I were to walk into that bathroom, I would find hand dryers and no paper towels. In Italy, I learned that Italians disliked unnatural air currents. In Korea, I learned that hand dryers are incredibly unhygienic. Klarissa had most likely avoided drying her hands in the bathroom for either or both of those reasons. It put me at ease to be able to relate with Klarissa on this surprising but ultimately insignificant detail.
"It's a place where you love to stay. You can enjoy life, really. For me it is natural to be there. That's why I feel..." her hands fluttered together and sprang apart as she spoke. "I mean, it's difficult, for me to change everything and to live here. Even though I have to admit, I am very lucky." The hands spread out across the table, as if imploring for help. "I live in the center of Manhattan, in a beautiful apartment. But it's very different."

I nodded empathetically. She felt as if she had no right to complain.

"My husband is very happy, because he likes to work in the USA. Yes. He is doing... classical studies," she said carefully, pronouncing each distinct syllable so that it sounded like 'cla-si-cal stu-dies.' "So he is professor in classics department. His English is perfect, because he started at Stanford University. And he was there for maybe fifteen years?"

Her hands clasped at her chest. "My English, is not so good!" She smiled as she exhaled out a sigh. "Because I was in Italy! I was against the idea of moving to California, because it is too far away from Italy."

I nodded, captivated by the way that her hands would clasp, unclasp, and rotate at the wrists to weave a story that ran parallel with the emotion behind her statements.

"New York, we are... in the middle. It's a compromise. Sometimes I miss my Tuscany, but I am happy to be here. At the end of this semester, I will fly back to Italy, and I will spend all the summer in Italy. I am in between two different feelings. Okay? But I am happy to experience. How to survive in New York, for example."

It sounded like she had not yet made peace with her decision to move to the US.

"What language do you and your husband speak together?" I asked, picking up notes of frustration about her husband's fluency in English in comparison to the lack of her own.
"We speak Italian," Klarissa said in a firm tone. Her hands clasped together with an audible sense of finality. "At home, we speak Italian. No way. Because English is for us, it would be kind of an artificial language. You cannot express yourself in—" she paused abruptly and threw an apologetic hand in my direction. "Oh, maybe you can!" she pitched in consideration of my experience.

I smiled reassuringly. She wasn't offending me at all—in fact, I had a feeling I was going to agree with what she had been about to say.

"Please tell me what you mean," I encouraged.

"I want to mean," she said haltingly, "it's difficult to express yourself in a different language. Your mother language remains your main way of expression. You know?"

Yes, in theory, unless your mother language is not the same as your most fluent one.

"Sometimes I feel like... did you read Wittgenstein?" It is like to be in a bottle. I can see outside, because glass is transparent. But I stay in a bottle. My language is like a bottle. I see people, they can communicate very well, but I cannot because my language is not good enough to express myself." Her hands wove the story of frustration in front of me, tapping at the table to emphasize certain words.

I was completely entranced. "Wow, that's beautiful," I remarked softly.

Klarissa let out a laugh. "That's beau—!" she repeated incredulously. "I feel a little frustrated, I don't know if I express the idea?"

"You did! I loved it!" I insisted with enthusiasm.

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22 Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889-1951): an Austrian philosopher who was interested in the limits of language. He believed that topics such as religion, ethics, and aesthetics were better communicated through experience and by display, rather than through logic and by words.
Klarissa laughed pleasantly. "My language is not good enough to express myself. And I am scared, that someone can think... I am exactly my language." Her fingers tapped on the table anxiously. "That I am exactly what I can express with *words.*"

I nodded. I have the same concern about what my mother may consider to be the extent of my mental capacities. Although I am twenty-two years old, she continues to treat me as if I was thirteen. I can see why—my Korean language ability is right around that of a fifth grader. I can prattle just fine about trivial, concrete events that happened to me during the day, but I am incapable of describing abstract concepts or intangible aspirations unless I strip them down to the core.

"Where would you rate your level of English?" I asked.

"Oh! You are asking me to grade my English?" Klarissa exclaimed, jolting up in her seat. "Oh! I am a professor!" she reminded me with alarmed hand gestures. "So I am very straight! I don't like my English at all! I am not happy with my English. What do you think?"

"I'm interested in what you think," I said gently.

"Halfway. I think I am halfway. Yes, 2.5. Halfway."

I blinked to hide my surprise. Halfway would put her on par with Han. In my opinion, she was more at the level of Leonardo, who had given himself a 4.5. I was dying to tell Klarissa that she should give herself more credit, but how was I to convince her?

"What do you think you have and what do you think it is that you need more?"

"I need more lexicon? Words. I need more words. I need more idiomatic expressions. I need more... exercise, maybe. Because I know the grammar. I have to tell the truth. I know what it is: past tense, or past progressive, past participle. Yes. But I have to *use* that."
"When I speak English, usually I try to translate at the same time I try to correct myself. I am not fluent because I am not relaxed. Always thinking about mistakes I am doing. Because you know, I am a professor of grammar, of language. So I am very... it is strong for me, I am very self-conscious about my mistakes. Sometimes I feel very scared, and shy!" Her hands flew up in indignant surprise. "I am not shy at all! But I became shy in a social situation!

"We have been in a beautiful houses in a Upper East Side. My English was not good enough to stay in that kind of social situation. I was happy to be there. The food was great. The place was wonderful. Beautiful paintings everywhere."

I saw then that Klarissa was looking at America through the lens of what she appreciated in Italy—specifically through the quality of food and the abundance of beauty. She was going to continue to be dissatisfied with America if she only searched for things that reminded her of Italy, I realized.

"People were friendly, wonderful," Klarissa said with an unhappy look on her face.

I waited for the 'but.'

"But they like to be very noising," she continued with a frown. "When they are together. Did you see? They like to drink, and there is a lot of noise. It is so difficult to understand English when they speak fast in a very noise place. So, sometimes I hope I answer in the right way, but I am not sure. Sometimes I answer in very wrong way. I don't know what they ask me. I cannot understand!" Her hands exploded off the table and disappeared into her hair. "Because it is very noisy. So I am exhausted.

"I am desperate because I want to understand, I want to stay in touch with people. You know, English is not my field. I can speak English a little bit, but I studied archeology, I studied Latin, I studied ancient Greek, I studied history, and Italian
literature. These are my fields. Okay? English, just a little bit. Of course, you have to do a little bit of English to travel, to read something, but it's not enough. It was enough in Italy, it was more than enough."

She took a deep breath, and an expression of fatigue came over her face. Shouldn't that be enough? Her heart talk cried.

"You can imagine, now I have to start again!" Klarissa exclaimed. "I feel very strange. Sometimes I am asking to myself, is it true? I am here? I have to? Express myself in a different language?"

After a moment of reflective silence, Klarissa's hand suddenly shot up in the air. "I have a project. I have a goal," Klarissa announced. "In one year, I think my English, it will be very good. I want to improve my English. Studying English, reading English, doing some new friends, and movies, books, everything." She inhaled deeply.

"What do you think?" she asked, stretching an arm across the table towards me. "I am too positive? In one year I will be fluent?"

I shook my head. "Not at all! I think you can definitely do it," I answered sincerely.

"Yes. I am sure, one year from now, my English will be much better," Klarissa agreed cheerfully. "Just this weekend, my director ask me to teach in English next spring. In one year from now, he ask me, why don't you teach Italian culture in English? Because if you teach Italian culture, and if you teach in English, you could have very good, big classes. So I was thinking about, and this morning I decided yes. I will be prepared to teach in English!"

I expressed enthusiastic complimenti.

"Oh, thank you!" she responded with a smile.
I knew that Klarissa's research interests included the Roman appropriation of Greek mythology into its culture, so I asked if this was what Klarissa was planning to teach in English a year from now. If so, I was prepared to beg my way into auditing the course.

She shook her head. "I have to change my field, my research a little bit. Because I used to do research in ancient fields. Now I am doing much more modern and contemporary."

I stifled a disappointed sigh.

"Do you see some of the same trends today?" I asked on a whim. "As in, cultures appropriating one another? Or cultures imposing themselves onto another?"

Klarissa's eyes widened. "Oh, of course," she responded gravely. "But only one way. American is imposing his culture abroad—Italy is not imposing anything. America is imposing a lot, I think. Especially in young people. They are looking to America like a wonderful dream place, a place where everything can happen. The future is here, in New York, in America."

Leonardo's unbounded optimism came immediately to mind.

"Sometimes, they forget how lucky they are to live in a place with a history so long. To have strong traditions, to have the mentality much more old in a sense, but sophisticated. Because when you are very old, you have a lot of experience. And we have a long history behind us. Okay? But they are fascinating by American culture. The movies, you know?"

"What would you tell one of those young Italians, if they told you that they wanted to move to the United States?" I asked eagerly.

"For example to my daughter, I recommend her to come," Klarissa said. "Because you have to experience this place. You have to understand what it means to live in the
USA. I think it is important. To open your mind. I certainly would recommend to young people to come here, to study, to spend two, three, maybe more years. I think it is very important to understand the world. Now, world is small. So you can live in New York, and Seoul, and Rome, and stay in touch. Now I am not speaking about language. I am speaking about cultures, peoples, and different mentalities."

"What do you think is the link between language and culture?"

"Oh, the link is very, very strong. Language and culture is the same thing, I think."

I cocked my head in skeptical but otherwise genuine interest.

"Even body language is the same. When you try to express yourself, you are using everything. You are using your body and your language at the same time. This is culture."

I was blown away. Culture is the combination of verbal language and body language. Of course! When one immigrates to a new country, one must not only learn the language that is spoken there, but also get a sense for how people interact physically. Do you greet someone with a handshake, or a bow, or an air kiss? That was only the beginning.

"Because we use it in a different way," Klarissa clarified. "If we smile, we smile in a different way. If you have eye contact, it can be different, it depends, if you are from different country. So body language, language, everything. Paintings are culture, of course they are. Architecture is culture, of course it is. But even body is culture."

I continued to nod. I could not stop nodding. I agreed with everything she had said and I had something to add.

"I think this will be very interesting to you," I began. "In Korean, there is a word called 눈치, and it means the sense you have about what someone is communicating to you through body language. Not through words."

The expression in Klarissa's eyes told me that she understood immediately.
"What is the word?" she asked, reaching for her bag.

"눈치," I repeated.

"Noon-chi," she repeated with wonder, drawing out the syllables as if embracing the word with her voice. "I love this word. I have to remember. Because it is exactly what I want to say, what I mean," she murmured, writing frantically in a small notebook. "Yes, I want to write it. Because I like it too much. I like it!"

She slid me her notebook. In it she had written 'nunci.' The Italian spelling brought a wide grin to my face. I nodded and Klarissa slipped the notebook back in her bag.

"Yes. Nunci. Nunci," Klarissa repeated. "So, you understand me. For example, I don't know if American person..." she paused to choose her words carefully, "...can understand what I am saying? I'm... it is not so easy to became friend, really friend, with American person. It's not so easy for me. Because I don't understand them... enough, probably. To become really friend. To go deep."

"I've found that immigrants tend to have high levels of 눈치. They have to have it in order to learn the culture abroad," I ventured.

"Yes, yes," she agreed wholeheartedly.

"But I've also noticed that Americans tend to have a particularly difficult time abroad," I added. "Maybe it's because so many different countries speak English. Americans don't have to learn different languages and cultures, because everyone knows theirs. So they never developed 눈치. They never had to."

Klarissa nodded her agreement to this statement as well. "This is true. You know, it is very slight thing. You have to... know what it is. It is difficult to explain. If you don't have this kind of mentality, you cannot explain what it is."

I blinked. If you don't have this kind of mentality, you cannot explain what it is.
"You have to be more considerate of me. I am always apologizing and picking up after you. You have no idea how difficult you make things for me," I finally verbalized to my friend Sarah after our disastrous trip to Italy. She burst into tears. "I don't know how you can say that. I'm always so nice to you!" she sobbed angrily. I attempted to explain when and how her actions had inconvenienced me or others. Why apologizing to me but then forgetting to correct her behavior for the long run was not good enough. Why I could not turn a blind eye to the sheer magnitude of her transgressions. Why I could not be expected to tell her every single time she failed to take someone else into consideration. "You mean you want me to change myself?" she had demanded in horror. "No, just... try harder to be more considerate," I had replied limply. After an hour, she still did not understand.

"But for us, it's clear what it is," Klarissa was saying.

"Yes," I mused, somewhat distractedly. "What do you think it is that helps you understand what 눈치 is?"

"My understanding, it comes from my culture," Klarissa replied confidently.

"Because as you know, for Italian people, body language is very important. Sometimes they make a joke about Italian people, because we use hands, we use body, sometimes, we touch people." She physically demonstrated each item on her list. "Just to... communicate something."

There is a large emphasis on body language in Italian culture. I'd never thought to connect it to the concept of 눈치 before, but the link was obvious to me now.

"When I arrived, a very nice and sweet colleague of mine told me, okay, I know you like the students, and they like you a lot, but be careful. Don't touch them." Klarissas's face took on a look of wide-eyed indignity. "Because of course I don't touch people!" she said in a voice dripping with sarcasm. "If I see a student very sad for example, sometimes
for me, it is..." she got up from her seat to demonstrate. She approached me with a concerned expression on her face and gave my shoulder a gentle touch. "How are you? Do you feel well? Do you need something?" she asked kindly. "It is just... to express my compassion. To express that I care. Okay?" she clarified. "But they don't." She mimed cringing away from herself. "No no! But it is not true!" she declared, sitting back down.

"Because for example, one week ago, I saw a very good student, I saw her very sad. I didn't say anything during the lesson, of course. After the class, I called her. 'Sorry, can I speak with you?' She waited for me, and we were alone in the class. I ask her, 'Sorry, I see you very sad. Can I do something for you?' She's American. She... I don't know how to..." Klarissa leapt back out of her seat to mime clinging heavily onto someone. "She was hanging me? And she started to cry. She was really hanging! 'Oh, thank you!'"

"That moment I was not the professor, I was not... you know?" she said, gesturing to herself. "I was in between. No? I am also a person, I am not only a professor. I am a person and an adult."

This statement put a warm glow in my heart. In Korean, we would say that Klarissa was exhibiting 정 (jung). Most simply put, 정 is an unspoken bond that ties human beings to one another. It transcends bloodlines and national borders and connects strangers to one another through the most fundamental trait that they share: humanity.

"If I see a young people in trouble, I have to say something. Because I am from Italy, so I have to do something!" Klarissa said, laughing.

I laughed along. "I like it. Because you are a person. Because you are from Italy!" I summarized.

"Yes!" Klarissa exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. The excitement positively shot out of her fingers. "I like to be friendly, deep friendly, with women.
Because I strongly believe in friendship among women. If we don't... solidali each other, we do a big mistake in this world. Because man take advantage from that. So I really believe in women, and with Korean women, I feel I have a strong communication. I was surprised, I was asking me, why? We look so different, we live so far away, but there is something? My Korean friend\(^2\) and I were speaking about personal things, exactly in the same way I am used to speaking with my closest Italian friends. I am not speaking about things or something what happened, but feeling. No? Education, relationship, no? So, very..." she rubbed her thumb over her fingers, "...subtle things. I felt something very similar. I was really surprised. So I ask you, why?" Her hand reached out to me for an answer.

I thought long and hard. What was the link between Italian and Korean women? Jisoo concealed her emotions quietly inside of her. What did she have in common with Klarissa, whose entire body performed the emotion she was feeling?

"Maybe an emphasis—one that is manifested in different ways, but an emphasis nonetheless—on emotions and on non-verbal communication?" I pitched.

Klarissa's entire being lit up. "Exactly! The feelings, the communication, the intelligenza emotiva. Because there is logic. But there is another level and it is emotional. You have to understand both," Klarissa said, holding out both of her hands. "You cannot stay only on the logic side. Because if you stay only on the logic side, it is like... to stay only on one foot!" The other hand disappeared. "Uh... where is the other one?" she demanded.

We laughed together.

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\(^2\) She had previously talked at length about her friendship with a Korean woman in San Francisco. See the Appendix for details.
"Communication; to share," she said, painting circles in the air with her hands, "to understand each other. This very important. The emphasis on feelings, on communication. Yes. You are right. Thank you so much!"

I remember being so startled the first time Klarissa asked for my opinion. Other interviewees had deflected questions to me in moments of awkwardness, but this occurrence felt different. Klarissa genuinely seemed interested in hearing what I had to say. In interviewing her, I was attempting to make sense of my life by listening to her ideas. But it seemed as if Klarissa saw an opportunity to do the same. An unexpectedly beautiful and equal exchange, couched in terms of female solidale, ensued.

On occasion, I come across someone like Klarissa, whom I can connect with on a deep, emotional level. It begins with the discovery of a topic of mutual interest—emotional intelligence in this case. The topic is not only interesting to Klarissa and me on an academic level—it is one that we both happen to care for on a personal level. The feeling of an emotional connection comes from the process of encouraging and building upon the ideas of the other in a sensitive and intellectual way. To me, this emotional connection feels like belonging, and it feels like acceptance.

In response to the questions I asked at the end of Chapter Five, I do not need to seek complete acceptance and belonging from entire cultures, because I can find pockets of it cross-culturally among individuals. Partaking in an emotionally charged conversation with someone who regards me as an equal is important not only for the feeling of acceptance that I crave—it also strikes the perfect balance of being able to exert my own opinions while also paying my respects to the opinions of others.
I must be careful to acknowledge that it is dangerous for me to entirely neglect ethnic, gender, and age differences. Klarissa looked at America through the lens of what she appreciated in Italy and I could see how that would only lead to disappointment. I have to be honest with myself and admit that I do the same thing with individuals. I seek to belong by searching for things about others that remind me of myself. But in doing so, I overlook key differences, and sooner or later, I find myself inevitably disappointed.

I wonder where else I apply this same problematic paradigm of thought? I have discovered quite a few trends in the process of my thesis journey. It appears that I still have quite a bit of work to do!
CONCLUDING REMARKS

To begin, a chapter by chapter recap of the entire thesis journey:

In noticing that Leonardo heavily romanticized American culture, I discovered that I too set myself up for disappointment by idealizing cultures. This tendency was the reason why I fled Korea for America and America for Italy. I wondered after the interview if I could find a more realistic view of culture by interviewing someone who was tossed into America's with little to no knowledge of what to expect. What could I learn from someone like that?

Haena was under the impression that she was going on vacation when she was brought to the United States by her parents at age eight. I simultaneously gleaned next to nothing about her and a slew of ugly truths about myself. The one that arose over and over again was the extent to which I struggled against admitting truths to myself. I did not want to admit how I had made my life more complicated by moving to the US, or how it was impossible for me to fully belong in either Korean or American culture, or how it was selfish of me to run away from my family. Disturbed by the way I would passive-aggressively lash out at Haena, I halfheartedly questioned why I engaged in such childish behavior, hesitating to dig deep enough to find the answer.

Kyung-min's explanation of the Third Space, the cultural abyss that immigrants often find themselves stuck in, helped me to understand why I made a habit out of pinning blame on innocent bystanders such as Haena instead of on myself. Most of the time, I flip back and forth between engaging in Korean culture with Korean peers, and engaging in American culture with American peers. But when Korean family and American friends simultaneously tug me in their respective directions, I am frozen by
indecision. By moving in one direction I will inevitably offend the other, so my solution is to remain in the middle for as long as possible, until one side exerts itself forcefully enough for me to justify letting myself fall in their direction. I didn't do it for myself, the sea-monster made me do it, it's not my fault, I would explain to the side that I did not choose. Kyung-min seemed to suggest that accepting my imprisonment in the Third Space was the only option available to me. I could not bear to accept that answer, so I desperately sought a solution elsewhere.

Han delivered the answer that I needed. It was the same answer that Kyung-min gave, but Han convinced me that I could maintain my optimism while accepting the solution. I had stubbornly rejected the inevitable truth that I could not perfectly belong in either Korean or American culture (amongst other inevitable truths), but Han encouraged me to not be afraid of admitting them to myself. I was afraid, because to admit that I was wrong was to invite an onslaught of regret and guilt. But Han suggested that instead of thinking about the negative repercussions of my actions, I should focus on the positive ones. That way, I could maintain my optimism without having to lie to myself. So I resolved to take a step forward by asking how I have been fortunate since making the decision to come to the United States.

Jisoo provided me with a visceral look at how my life could have been if I had stayed in Korea with my mother and the rest of my family. Watching the repressed guilt burst sporadically through the seams of Jisoo's happy mask was painful and anxiety-inducing, but it ultimately gave me the closure that I needed. I realized that I have been extremely fortunate to have had years to practice exerting my own opinions and desires. I comprehended that there was no need to place myself behind a mask in America, and that it was wrong of me to create sea-monsters out of Americans. No one in the US was
demanding that I suppress my autonomous desires on their behalf. At the same time, I made sure to refrain from telling myself that I must get comfortable with exerting my opinions since I currently live in the US. To tell myself that would be to re-introduce the problem of forcing myself to be a certain way in order to assimilate into a culture. So, I asked: what level of self-expression versus cultural acceptance is good enough for me?

I was surprised when Klarissa presented me with a beautiful compromise. I may not be able to identify fully with any culture, but I can identify in part with many different people from many different backgrounds. In an emotionally charged conversation with someone who regards me as their equal, I receive the feeling of acceptance that I crave. Such a conversation also provides me with the perfect opportunity to express my own opinions while staying respectful towards those of others. I made sure to warn myself against idealizing similarities between my conversation partner and me, because to do so would be to set myself up for disappointment (not unlike what I do with cultures).

I now return to the original two questions that inspired the trajectory of my thesis. The first question: how does language function as a means of communication? If there is one thing that I have confirmed, it is that communication involves so much more than verbal language. On the one hand, acquisition of verbal language is highly important in order to adequately explain ourselves. But on the other hand, verbal language is only one half of all communication. Body language is the other "foot," as Klarissa put it, and we miss a great deal of information by ignoring forms of non-verbal communication. In Korean culture, emotional expression is largely suppressed, and a high level of 염려 is necessary to successfully navigate interactions with others. I grew up internalizing the notion that I had to hide my personal thoughts and desires behind a mask of

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indifference. Perhaps as a direct result of this upbringing, I occasionally throw passive-aggressive heart talk out at someone. In extremely subtle ways, I implore the person to listen to what I really want to say, but am afraid to convey it more directly. I am relieved when my heart talk goes unnoticed, because I am ashamed to be engaging in such behavior. Besides, it is the sea-monster's fault for not understanding my meaning in the first place—it is their that is not high enough. I must work to remember that , heart talk, and all other forms of non-verbal language can only exist in a give-and-take relationship. Subtle forms of communication exist, but only insomuch as they are interpretable by a recipient. By this I mean that, after a certain point, I have to stop blaming others for their lack of and reflect the blame on myself for not being clear enough with my intentions—cultural differences and upbringing aside.

The second question: how does one come to terms with the issue of multiple identities? LEONARDO aspires towards a perfect embodiment of both cultures. HAENA has a single identity that fuses both cultures together. KYUNG-MIN rallies himself behind an academic concept (the Third Space) and does not feel a need to identify completely with either culture. HAN has made the most of what life has dealt him, understanding that regret will get him nowhere. JISOO mostly represses her stress. KLARISSA doesn't want a second identity—she just wants enough fluency in the English language to be able to communicate herself to others effectively.

In light of this diverse assortment of solutions, my own plan going forward is to primarily stop shaming myself for not being able to embody each of my cultures to perfection. I will also work to maintain my optimism by acknowledging the reality of a

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24 This is what I should have explained since Chapter Two. I have not been able to admit it until now and I apologize to all the people in my life who have waited for me to do so.
situation before putting a positive spin on that reality. Finally, I will remind myself that I
don’t need full acceptance from each culture—being able to have genuine connections
with people across cultures is more than enough.

This summer, I am returning to Italy for the last time before embarking on the
medical journey that my mother has charted for me since before I was born. When I told
my mom that I had been accepted into Columbia University's Postbaccalaureate
Premedical Program,25 she screeched into the phone so loudly that my housemate heard
it from the bathroom at the end of the hall. She wandered into my room to find me
giggling in embarrassment at the hysterics of my elated mother. In celebration, my
mother declared, she would take all three of her sisters out for dinner, buy each of her
employees rice cakes, call her parents, order a cake, take twenty days off work, come to
New York to buy everything in sight if it had the Columbia logo on it.

I had rebelled against the thought of medical school for eight years and I am still
hesitant to express enthusiasm for the hardships that acquiring an MD will entail. I
finally agree with my mom however, when she says that both my character and my
intellect are well suited for the physician role of a psychiatrist.

We've had many conversations for the past month about how I should be spending
my summer. My mother would like for me to remain in Korea by her side, studying up
on biology, chemistry, physics, and calculus. She would hire private tutors for me, she
told me excitedly. No expense is to be spared when it came to the future of her favorite
child as a doctor. I, on the other hand, wanted to travel to Athens, live in Italy for a while,

25 The Columbia University Postbaccalaureate Premedical Program describes itself online as: "the oldest
and largest program of its kind in the United States, [which] aims to meet the needs of college graduates
who wish to pursue a medical education, but who have taken few or none of the core science courses
required for admission to medical school."
and take my mother on vacation with me. "있다가 말하자," she would say, if I tried to convince her to allow me to do something she disapproved of. *Let's talk about this later.* I would agree, and we would go about the rest of our day, individually taking time to process the words of the other.

The compromise that my mom and I arrived at quite peacefully: she will fly to New York, where my brother is, with my sister and my father a week before Wesleyan's 185th Commencement Ceremony. The day after I graduate, all five members of my family will hasten back to Korea in order to watch my sister proudly graduate middle school.

I will spend all of June sharing lunch with my paternal grandmother, talking with my father and my siblings over dinner, and crying over biology, chemistry, physics, and calculus in between meals. On Sundays, my mom's only day off, she and I will go explore the city or pay a visit to my maternal grandparents.

In the beginning of July, I will fly out to Italy alone and spend a month in Firenze cementing my Italian language abilities before they slip away. I will also be learning how to paint oil portraits. This was my paternal grandmother's idea. She commissioned me to paint my grandfather's portrait, with the intention that it be used at 제사 (jeh-sah). 제사는 an extremely sacred and traditional ceremony that is held annually on the day that an ancestor passed away. I am honored and absolutely terrified by her request.

In early August, my parents and my siblings will fly to Roma, where I will be waiting for them. I am in the process of planning a week long family road trip from Roma to Lecce and back. Just the thought of my mother's amazement at the beauty of Italy brings tears to my eyes.

I am so beyond excited to begin the rest of my life.
APPENDIX: DELETED SCENES

This Appendix is a compilation of vignettes that I found poignant, funny, or interesting as stand-alone fragments, but couldn't quite fit into the overarching narrative. None of the content found here is in any way necessary for the comprehension of the thesis as a whole—it is intended to read as optional and additional content.
LEONARDO
AGE: 26
OCCUPATION: Aspiring Actor
HOME: California
ENGLISH: 4.5
ITALIAN: 5

What's Lost in Translation:

"For me, the word 'love' doesn't have the same weight as the word 'amore.' When I say 'I love you,' for me it's just words. If you say 'Ti amo,' it's... I know what it means. I know how it feels. That's something when you learn second language. The meaning, the feeling, sometimes is hard to combine, 'cause you get lost in translation, you get lost in the words."

Oral Tests:

"In Italy, you have to study like a beast. And you have to... oral tests? Ahh! Urrr. So in Italy there is the interrogation. The teacher says, 'Okay, today we're going to interrogate... Mario Rossi.' So Mario Rossi stands next to the teacher, in front of everyone. All the classmates go, 'Oh yes, not me!' Then they shoot you questions. And you have to know them like that. (Makes repeated chopping motions with his hand). If you don't know, you sit down, and it's over. They give you 2. It goes from 1-10. 6, it's the minimum. You fail if you get 5. Some teachers, they give you 1. It's terrible. So you have to study, you have to work your butt off, if you want to actually pass."
An Interesting Fact about Korea:

"Ooh! Interesting fact! Korean dorms have a curfew. Yes! We didn't, but, the Korean kids that live in Korea and that stay in the dorms—which most of them don't, which I found very interesting—they commute from the home. But some... do stay in dorms. They have a curfew, they have to be in by midnight, and the doors stay locked until five or six in the morning. So they can't get back in. (Laughs.) Yeah. So you're either... you have to stay out all night or you have to get back in before twelve. We didn't have that restriction. But the kids... the Korean kids did, which I found very interesting."

Pae-baek Ceremony:

"We got married at a Catholic Church, and then at the reception, I did the whole... the thing. I wanted to do that 'cause I had a lot of American friends and I wanted to show them my... the Korean culture. And I like the pictures, too! All, the whole, getup. So we did it. Both ways. The American was more fun because of the big dress. Well actually...! They were... they were equally fun."

26 (pae-baek) ceremony: a beautiful and colorful bowing ceremony with roots in Confucian values. The bride and the groom, dressed in traditional wedding robes, engage in rituals such as those involving full body kowtows in front of (traditionally only the groom's parents, but in modern day, typically) both sets of parents. Originally, the ceremony signified formal acceptance of the bride into her groom's family, and implied the severance of her ties to her own. But in modern day, the ceremony is simply regarded as a popular and fun way to pay homage to one's culture on one's wedding day, as is the case with Haena.
KYUNG-MIN
AGE: 24
OCCUPATION: Education Consultant
HOME: New York
ENGLISH: 5
KOREAN: 3 or 4

Gu-Gu-Dan:

"A lot of bilingual speakers have certain topics they like to think in one language over another. When I do the multiplication tables for example, I think in Korean. Versus much of the other mathematical computations, like the quadratic formula or the Pythagorean theorem, which I learned in English. So I would think, you know, 'A squared plus B squared equals C squared,' rather than, you know, the multiplication table, where in Korean, you have 27 구구단 (gu-gu-dan), of which there's like a certain rhythm to memorizing and reciting it. You know, like, '이일은 이, 이이사, 이삼은 육, 이사팔, 오오십' et cetera. So whenever I do the basic multiplication now, without thinking, I know that I'm counting numbers in Korean. Those are some of the differences in language that even I encounter, even today."

The Model Minority Myth:

"A lot of my Asian American friends tend to be a little bit more shy, reserved. Especially when they witness injustice in public, they tend to remain a little bit quiet, they don't stand up for themselves. They just sort of hush away from it. That's definitely not

27 구구단 (gu-gu-dan): the multiplication tables
28 이일은 이, 이이사, 이삼은 육, 이사팔, 오오십 (ee-il-eun ee, ee-ee-sa, ee-sam-eun yook, ee-sa-pal, ee-oh-ship): two one is two, two two four, two three is six, two four eight, two five ten.
who I am. (Chuckles.) I get very, very angry. Most of my friends are Asian American, their entire family immigrated to the US, so they always had to live under this Model Minority Myth, right? Model Minority Myth means if you remain a good minority, we're going to treat you better. As long as you don't complain, as long as you know your place, nobody's going to bother you. A lot of Asian American families live under this principle. Unlike Hispanics, or Blacks, where they try to stand up for themselves more. I hate the Model Minority Myth."
Dishwasher to Chef Story:

"Sometime I had a guy. Dishwasher. One day he brought me all the pictures. He was a bakers! He made all the bread, and cakes. That time, he had no English whatsoever. That time I know how to speaks little Spanish. So I would ask him, that's what you done, everything? He said yes. So I took him out from dishwasher, take him to our bakery department. I told them to use this guy in bakers. That time, they refused. There was all full! In bakery department. Just put him on, use him. So after that, year later, he made it the special croissant. Just amazing taste! He bring that croissant business every party, and people sometime, they wanna come buy the croissant bread from our company! He was just so popular. His croissant was always on the menu. So there was good for the company, and lot of revenue, so very tasteful. About fifteen year later, he got the big promoted, with a certain place gourmet, huge Italian gourmet store. They hire him, as chef. (Chuckles.) So he got a really good promotion. He very successfully life going on right now."
JISOO

AGE: 32
OCCUPATION: Veterinary Assistant
HOME: Virginia
ENGLISH: 3
KOREAN: 5

Discrimination at School in the US:

"And... the funnest thing... My English teacher was fresh out of college, so she was only like a year older than I am? I don't know how she thought of me, but I didn't... talk much, I didn't speak well. But I did pretty good at writing, reading, and I was pretty good at vocabs. My midterm and final exams, my classmates actually copied my answers. I kinda knew. But... I didn't say anything. That was stupid. Teacher came after me. 'Cause, what she saw was a shy, non-English speaking girl, not talking much. Of course... I guess it makes kinda sense that since I was writing so much better, maybe she thought I'm the one copying. So I was reported. I had to retake the exam and essay. I did better, thank goodness! (Laughs.) So I graduated. It was... it was the most... most... tough... tough time in high school. I cried a lot. 'Cause I was being accused of something I didn't do. (Voice brightens.) Other than that, I think I had a pretty good time, just hanging with non-Korean people, mostly international friends. 'Cause they were all in ESL classes."

Dorms in Korea:

"Most of the time, [living in dorms] is optional. It's not a must. So... many friends of mine, female friends, who went to college, the whole family would move with her. Or would have some kind of relative that live close to campus, and my friend will live with that relative. Not by herself. Not in the dorm."
Age or Environment?:

"Environment, definitely. If I came to the US earlier, I think I would have learned to speak faster? Definitely the youngers will learn faster than the olders. Age definitely does affect the speed of learning. But there was a kid in high school, he came to the US when he was eleven. He only hung out with Korean speakers. By the time we graduated high school, I spoke better than he did. That's weird, right? I hope I'm not rude, but his English is shorter than mine. Vocab wise, grammar wise. (Laughs). Maybe he didn't have tough time like I did. (Laughs.) To go over all the... to overcome the issues, difficulties. But... I think environmental condition does effect more than age."

Mandatory Study Sessions:

"If you go to Korea in high school, it's... it's not... it's supposed to be not a duty of yours, but school will... force you to participate after school studying. It's just another class. Without teacher. You just sit there, do homeworks. My brother used to leave house at five am, 'cause the morning study session. So he gets to school around five thirty, study session starts, then real class starts at eight o'clock. And then after all the regular class sessions are done, around three, the after school study session starts, and ends at eleven. So my brother will get back home around twelve. He sleeps around five hours, spends whole day at the school, for the rest of the day. For three years. Everyone does. Teachers kind of force students. Better than having loose students around the school, drinking, or doing something the students are not supposed to do. Fun stuff! I know it sounds pretty terrible, but we found pretty much all good memories around that time. Squeezing our crazy stuff in between, running away from school..."
American Organization versus Italian Flexibility:

"American people, they are very, very organized. So if today, want to invite you to a dinner, they ask you one month in advance. They have to plan everything. In Italy, maybe we are country... guys? I don't know! But it is easy. I don't have to ask you, 'Could you please come to my house, twenty-ninth of March?' (Shocked expression, hands fly up to hair, sputtering sounds.) It's so far away! I don't know if I... will be alive! (Both of us laugh.) It's too far away! Even two months in advance! So they like to be very, very organized. I see they are always thinking about time. They don't like to lose time? If they have to tell you something, they just tell it. That's it. (Hands make rigid choppy motions.)

"Our relationship is much more... flexible. I don't know how to explain. (Tone and hands take on a much more mellow, soothing tone.) If I have to tell you something, of course I tell you what I want to tell you! But at the same time, I ask you how are you, or I remember what happened to you maybe one week ago, and I ask you about your son, or about your husband. They are very private? They go... they have a goal. (Stops herself.) I don't know if it is true, or if it is a stereotype. But every day they look to have a goal? They are very focused. We are less. We are more relaxed."
The Difference Between 'I Love You' and 'Ti Amo':

"They say I love you, to parents, to mother, to father. They can say, of course, I love you. But I cannot say I love you to my father or my mother. It's completely different in Italian. I say 'ti amo' only to my partner."

Something More than Just Language:

"I don't say okay, class is finished, (wipes hands) bye, see you next week! I cannot say that. I like to stay in touch with my students, to have something more than only language. Because if you spend one hour every day in the same space, after a while, you have to understand something of each other. It is not only about the topic. I don't know if it is correct, but this is my idea because I am from Italy!"

Friendship with a Korean Woman:

"What about your country? Is it your country different from American? Is it close to Italy? (I nod vigorously.) Because I spent almost one year in Palo Alto, California. At that time, I had very nice friend, and she was from Korea. (Hand stretches in my direction, with a smile.) And we enjoyed. We still email each other. She was married with a professor of economics, and she was not working at that time, and I had a leave from my job, so we were free, so we enjoyed our friendship. She was very warm, and open, very polite. With a sense of humor, very close to our sense of humor. I think humor is a very strong point in a culture. When you laugh for the same thing? That is a strong connection. Because humor is a very difficult thing. No?"
Everyone Running:

"The food, and people, and life is slow. It is not so fast. Because everyone here is running away! You say, 'Hi, it is nice to meet you!' 'Oh! Sorry! I have to go!' 'Oh okay! Nice to meet you!' 'Ah! I have to run!' 'Okay, bye bye!' Everyone is running."

American Preservatives:

"Yes, the quality of food is completely different. In this country, sometimes I feel desperate. I think they put a lot of artificial preservatives, if you buy something? (Sounds genuinely perplexed.) You can keep it in the refrigerator for fifteen days? And it is the same. No! In Italy, if you buy something, you have to eat it in maybe two or three days! You have to discharge! You cannot keep! Ah! (Laughs.) The yogurt! You can keep it three month! (Shakes hair violently.) No! What do you put it inside? Because it is not normal!"