When I was little, I went to a Korean school that was held by my church on Saturdays. It was one way they advertised the church to gain more members, trying to reach the meager Korean population in town. I never wanted to go. I already had to go to school five days a week; why did I need a sixth? No matter what I said or what I did, I couldn’t get out of it. Umma dragged me there whether I liked it or not. Every Saturday morning as I got dressed, I would complain and tell her that I didn’t want to go. Then she’d tell me that it would look bad if a teacher’s child didn’t go to school.

“I live in America. We speak English,” I told Umma in Korean. “When will I ever use Korean?”

“You do at church,” she replied.

“Yeah, but only at church. My friends all speak English.”

“Even So-ra and Da-ni?”

“I mean, no... but they’re not really my friends. They’re church friends. There’s a difference.”

Umma would then give me a resigned sigh and push me to the car. I pouted and looked out the window, counting the trees passing by and shrieking, “Cows!” when I saw them grazing outside. The church was only forty-five minutes away, but the drive felt like ages. Korean nursery songs played in the car, and I kicked my feet to the rhythm. Umma’s eyes appeared in the rearview mirror, a tiny reflection of my face behind her. You’ll understand one day, she would say. When you’re older, you’ll realize how important and special it was that you got to learn Korean.
We got to the church, and my mom parked the car. I put on my backpack and walked to class myself. I grew up in the church, and I knew the building like the back of my hand. I walked into the classroom, sat down in my seat, and pulled out my textbook and pencil from my backpack. I looked up at the bulletin board. There were twelve printouts of a bundle of grapes for each student, arranged in rows of three, columns of four. With each achievement we made, a grape was filled. Mine was already fully ripe.

That was where I met him. He appeared out of nowhere one Saturday, introduced as the new student. Kim Seung-ho, ten years old. He was quiet—unfamiliar and unsure of this new world. In front of the class, he put his hands on his navel and bowed, making a kiyeok with his body. He was small—his shyness made him look smaller—and he had a bowl cut. He had just moved from South Korea with his mom, and he was the grandson of an elderly lady in the congregation. I didn’t know why he was there because he spoke better Korean than everyone. Maybe his mom thought he needed some friends.

I sat with my mom at lunch and heard the other women whispering about how his mother got divorced and fled to America with her son, trying to get a fresh start. Divorce is out of the question, one woman said. You can’t break a union made by God. Then my mom chimed in, You can never forgive a cheater. Once he cheats, he always will. I just sat in silence eating my rice and miyeokguk.

It turned out that he also went to my American school. His English wasn’t very good, but that was okay because he had me. I was the only Korean—Asian, for that matter—student in the entire school. The principal was well aware of this, so she appointed me as the “ambassador” for him. I don’t know if she even knew we were both Korean, but even if he were Chinese, I don’t
think she would have spotted the difference or cared enough to. Seung-ho was placed in my class, and he stood in front of the room with the teacher, who cleared her throat to bring the chattering room to a hush.

“We have a new student today. His name is Daniel. He came from South Korea!” She said it in an animated voice, excited to have someone from an exotic country in her class. She then ushered him next to me and said, “I know you’ll do a good job teaching him the things we do in class.” I just nodded and smiled.

He stuck next to me the whole day. I didn’t blame him; America was tough, and school even tougher. At lunch, he picked at his steak fingers, his face scrunched up in disgust.

“It tastes better when you dip it in ketchup,” I said.

He didn’t say anything. I asked if he wanted to be called by his Korean name or his English name. He said he didn’t care, but I assumed he would want some familiarity in this strange place with no one who looked like him. We struck a deal, saying that when it was just the two of us, we would call each other by our Korean names; around everyone else, though, we would call each other by our English names. He readily agreed. That evening, my mom said it was nice of me to do that, but it would probably help him more to use English. I didn’t care. I had a Korean friend.

He later told me that his mom had picked his English name: Daniel from the Bible, whose faith in God was so strong even in a foreign land and in the face of lions. Typical Korean Christian things. He said he wanted to be Bruce, like Bruce Willis.

I told him Daniel was better.

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Seung-ho and I spoke in a secret code. We would whisper and giggle about how Heidi had a bug in her hair or how Jason’s jacket looked bad or how stupid some Americans were because they couldn’t grasp long division. No one knew what we were talking about, and what we said stayed between us, no matter how public the setting was. We were sworn to secrecy. Korean became our language.

“Seung-ho-ya,” I called to him. He turned around.

“Mweoh?” he asked. What?

“Sarah said you look cute,” I said in Korean. “But she told me not to tell you, so you can’t tell anyone.” He smiled and blushed. I poked him teasingly with the eraser end of my pencil.

I spent most of my time with Seung-ho. We saw each other every day in American school, on Saturdays for Korean School, and on Sundays for church. We ate our lunches together. I didn’t like kimchi, so he would eat it for me. He didn’t like namul muchim, so I would eat it for him. Sometimes, our parents would pack us Korean food to take to school, and we would eat it together despite what the other students said. He showed me his Pokémon cards and told me which characters were what. My favorite was Rapidash because it looked like a horse. When he got an unfair trade (some kid gave him a shiny Charizard for his Mewtwo), I sat next to him and consoled him, promising that we would get it back.

I think the moms in the congregation thought we were cute together, and they would whisper, I thinking they’ll get married one day. Umma said that’s for God to decide, and childhood relationships never last until adulthood. But how nice would it be, the ladies replied. Two people start as childhood friends, and they grow up to get
married. Plus, they met in church. Because the church apparently is the best place to find your life partner.

Seung-ho and I would walk to ESL together on Mondays and Wednesdays. Apparently, the school saw fit that people who looked like they couldn’t speak English should be taught English outside of the classroom. I think it helped Seung-ho a little bit, but he didn’t like that they seemed to baby him, especially since he had learned the basics in his school back in South Korea. They think I’m a ba-bo, he told me. They think I’m stupid. We had just finished a mind-numbing sing-along video on counting by twos, fives, and tens.

“You just have to deal with it,” I said.

I hated it just as much, but at least the teacher was nice. Did I know what sounds ch and sh made? Yes, but the American teachers didn’t seem to care, even though my English was just as good, if not better than everyone else’s. To them, I was a Korean American student, so there was no way I was just as good as any American. The next year, I no longer had to go to ESL because my state test scores proved that I was more than proficient in English. But Seung-ho stayed for another two years.

***
They don’t tell you that growing up is a nightmare. Raging hormones and cliques seemed like something I would only see in movies, but it was happening all around me in middle school. All anyone wanted to talk about was who was with whom, who kissed whom, who asked out whom.

Seung-ho and I caught a lot of attention. A majority of our friends knew we were just friends, but a few wanted to give us a nudge. You guys should date, one said. I’m sure Seung-ho likes you. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. Don’t you like him? I would
brush them away, telling them it wasn’t like that, and I was just his friend. He was like a brother to me.

One chilly afternoon, I was sitting outside with Seung-ho, waiting for my mom to pick us up. She would usually be our ride back from school because Seung-ho’s mom was busy at the restaurant. A random kid walked by, looked at us, and asked if we were siblings. Seung-ho and I both said that we weren’t. We didn’t even look alike. Then the kid proceeded to ask if we were together.

“I see you guys together all the time,” he said. “And usually, people date people that look like, you know, that look like them.” This comment irritated Seung-ho, and I was left speechless. Seung-ho flipped him off and told him to piss off. The kid shrugged and walked away, muttering to himself, “It wasn’t serious or anything.”

“What a racist fucker,” Seung-ho said. At least his vocabulary was expanding.

When we were in class, Seung-ho and I still sat next to each other. It helped that both of our last names were Kim. There are so many Kims in the world. We still didn’t know any other Koreans (or even Asians), but at least the number of friends we had grew. We didn’t feel any more accepted, though, because anytime we called our moms, our friends would hush each other—Be quiet! They’re speaking in Korean!—and stare at us while we asked our moms to please bring the homework we had forgotten at home. I didn’t like being stared at like an animal. But Seung-ho and I kept our secret code. We told each other our secrets, vowing to never let another person know what passed between us.

But there was a secret that I couldn’t tell him, no matter how hard I tried.

***
The summer before my freshman year, Umma and Appa said we were going to Korea. I counted down the days until we finally made the trip. I hadn’t been in seven years, and I barely remembered my time there. I was excited because I would be in a place where I belonged. No one would look at me like I was an exotic zoo animal. I felt bad for Seungho, though, because he hadn’t been able to go back to South Korea since he’d come to the States. If he did, I don’t know if he’d even be able to come back because his mom never completed all the paperwork.

We stayed at my grandparents’ house in the countryside. They used to farm, but now that they were old, they just had a small plot of land where they grew potatoes, onions, sweet potatoes, and garlic. My grandmother woke me up early in the morning, saying that we had a lot of work to do. I groaned as I twisted and turned in my blankets, trying to escape the bright lights. Then I ate breakfast and went out with Appa and Halmeoni to dig up some onions.

Halmeoni pulled me aside towards a pile of onions on the ground. “Take these,” she said, “and put them in bundles of seoreun. No, shwin.”

I stared at the pile of onions. How many was seoreun? How many was shwin? My mind went blank as I counted, “Hana... dul... saet...” I think Halmeoni noticed my existential crisis because she said that she would do it herself and told me to help Appa. The whole time I helped my dad dig up garlic, I chastised myself for not knowing my numbers.

It didn’t get any better once my cousins arrived. They all spoke Korean, and not a single one spoke English. They knew the basics—hello, good-bye, Taylor Swift—but nothing that I could use. I thought my Korean was good enough, but apparently, it wasn’t. All I could muster was a feeble anyeong, unsure of what I would even say to
these related strangers. In turn, my cousins stared awkwardly at me, not knowing whether they should address me in their broken English or full-blown Korean. I had never felt so alone.

I spent my nights emailing my friends, telling them how my trip was going. I told Seung-ho, “I don’t know what I’m doing here. I thought I was Korean, but maybe I’m not. I look like them, but to them I’m American.” I hit the send button, hoping he would email me back soon. He never did.

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In some ways, high school was worse than middle school, but in other ways, it was better. My schedule was loaded with AP classes, and Umma’s high expectations were weighing me down (along with my backpack). I knew I would have to go to university on a full scholarship. There was no way we could afford it with the small income the laundromat was bringing us. Daniel and I competed with our practice ACT and SAT scores, seeing who did best overall and who did best by section. Daniel’s Math score was always higher than mine, but my Reading and Writing scores were higher than his.

My feelings for Daniel had waned a bit, though every time my hand brushed against him, my skin jolted with electricity. My heart ached every time he mentioned Seul-gi, a girl from church. Seul-gi had just immigrated to the States because her parents wanted to find better opportunities. As to what opportunities, I didn’t know. I had never met her because my family had left the church a few years ago—something about the preacher helping himself to the church’s petty cash and the congregation thinking he was sent by God.
We still spent our days after school together, working on homework or projects. Seung-ho’s mom started to stay at the restaurant longer, so Daniel would eat dinner with us. After our homework, we would sit and watch whatever drama was on TV together. My head was on Daniel’s lap as we watched the main character finally kiss the boy of her dreams. I looked up at him, studying his face. He had ditched the bowl cut a long time ago, but his face still looked childish. He was far from growing his first facial hair, even though he kept insisting that he could feel something on his chin.

“Seung-ho-ya,” I said.

“Mweoh?” he replied.

“I think I like someone,” I said in Korean, turning my face back to the television. I felt him freeze under me.

“Nugu?” Who?

“Benjamin,” I said. Benjamin was initially my friend, but Seung-ho became friends with him through me. He was on the Knowledge Bowl team and the Chess team with Daniel and me. He was nice and smart. He was one of the gentlest, most genuine people I knew. He had curly brown hair that he was always trying to fix. He smelled like fresh laundry.

“I don’t want to tell him, though,” I said. “He’s super nice to me, but I can’t tell if it’s because he likes me or not. I just want to stay quiet because I don’t want to ruin anything. You can’t tell anyone, okay? Yaksok? Do you promise? He didn’t say anything.

That night, as I was getting ready to crawl into bed, my phone rang. The caller ID read Benjamin, which was odd because he wasn’t much of a caller, especially this late at night. Maybe he had a question about the next Knowledge Bowl meeting. I answered the
call and asked him what was up. He said that someone told him something, and he wanted to check and see if it was true. My heart sank as I asked him what he wanted to know. He asked if I liked him. My eyes stung with hurt and betrayal. My chest ached as I asked him who told him, and he said he couldn’t say.

That night, I cried myself to sleep.

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A few weeks later, Daniel said he was going back to South Korea.

“That’s fun,” I replied. “For how long?”

He looked at the ground. “We’re not coming back.”

“What do you mean you’re not coming back?” I asked. “You live here.”

“No, I don’t. I’m not American. I have a Korean citizenship.”

“You’ve lived here since you were ten!”

“And I’m sixteen,” he said. “Six years is hardly anything. Besides, schools there will be happy to take someone who studied in America.”

“You studied in Mississippi,” I said. “It’s not like New York or anything.”

“It doesn’t matter to them,” he said. “America is America.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was a Korean living in America. I was Korean American, but American nonetheless. Daniel was also a Korean living in America. Sure, he wasn’t born in the States, but what did that matter? He made me feel like I belonged where I was. I finally wasn’t different when I was with him.

In a month, his family was all packed and gone. Later I was told that Daniel’s mom had found someone in the church. A man who had come to visit from South Korea and was friends with the pastor, who had suggested he attend the church while on his trip. Stay close to God and all. The man offered a better life for Seung-ho’s mom in
Korea. No more days wiping down tables and collecting meager dollars in tips. No more living in fear of being caught by government officials. She could go back to Korea and be a nurse like she was before she came to the States. And Daniel would be Seung-ho again. The language he was comfortable with. The people he longed to be with.

And I would be here.