Portrait of Mother with Fire

by

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I

My mother picked me up from LAX and drove us north on La Cienega Boulevard—la cienega, “the bog.” The street snaked through the scrubland and hills in the south of the city. I could see the warm smog gather at the horizon, but the car vents transformed the air into a cool, chemical-scented whisper. My body had been in shock since stepping out of the airport into the eighty-degree desert, which obliterated any trace of the winter I’d left, and sucked the moisture from my skin.

We passed through the Inglewood oil fields. I stared through the window at the ant-headed pumpjacks dipping their heads up and down, forcing the crude matter up from the earth. Oil, gas, cars, smog: the capitalist combustion cycle propelled us forward over the very earth it churned apart. I felt the urge to turn around and head back to the airport.

“It is an ugly city, huh?” said my mother, without looking at me.

I hadn’t come back for either summer or winter break, but she looked the same as a year ago. Her face was moonlike, glowing with satisfaction at sensing my unease.

“Your mother can tell some things,” she said. She reached over and tapped the side of my face with her palm. I’d always found the gesture babying, and jerked my head away. The seatbelt grazed my neck and she laughed.

I’d been back fifteen minutes and already felt trapped. The fuzz of the car seat and its ergonomic curves, the tint of the windows, the carefully engineered silence—all of it was made to suspend the body, to insulate it from contact with the outside. The car was nowhere, and it was where we spent all our time in L.A.
We passed out of the oil fields and into the flat city. A man dressed in a polyester Statue of Liberty costume stood at a corner, twirling a bright yellow sign for free credit reports. He had headphones in, and made a game of how high he could throw the spinning sign in the air then catch it. So this was the endpoint of the American Dream, the homeless, tempest-tost passing through the golden door—to be human posters for credit sharks.

The spindly arms of traffic signals and streetlights pierced the hazy sky, while the sprawling streets offered one-story stucco blocks in every direction. We idled at a red light. A white strip mall stood across the street. Bright, mismatched signs advertised a nail salon, a sandwich chain, an auto supply store, and a bank. I remembered why I was back and tapped the window. “Didn’t that strip mall burn down during the L.A. Rebellion? 1992?”

“Sa-i-gu?” she asked. She used the Korean name for the event, the simple three-syllable placeholder of 4-2-9, the date the fires started. “You weren’t even alive then.”

“Weren’t you involved in some sort of black-Korean organizing back then? How was all that connected to the Rodney King stuff?”

Her gaze stiffened. “What makes you so curious about all that now?”

I reminded her that I almost hadn’t come home again. The grand jury would hand down its indictment in the Liang-Gurley trial any day, and it was important for us to rally at the courthouse to support Gurley’s family.

“You can’t be at every march,” she said.

“A lot of people are comparing it to when Soon Ja Du shot Latasha Harlins here, in 1991, and got off with probation,” I continued. A conservative Chinese-American
opposition that saw Liang as a victim, and the media presented them as the dominant voice in the community. “The story is still: Asians and blacks are at war. That’s why I want to know. If we frame this within a longer history of activism, we can shift the narrative.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. She peered at me through the side of her eye. We continued up La Cienega, passing gas stations and drive-thrus and unmarked office buildings. I was almost certain the white strip mall had been an empty lot with a chainlink fence in my childhood. But those stores were innocent of their own history; the mall had become anonymous among the sprawling streets. Los Angeles wasn’t just bland and ugly, its history was hidden by a silent conspiracy.

“That was a difficult time,” she continued. “Why don’t we grab lunch and run some errands? Your dad won’t be home until dinnertime.”

She changed the subject so quickly I almost forgot my question. I’d asked my mother about her past when I was younger, and came up against that same wall of silence. But I was older and resolved to try again.

“You need a haircut,” she continued. “And you look skinny. The Korean food in New York is no good—Esther says this new barbecue spot is the best in Koreatown.”

“Esther, the wife of the ‘Mayor of K Town’?” I asked, putting scorn into the false title. He was known for his dry-cleaning empire, buying out mom-and-pops and forcing his own form of petite-bourgeois austerity on them. Of course, every non-profit wanted him on their board.

My mother shrugged. “She knows her food.”
We turned right onto Olympic Boulevard. Four lanes on each side shot cars east and west, an everyday street wider than the highways in New York. Of course the city was so ugly: it was meant to be seen as a blur.
II

My mother pulled into a strip mall. Two stories of a cheap concrete loomed in front of us, and cars jammed the narrow lot in front. Hangeul business signs buzzed in red and blue neon, though it was mid-day. I stepped out of the car and inhaled smoke rich with meat and onions and garlic.

“Don’t let the exterior fool you,” said my mother.

“It’s L.A.,” I said. “Of course the best barbecue would be in a strip mall.”

I followed her into the restaurant. The interior was a dazzling mix of bright and dark: LEDs shined onto the marble tables, each inset with a grill, while the walls were painted a dark gray. The lights illuminated red broth bubbling in earthenware pots and meat charring over open flames. It was all designed to convey abundance, the pleasure of the meal.

The host, dressed all in black and wearing a headset, brought us to a table in the center. I sat facing my mother, the grill between us and a metal ventilation hood hanging above. She picked up a menu. “Shall we get the combination platter? Comes with kalbi, bulgogi, gui.”

I said I wasn’t that hungry, so maybe just one of those. “Also, I’m trying to eat less meat.”

My mother stared at the menu. “Is that a health thing or an ethical thing?” she said distractedly. The waitress came. She wore slim black jeans and makeup that gave her skin the even porcelain glow that was popular in Korea. Growing up, all of the restaurants we went to were staffed by gruff ahjumas wearing hanboks. New money was flowing into
Koreatown, which demanded a more glamorous staff. My mother ordered the combination platter and handed the menus to the waitress.

“Both,” I muttered.

“Don’t worry, you’ll finish it. So.” She sat up straight and interlaced her hands on the table. She looked immovable, an inquisitor. “You’re here for such a short time, we have to cram a lot in. How was your last semester?”

“Fine,” I said.

“Fine,” she mimicked, in a gruff voice.

I asked if we could go back to the topic of her organizing.

She studied my face as if assessing how determined I was. At last, she said, “Do you remember Bobby?”

My brain clicked through memories of that name. It’d been years. I recalled the thin black man with a beard and a dark suit from the holiday parties my parents used to throw.

I nodded. “Why?”

“He was my co-chair on the Black-Korean Alliance.”

I remembered another detail. “He’d come up to me and peer over his glasses and say, ‘Your mom, man. Back in the day? We were scared of her.’ Then he’d walk away like he’d delivered his message.”

She smiled. “Don’t listen to that. He could be a pain in the ass himself.”

I tilted my head. “How is it the two of you were in charge of building black-Korean unity?”

She shrugged. “Who the fuck else was gonna do it?”
The waitress returned with a large plate of red slabs of meat, gleaming like precious stones. She used a pair of tongs to toss the meat on the grill, where it sizzled and released a rich, fatty smell. She flipped the pieces over, opened her palm to indicate they were done, and walked away.

My mother started to place the cooked pieces onto my plate. “Start eating. It’s best when it’s hot.”

I dipped a thin slice of meat into the dish of salt and sesame oil and began to chew. It was good quality meat, tender with a rich, earthy taste. The restaurant didn’t hide the flavor by soaking it in salt and sugar.

My mother beamed at me. “Good?”

I nodded.

“Good. Keep eating, there’s lots.”

She said it as if she’d had no control over how much food appeared, but I decided to save my arguing. I asked her what the Black-Korean Alliance did.

“The problem was the County never fully supported us,” she said. “I think they gave us letterhead and meeting space. But no one wanted to touch the issue. I remember once, I was quoted in the L.A. Times after some incident in South Central. My boss called me into his office and said, ‘You’re not an activist anymore. You need to run quotes by me.’ And I said, ‘Who the hell wants to interview a white guy about this issue?’ He didn’t like that.”

I laughed despite myself. She’d avoided my question again, jumping straight into a defense—but I still didn’t understand what she was defending. I made a note to myself to look up that Times article. “But what was ‘the issue’?” I asked.
“You know the issue,” she said, as telling a tired story. She spoke in flat tones about the Korean immigrants who opened stores in black neighborhoods, especially South Central. Even before she started working at the County, there were multiple reports of conflicts between Korean shopkeepers and black residents: the former complaining of robberies and extortion, the latter reporting rude service and profiling.

“Being here brings back a memory of Bobby,” she continued, her tone becoming brighter. “We were came to Korean barbecue after some meeting. I ordered, and we started debriefing. I looked up and saw that all the meat was gone. There was just one piece left on the grill, so I popped it into my mouth and burned my tongue.” She chuckled. “I was pissed. Bobby just shrugged and said, ‘I grew up with five siblings. You want to eat? You’ve got to be fast.’ I cussed him out. Talk about black-Korean tension.”

I blinked. I didn’t see what was funny about such a serious issue. I asked what they were meeting about.

“Oh, I don’t remember. Resolving some tension from the meeting, probably.”

“But that’s the part I’m curious about,” I said.

“That’s what you want to know?” she asked. “Some fucked-up thing one of the Koreans said in the meeting about black unemployment maybe. Or a fucked-up thing one of the black people said about Koreans needing to learn English. I forget.”

“OK, but like, how did you address that anti-black racism within the community?”

She looked at me as if I was the one who’d missed the point. “That was the whole idea behind those meetings. You have to get people face-to-face to dispel those stereotypes.”
“That’s interesting,” I said. “In our analysis, the conservative Chinese Americans are the opposition. We follow their posts on Weibo and message boards and Chinese media, then plan counter-statements based on those. I don’t see how meeting with them would help us.”

“Well, has anyone asked?” My mother picked up the tongs again and piled more meat onto my plate. “It’s not good the second day.”

I stared at the precious, freshly-grilled meat before me. No one had asked, to my knowledge. The thought hadn’t occurred to me. I pushed the thought away, feeling pressure to finish the meat. Was it less ethical to eat so much meat, or to throw it away? I began wrapping kalbi with lettuce and dipping sauces on the table. My mother placed the remaining raw pieces on the grill, flipping them deftly with the tongs, then tossed them on my plate.

Soon I was stuffed. I leaned back and stared in a daze at the few blackened pieces of kalbi in the corner of the grill, and the emptied panchan plates with little puddles of chili and oil. A pressure from my upper stomach pushed into my esophagus, and breathing became labored. My mother offered me the remaining pieces of meat, and I declined. A few seconds later, she offered them again.

“No, mom,” I said.

“You sure?”

“I didn’t even want to order the combo platter.”

“It was good, though, wasn’t it?”

I looked at the burnt chunks on the grill and felt nauseous. A busboy, a Latino man wearing a black polo shirt, came to the table carrying a big plastic tub. He dumped
all of the plates into the tub with a loud clatter and took them away. Then he returned with a metal wand, which he placed into a groove in the grill, and lifted it out of the table. It was a comic reversal of the ceremonious presentation at the beginning of the meal.

My mother shook her head. “Scrubbing that is hard work. I feel bad for those guys.”

I pictured the back room full of workers scraping charred meat off the grill in order to present a gleaming surface to the next customers. I pointed out that the maître d’ and waiters were all Korean, the busboys all Latino. I’d learned to call this, in my readings, ‘racial capitalism.’

“Oh yeah,” said my mother. “Cedric Robinson. We read him, back in the day.”

The bustling restaurant, with its bright lights and small fires all around us, took on a new significance. “Isn’t it disturbing that the labor is so divided along racial lines? Wasn’t that also the whole issue that led to the L.A. Rebellion?”

My mother took in a quick, sharp breath. “Yes,” she said, looking away. “We still have a lot of the same issues.”

“As patrons,” I said, “aren’t we complicit in that system?”

Her jaw hardened. “So, what? You’re going to boycott every Korean restaurant that hires Latino busboys? Good luck. You focus on that, you’ll drive yourself crazy.”

“If we don’t focus on it, who will?” I asked.

We both started. Neither of us was used to my being so direct. But I’d been practicing in my organizing meetings, where I learned that if you didn’t argue, your point would be trampled in the quick conversation.
After a pause, my mother spoke slowly. “You’re starting to remind me of myself in college.”
We were silent in the car, drowsy from the heavy meal. Koreatown scrolled by outside: nondescript office buildings with heavy stone exteriors and more strip malls crammed with small businesses by and for Koreans. I understood why people viewed Koreans as alien—the Hangeul signs they didn’t bother to translate flooded the streets as if to say, *this is ours*. Even I felt alienated, in this neighborhood supposedly for me.

My mother asked what I wanted to do next. I shrugged.

“Are you scrubbing yourself?” she tugged the flap of my ear forward.

I groaned and leaned away from her reach.

“I know,” she said, unfazed. “I’ll take you to my new favorite spa. The service is good there—they really get you clean.”

“Believe it or not, I’m a functioning adult,” I said. “I didn’t make it to twenty-one without learning the basics of bathing and feeding myself.”

“Yes, we did a good job raising you,” she said, in mock pride. “But it’s not like you go to the spa yourself, or Korean barbecue.” She waited for my response. “Unh,” she added, like a capstone.

She was right. If we ever did go to the one-street Koreatown in Manhattan, it was for a cheap meal of soondubu or bibimbap. And of course I never went to the spa, or anything luxurious. I didn’t know what my activist friends would say about it.

“The spa’s a good place to talk,” she continued. “It’s quiet. You can ask me more there.”

“I sense an organizing tactic. You’re making a bargain with me.”
“Very perceptive.” She tapped the back of my head. “You must get that from me, too.”

I shrugged and took out my phone. There were dozens of new posts on twitter of that morning’s picket at the Brooklyn courthouse. I saw my friends marching back and forth between metal police barricades, while lawyers and office workers shuffled past in the background. An impromptu press conference, with “Black Lives Matter” batter and “#Asians4BlackLives” pickets. Gurley’s aunt spoke into a megaphone. No news yet from the grand jury. I retweeted a few posts to show support and put away my phone.

My mother asked what I was doing, and I told her.

“I don’t understand all this twitter activism stuff,” she said. “Maybe you can explain it to me.”

I said the platform lent itself to activism. “Black Lives Matter probably wouldn’t have happened without it. Twitter allows us to cover our own events, without waiting for the mainstream media, which would probably ignore us. And we can connect directly with other organizers, even if they’re not in New York.”

“But do you know these people you’re tweeting?”

I laughed and said that wasn’t exactly how it worked. “Part of the point is you’re talking to people you’ve never met, and find a shared political interest. You can form an online community very quickly and build your critique. But yes, some twitter conversations led to IRL friendships.” I added, “In real life.”

“You should be careful,” she said. “You don’t know who’s reading.”

“I doubt the state is bothering to surveil us, if that’s what you mean.”
“Back in our day,” she said, “we always knew the pigs were watching. They probably have a file on me.”

I started. She’d said it so casually. I flashed back to all the Black Panther posters I’d seen, of the literal pigs in cop uniforms. I strained to find the right question about this.

“K town’s changing so quickly,” said my mother, changing the subject. She looked through the window. “So much nicer that it used to be—I actually want to spend time here now.”

We’d passed into a wealthier area, where the boutiques and cafes had wide, glass fronts showed sparse interiors. It was nothing like the old K Town of diamond grates halfway shut across dusty windows. “Isn’t that just code for gentrification? Rebranding property to attract a wealthy clientele and pushing out the old population?”

“Geez,” she said. “I can’t get anything by you.” She pointed out the window. “I remember that store. I think we organized there.” A sign with LIQUOR in bold black letters against a yellow background pointed towards a storefront. “It says liquor, but really a lot of these stores were community anchors, especially in South L.A. They’d sell groceries and canned goods and all that—not just alcohol.”

“But wasn’t the real issue that the stores were opening in neighborhoods were people were systematically denied access to capital resources? Maybe they sold needed things, but they were still perpetuating exploitation.”

My mother chuckled. “Are you still in your Marx reading group? You know, the Grundrisse was one of the first books I ever read in college.”

I blushed—first, because she’d laughed away my analysis, and second, because I hadn’t read the Grundrisse. I muttered that I didn’t know that story.
“My friend recruited me to a study group,” she continued. “She handed me this book the size of a toaster and said I had to finish in two weeks. I sat there with an English dictionary until my head hurt.”

I felt defensive. I didn’t know about their time in college, and here it was being used to prove something. “And now here we are, two Marxists, going to the spa,” I said.

“I don’t see a contradiction between self-care and activism,” she said sharply. “In fact, it would’ve been better if we understood that back then.”

We came upon a large, new mall. I’d never seen it before, and couldn’t remember what had stood there before. A smooth, concrete shell wrapped the facade, and on one side a huge screen played advertisements for soju and skin care products. The new K Town elite. My mother turned right onto the side street that ran alongside it, then left into the gaping mouth of the parking lot.

She drove slowly down a steep ramp, and the car’s headlights came on automatically. I blinked to adjust to the dirty twilight of the lot. We were moving down a narrow driveway with raised cement on either side, barely wide enough for the car. The neon lights hanging from the low ceiling were mismatched—some of them orange, some of them blue-white—and several were out. My mother circled the narrow lanes until she found a spot.

“I hate this parking lot,” said my mother. “After sa-i-gu, all these slumlords bought up property cheap. Now they’re building these malls that look good but are built like crap. Look how many cars they cram in here. And if you’re in the heart of K Town, you can charge whatever you want for rent.”
“People like Esther’s husband,” I said. “I’m glad we’re putting our resources where it’s needed.”

My mother shook her head. “That’s my people. You want to hang with Koreans, you have to take them as they are.”
IV

I was naked. I lay on my back and stared at the high ceiling, which dripped with condensation from the hot room. The bed of bright pink plastic squeaked beneath me each time I moved. The man standing beside me was topless, wearing baggy black shorts and sandals.

“Hankook?” the man asked. He had a booming voice that echoed off the bare walls, a voice that matched his bald head and barrel chest. His skin was luminous from hours in the steamy environment, as if buttered.

In my toddler’s Korean, I eked out that my mother was Korean, and my father was Chinese.

He switched to Mandarin and asked me something about China.

I shook my head.

He explained that he was Korean, but from China, and spoke both languages. “Like you,” he added. “No Chinese, no Korean, OK! English only.”

I nodded. Our little banter, instead of breaking the tension, made me feel more distant. I’d only encountered a handful of people in my life who shared some mix of Chinese and Korean, and here I was, unable to communicate with one of them. I was uncomfortable already, caught in this parody of late capitalism: I was farming out this basic aspect of social reproduction, asking this man to enter the sphere of the body for a wage.

The man put on a beige exfoliating mitt, lifted my arm, began to scrub it in slow, harsh strokes. It felt as if my skin were being torn off. I looked up and saw it was: the outer layer came off in small, dark rolls—ddeh.
“Much, much,” he boomed. He paused and lifted one of the rolls, then dangled it before me like a limp, gray worm. “Wow,” he said, laughing. “When was the last time you scrubbed?”

I blushed and chuckled along with him. I remembered my childhood baths: my father would run a soapy towel over me, until one day my mother noticed an accumulation of dirt in the fold of my elbow, and took over. She’d wrap a washcloth around her index finger and dig into my skin, taking extra care with the inside of my elbow, behind each ear, and the groove of my ankle. Then she’d hold up the towel, gray with ddeh, for me to see. My skin would be pink and raw by the end of the bath. I complained until we developed a compromise: I’d scrub myself, and my mother would inspect me afterwards. I saw those baths as a metaphor for the way my parents expressed care—my father’s gentleness and my mother’s rough intimacy.

I told the man I didn’t remember my last scrub. I didn’t tell him that the last person who scrubbed me was my mother, almost twenty years ago.

“Come back more,” he said. There was an edge of concern in his voice. I realized he didn’t feel any of the awkwardness I did. He wanted to do a good job.

The man lifted my right leg, bent it, and laid it to the side, so that my right foot was against my left knee. He began to scrub the inside of my calf, then moved up my thigh. He lifted the right side of my scrotum with the back of one hand and scrubbed underneath. I flinched, but he continued to scrub as if he hadn’t noticed.

He placed a foot on the bed, picked up my arm, and braced it between his thigh and his fleshy belly. He swiped his mitt downwards against my arm, and with each stroke I felt a patter of dead skin hit my chest. I’d never felt so much like just a body, a piece of
flesh. Nothing was too intimate for this procedure—if I felt any discomfort at it, that was my own issue.

“Left side, please,” said the man.

The bed squeaked as I rolled over onto my side. I now had a view of the open shower stalls. An older man squatted on a white plastic stool in one stall. He gripped a blue scrubbing cloth between his hands and ran it across his back in brisk, automatic strokes. He was naked, too, and lacked any self-consciousness about exposing all of his leathery skin. Scrubbing wasn’t such a luxury, after all: it was a routine.

After the scrub finished, the man pumped soap into a hand towel and lathered it together so that it formed a big, foamy ball. He rubbed this towel over my front and arms, and I was jolted again. It was the opposite of the harsh scrub, almost too luxurious, my skin being tickled by suds. He reached my feet and began to towel between my toes. I couldn’t control myself: I giggled and jerked away.

The man laughed, the booming sound echoing off the tile. “OK, OK, calm please,” he said, then tried my other foot. My leg kicked and I giggled again. I felt ridiculous, but I couldn’t stop myself laughing.

The scrub ended and I thanked the man. I went to rinse in a shower stall. My chest and arms were streaked with red marks, just like my childhood baths. My skin burned, like I was now porous and breathing through my skin. I noticed my fingers trembling. I felt both renewed and shaken, as if I’d just survived a fight. Maybe the two sensations weren’t so separate.

I put on the baggy brown pants and shirt that were the spa uniform and went down a hall into the common area to find my mother. The relaxation room was sparse and lit in
a soft yellow light: people lounged on the padded floor, scrolling through phones, and three televisions on one wall played Korean TV on a low volume. Everyone looked the same in their matching outfits, and it took me a moment to realize none of them was my mother.

I headed towards the treatment rooms at the far end. I opened a door to a room lined with slices of dark charcoal lit by a blue glow. There were three people lying on the straw mat. One of them raised her head. It was my mother. I went over and lay down beside her.

“How was your first scrub?” she asked.

“Intense?” I said.

“You have to get used to it,” she said, chuckling. “Let me feel.” She rubbed my forearm and grunted in approval. “See how soft? You don’t get that just by washing.”

I repeated to her my observation that late capitalism had made even bathing a waged labor.

She cocked her head to the side. “Sure, but how’s that any different from getting your car washed?”

“It’s a little more intimate.”

“Well, that’s your own issue. The guys who do this have seen it all.” She suggested we try another room—each was covered by a mineral element that was supposed to have certain health benefits.

We got up and moved to another room covered with small pink rocks, the walls backlit pink bricks. It was scorching hot. We lay down on two cloths, which protected us
from the burning stones. The heat pressed down like a weight, pinning me to the cloth beneath me.

“Good to sweat out the toxins,” she said.

I never believed her pronouncements on health, unclear how those toxins would move up from the organs through the skin to evaporate in the hot air.

“So,” said my mother. “You’re spending a lot of time on this trial.”

I nodded, the rocks beneath my head grinding together.

“How do you think it’s going?”

I said that it was hard to tell, since so many of the conversations were happening on shadowy message boards, in which right-wing Chinese Americans posted support of the cop who killed Gurley. If that was any indication, though, we were clearly touching a nerve, forcing a needed conversation into the public.

“Do you think he’s guilty?”

I raised myself up on my elbows. “Of course he is. He shot Gurley in the stairwell of his girlfriend’s home. Gurley wasn’t even armed.”

“Just making sure.” My mother was unfazed. “You have to have a solid foundation for your case. Why’d he do it?”

“Does it matter?” I asked. The heat made me impatient. “Liang said he was ‘startled.’”

“Why was he there in the first place?”

I explained the NYPD’s “vertical patrols”: they sent police officers to sweep public housing units floor by floor. Part of our ask was to eliminate those patrols, which reinforced the idea that being poor and brown made you a criminal. As I spoke, I realized
how much I’d learned about the NYPD and policing in the last few months—information more relevant than anything I’d learned in class.

I lay back down and stared at the clay ceiling, framed by the walls of glowing pink bricks around me. I was sweating, the moisture forming a slick layer on my scrubbed skin. I wiped my forehead. My mother seemed as if she could lie there forever. Her eyes were closed, as if in a meditation, and she seemed to welcome the sweat beading on her face.

“Reforming the NYPD is a big ask,” she said. “It’s important to take breaks, otherwise you burn out.”

My throat constricted. I’d expected her to recognize the urgency of what we were doing. “I think it’s more important to show up when you’re called.”

“But between your activism and taking a full course load, it must be hard.”

“It’s true,” I said. A vein in my forehead pulsed from the strain of the conversation. The heat seemed to choke me. “I realized I can’t do both. And that I’m not learning anything useful for the movement in my classes. That’s why I’m dropping out.”

Someone on the other side got up to leave, and the crunching of rocks as they walked filled the quiet room. My plan had been to wait until dinner to tell my parents. But it was done—I’d delivered my message in person. I felt relieved.

My mother didn’t react. We lay there in silence until I couldn’t take the heat any longer. As I shifted to get up, my mother said she would meet me in the cool room. I got up and performed an awkward stride across the scorching rocks, each step burning my feet.
The next room was brightly lit and covered in blue and white tile. A large air conditioning unit overhead roared. It was like the inside of a refrigerator. I sat on the tile bench in the middle of the room and felt an intense relief as the sweat dried and my skin cooled.

Just as I felt cold, my mother came in. She saw me rising from my seat and laughed. “Done already?” she asked. “You always were sensitive, even as a boy.”

She smiled in a way that suggested she’d somehow guessed about my dropping out. She sat down on the cold bench and closed her eyes and sighed with relief. “I’ll meet you outside.” She gestured to her face, which glowed from the steam and sweat. “It’s hard work taking care of yourself.”
V

We drove back up the ramp of the parking lot. I was surprised to see it was sunset, that we’d been in the spa, which was windowless, for hours. It was almost six o’clock and the sky blazed orange, stippled with cloud puffs that caught the last of the yellow in the fading light. Smog, at least, made for vivid sunsets.

I was doubly drowsy from the steaming rooms and from being stuck in a time zone three hours in the future. My mother still hadn’t mentioned me dropping out. The silence was so stark I wondered if she was pretending I’d never said it, like she might undo it through denial.

“Why don’t we stop by and see Halmoni?” she said. “It’s on our way home. You haven’t seen her since the stroke.”

I’d almost forgotten. My mother told me months ago about her surgery and the complications, but I’d been so absorbed in work that it barely registered. Guilt rose in me like steam. I’d left behind more than the city.

My mother pulled up to a low building of gray brick on Olympic that I’d never noticed. We walked through a pair of sliding doors into a brightly-lit reception area. Nurses zipped across, disappearing into rooms, and the receptionists clacked away behind a broad desk. Everyone was Korean. My mother bowed and waved at the receptionist, who returned the bow from her seat. K Town was its own world. I’d always thought of medical care as official, depersonalized. But like the spa, the rest home offered intimate work with the body just for Koreans.

I followed my mother down a hallway and through a doorway at the end. The room was darker than the hall, with fluorescent lights buzzing overhead. We strode by
two beds, each holding a listless, older woman. “They never get visitors,” said my mother. We reached Halmoni’s bed, at the end of the room. “I got Halmoni the best bed,” she said with pride, “next to the window.”

I was shocked at my grandmother’s appearance. Her hair, which she’d always kept in a neat perm dyed jet black, had grown out gray and straight. Her front tooth poked out over her caved lips, like a baby’s—the rest were missing. A beige hospital blanket covered her body, and from under it a tube snaked out to a feeding machine that dispensed a creamy substance every few seconds with a mechanical whir. Halmoni turned her head towards us.

My mother spoke to her in a loud, childish Korean, asking her if she remembered her grandson. Halmoni’s eyes darted over to me, and she gummed her lips.

“That’s a yes,” said my mother, cheerily. “She’s improving.”

We sat down in two plastic chairs at the foot of the bed. I pictured Halmoni as I’d last seen her: a smiling woman with upright posture, wearing bright red lipstick, blue eye shadow, and a sequined cardigan.

“I didn’t know it was so bad,” I said.

My mother saw the surprise in my face. “It is sad, huh? I told her not to get that damn surgery. She wanted to fix her spine so she could wear heels again. She’s lucky she’s alive.”

I asked if I should’ve come home sooner.

My mother shrugged. “To do what?”
To say goodbye to the version of her I knew, I thought. Then embarrassment flooded me: after all, I’d insisted to my mother that I was too busy to return last when she asked. I didn’t say anything.

A pastor came into the room. He was a trim man with gray hair that had receded high on his forehead. He bowed at my mother and me, then bent over Halmoni. He produced a jar from his bag and swiped a finger in the cream inside, which he began rubbing into her face.

I looked at my mother for her reaction, but she was occupied with her thoughts. The pastor acted as if this were normal, rubbing the face of this semi-paralyzed woman. I resented his familiarity with Halmoni. I’d never touched her face, and wouldn’t feel comfortable touching it now.

I asked my mother what was going on.

“Oh,” she said. “He comes twice a week to give facials to all the patients.”

The pastor didn’t turn around, so I assumed he didn’t speak English. “He’s obviously making a last-minute attempt at conversion,” I said.

She shrugged. “Your Halmoni was practical. She would have accepted a facial from a Buddhist monk.” Halmoni glanced over. I had the sense that, though she couldn’t speak, she knew what my mother was saying. “She was vain, too. In a way, this is what she wanted: to lie around all day having someone take care of her.”

“Jesus, mom.”

The pastor turned around and raised his eyebrows. I realized I’d taken his lord’s name in vain, and blushed, though I had no feelings for his religion. He took out a cotton pad, dabbed Halmoni’s face, and bowed to us. He moved on to the next patient.
"You always talk about Halmoni like she’s some monster," I said. "But you’ve never told me anything about why."

My mother inhaled through her nose. "Halmoni wasn’t really a mother," she snapped. "She was much kinder as a grandmother than she ever was to me. You want to know about that?"

"I feel like get it anyway, from the way you talk about her," I said.

"Another time," she said. It was the same response she’d used years ago, when I’d asked about her childhood.

I decided to steer the conversation back. I asked what Halmoni thought of her black-Korean organizing.

"It was just another thing to criticize," she said. My mother spoke firmly to Halmoni, as if arguing with her. "I became political around your age. Halmoni always said it was a waste of time. Her whole reason for coming to America was for me to get an education, which meant I’d get a good job that supported her. So when I took that County job and started working on the BK Alliance, she said, ‘Aigul, you could be a lawyer, at least.’"

The pastor’s serum had dried, leaving Halmoni’s skin with a pearly sheen. She looked at me, as if waiting for my response. My mother hadn’t registered the irony of what she’d said. "OK, but like, you’re not exactly happy that I’m working on the Liang-Gurley trial."

"I never said you shouldn’t work on that. But you can do more with an education."
I was ready for this. I said that there were different forms of education. “Didn’t you learn more in your study groups than in school? What’s the use of a diploma except to reinforce this white supremacist system that tracks people into different classes?”

“Yes, that’s what we thought, too. But then the revolution didn’t come, so we had to move on with our lives. It was a lot harder for people who’d opted out.”

“I’m not ready to give up on systemic change yet,” I said. “This country can’t continue this way. Maybe it’s not a revolution, but something’s coming.” I hadn’t meant it as a critique, but in the silence that followed it felt like one.

“Let’s talk about it more,” she said. It wasn’t an invitation, but a closing of the conversation.

I looked back and saw that Halmoni was gazing out the window. It was night outside. Cars lined up along Olympic Boulevard, red taillights on one side and white headlights on the other, two illuminated streams rushing home.
VI

I sat at the dinner table across from my parents, in the same seats we used every night of my childhood. My mother had started a long-term project of signaling class ascendance through decoration when I was in high school—and I could finally be trusted not to break nice things—that continued after I left for college. The dining table and chairs were new; no set ever lasted more than a few years. The edges of the dark wood were beveled and rounded, gleaming under the mid-century globular lamp above. The dishes were also new: handmade, minimalist off-white ceramics that only the people who could afford them would bother distinguishing from their mass-produced imitators.

More and more it felt we were living in a catalog, that the home became more of an idea, or ideal—which was of course the fantasy the catalogs promised, as long as one ditched the outmoded and dented furniture every few years.

My father had prepared dinner to welcome me home: a whole fish with scallion and ginger, green beans, tofu with bok choy. I thought of my mother’s old joke that the only thing she’d agreed about with her mother was not marrying a Korean man—she’d brag to her friends about her Chinese husband who liked to cook. My father piled food onto my plate, and because he believed in the importance of enjoying while everything was fresh, we ate quickly and in silence.

My mother finished eating and put down her bowl. “Our son has an announcement,” said my mother.

“Oh?” My father turned to me.

Sitting across from my parents was an odd mirror. Friends always told me I looked more like my father, slender and square-jawed, opposed to my mother’s solid
frame and round face. That physical similarity, along with being a boy, made me identify more with him throughout my life—his mellow temperament, his organizational mind.

I told him my plan.

“Huh,” he said. “Well, it’s certainly your choice. Your grandparents set aside that money for your education, but it’s up to you how to spend it.”

“Thanks, I guess,” I said. “I’m not going to spend it. I’ll probably give it away—wealth accumulation is one of the main perpetuators of class inequality.”

My mother turned to him. “That’s your opinion. I don’t agree.” She looked at me.

“You’re not giving that money away.”

“Well,” said my father, his voice dipping down then up, a tic that emerged in tense moments. “What would you do if you dropped out?”

I said I would dedicate myself to organizing, first on the trial and then on other issues around police brutality and anti-blackness within Asian American communities.

“And you don’t think having a college degree would help you with that?” he asked.

“All I’m learning in college about Asian Americans is how the ‘model minority’ is a myth. Meanwhile, most of the Asian students aren’t in those classes, because, of course they’re busy trying to be the model minorities as pre-meds or pre-law. So what’s the point?”

“What are you doing to reach those students?” asked my mother.

“I’ve invited them to meetings. I’ve stood in front of the science building handing out flyers.” I paused, looking for a way to release the tension in the air. “They avoid me like I’m a ‘C’ on their organic chemistry final.”
My parents chuckled. My father went to the kitchen and returned with an apple. He began peeling it, the signal that dinner was over.

“All I’m saying is, we knew those students, too,” said my mother. “Sometimes they surprise you. We have doctor friends, lawyer friends. Part of being a good organizer is finding out everyone’s story.”

“Did those students come to your Marx study groups?” I asked.

My father paused, the paring knife in the crook of his thumb and a curl of apple skin dangling from where it met the fruit’s flesh.

“I think he’s old enough to know some things,” said my mother.

“Did they?” I repeated. “Because these students definitely wouldn’t.”

“That was a very different time,” said my father. The sliver of apple skin fell, and he started peeling a new slice.

I went to my room after dinner. My parents had kept it the same as when I’d lived there, my father joking that it was a great source of trauma for college students to have their rooms converted to dens. The Ikea bed and desk and bookcase filled with my high school books, the stack of CDs against one wall, even the electric guitar I’d fiddled with for a couple years. It wasn’t so long ago I’d been that person, but it was enough to feel like I was stepping into a stranger’s room.

I sat at my desk and opened twitter. There hadn’t been much activity since the morning. I sent an email to the organizing thread asking how it went. I searched for press coverage of the morning’s protest, but didn’t find any. I opened weibo and turned on the translate function in my browser. There were scores of posts from the opposition.
Someone denounced us as “race traitors.” Another linked to a message board called “Chinese First.” I wondered if there were, in fact, more in the opposition, or if they were simply more dedicated.

I texted my high school friend CJ to hang out. Just as in high school, I felt like my life actually began after dark, when my parents went about their evenings and I had time to myself. Back then, I’d angle my screen so that its blue light didn’t show beneath my door, and pretend I’d gone to sleep. It was my only, precious solitary time, and I found it worth the pain of being tired in the mornings.

Then I remembered to search for that article my mother mentioned. It was such a simple act, I was surprised I hadn’t done it before. But it seemed sneaky somehow, even if the information was public.

I googled her. I didn’t find anything except her bio page at recent jobs and volunteer associations. I went to the L.A. Times website and put my mother’s name into the clunky search engine. Several articles came up right away, all from the years 1986 to 1991. I scanned the headlines: “Building Bridges of Understanding in L.A.,” “Black-Korean Truce Termed ‘Very Fragile,’” “Korean Merchants Reconsider Stance of Downplaying Crime,” and “A Moment of Terror in South L.A.” The headlines read like a cheap montage, a ten-second summary of five years of my mother’s work.

I opened the first article. It turned out to be an interview with my mother that started with a biographical sketch of her. Besides a couple key details—that she’d come from South Korea when she was fifteen, that she went to Berkeley—I didn’t know any of it. I was stunned. I closed my laptop.
“Slow down, fool,” said CJ. She was sitting in the passenger’s seat of my mother’s Prius as I drove back to K Town. CJ had a plastic baggie of weed and a packet of rolling papers on her lap, and used the tips of her nails to break a bud into small flakes. She owned a medical marijuana card, purchased from one of the shady doctors that dotted Venice Boardwalk.

“The weed on the East Coast is so bad. It’s oregano,” she said. “And it’s overpriced. Like, this bud?” She held out the fragrant green acorn between her fingers, as if it were a jewel. “Only Cali.”

We stopped at a red light and CJ smacked me on the arm. “Ta da! Look at that, bitch.” She held up the thin white joint, rolled into a neat cone widening from the smoking end to the tip twisted into a neat knot.

“You have true talent,” I said.

“That’s right. I’m a motherfucking master.”

We passed by the Ambassador Hotel, where Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. It was a grand white building with arms that extended out symmetrically, curving towards the street. The hotel was being torn down to make way for something else. Cranes surrounded the scraps of girding and chunks of façade like scavengers.

I pointed to the building. “This city has no appreciation for history.”

She shrugged. “I find architecture so boring,” she said. “People say it’s art, but it just doesn’t have the same intentionality. It’s essentially the management of all these competing interests. It’s like, the accounting department of the arts.”
“If we’re going down that road, you could say the same of painting. The artist has to rent a studio, hire assistants, buy supplies, then sell it at the salon or the auction house.”

“Ugh, don’t tell me you’re one of those Marxist ‘all visual culture is the same’ people. Anyway, I know you don’t really believe that. You’re too invested in beauty.”

I parked across from the bar. CJ asked if we could hotbox the Prius and I said I didn’t think it was a good idea, that it was my mother’s.

She nodded. “Your mom is a freaking psychic.”

We got out and wandered off onto a side street, and soon it was as if we had entered the suburbs: the businesses and what few pedestrians there were disappeared, giving way to apartment buildings and houses, the street lights less frequent and obscured by overhanging trees shooting up from grassy divider plots.

CJ lit up the joint and inhaled, passed it to me, and released a massive cloud of smoke from her lungs. I puffed on it, and passed it back to her. I told her that my tolerance was down. Also, the weed had become stronger in the years since we left in Los Angeles.

“Yeah,” she said. “Be careful, this is good shit.”

We passed homes, their windows illuminated by the blue flares of television screens. All the driveways were full of cars—everyone was home for the night. The occasional scent of night jasmine drifted towards us on the breeze, enhanced by the cool, dry desert air. I said that if we were on the East Coast, people would be streaming outdoors to enjoy a night like this.

“L.A. is the best, dude. I’m definitely moving back here after my dissertation.”
“All we talked about during high school was how we couldn’t wait to escape the city,” I said.

“I know, it’s crazy. But it’s like, I needed to leave in order to understand which parts I didn’t like about the city, and which parts were just me.” She laughed. “Now I realize it’s actually me that’s fucked up. So I might as well have good weather and be near my family.”

We passed the joint back and forth a few times until it burned down to a roach. We walked back toward the bar, semi-hidden inside one of the grand stone buildings of old Los Angeles on the east side of K Town. The apartment building we went to was built like a fortress, with small windows set into a sheer façade. I hadn’t seen any buildings like it set aflame in the footage I had watched. If more of the city had been built with the same solidity, rather than cheap stucco and drywall, it would have been harder to burn. Maybe it would have commanded too much respect to even try.

The bar played off that nostalgia for a disappeared city, with leather booths and shaded lamps and textured wallpaper. CJ and I sat at a corner table and ordered whiskeys.

CJ also added, at the last minute, some fries.

She asked if I was hungry. I thought back to my dinner, and realized, under the effect of the weed, that I was. I laughed and told CJ that I was.

“That’s how you know it’s good shit,” she said, grinning. Her eyes had puffed up and she leaned back into the booth, relaxed. It would have been clear, to anyone paying attention, that we were high—but then, I realized, probably half the people in the bar were, as well.

I told her I was thinking of dropping out.
Her eyes widened into deep, black pools. “For real?”

“I’m just fed up with school, you know? What are we really doing except learning how to write papers for one particular professor at a time. And all the so-called activism on campus. Who is that for? For the other kids like us, living in the bubble.”

She looked away. “My momma would fucking murder me.” After a pause, she said, “How did they react?”

“My mom’s also not happy about it. My dad seems more chill.”

“Of course,” she said. “Korean moms, it’s like getting a degree is wired into their blood.”

I told CJ about my attempt to ask my mother about her past. I said it was difficult to learn from what she’d told me so far, since she kept avoiding my questions.

She looked into the distance. “Dude,” she said. “You’re so lucky your momma shares anything with you.”

“It is,” I said. “But it’s not really what I was hoping for.”

“Still, though. You know how unusual that is, for a her to say any of that?” She said that the closest she’d ever felt to her mother was when her mother had been hospitalized, a few months ago. Her mother had felt some stomach pains but insisted on standing at the register of her store until she nearly collapsed. CJ flew home from college to be with her in the hospital while the doctors ran tests to figure out what was causing the pain. CJ realized it was the first time in decades, perhaps her entire adult life, that her mother had not worked. The anxiety of not doing the one thing that drove her, mixed with her fear at not knowing what was causing the pain, led her to share, for the first time, some of her deepest fears.
“She never would have said it this way, but she was fucking depressed,” CJ continued. “And I was like, No shit. I thought she was just a crazy bitch, but actually, she has all these issues. I mean, she’s still probably depressed, but she just works all day and then comes home and watches her soaps and does it again, so she doesn’t have to look at it. But at least I understand now.”

“Damn,” I said. She hadn’t told me any of this story. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know any of that.”

“It’s whatever,” she said. “Point is, appreciate that shit she tells you.”

I asked CJ how she was dealing with it now.

“I’m in therapy,” she said. “It helps a lot. I used to think therapy was for, like, rich white people. But then I started and I was like, ‘Oh, I have some fucking problems.’”

I thought back to high school again. “We used to make fun of people in therapy,” I said. “All the emo kids were assigned counselors.”

“I remember,” she said. “What did we know? I mean, I still don’t like those bitches, but now I see they were actually dealing with depression.” Her eyes became somber and she stared at a middle distance somewhere behind me. “That whole experience with my mom taught me that your problems don’t go away. You can ignore them, but they’re gonna come out some way.”
I woke up late, groggy from the night out, and the time difference. My mother found me at the dining table, eating leftover fish over rice.

“Smoking that mary jane again?” she asked. She said my father had already left for work, and we had the day free.

I muttered that no one called it that anymore.

“You were out with CJ? Tell the girl I say ‘hi.’”

I considered asking her how she knew both, but didn’t want to admit she was right. I shrugged.

She grunted, mocking my sleepiness. “Back in our time, a lot of people thought marijuana was bourgeois. Decadent. So the party line was to stop smoking. I never liked the stuff anyway—it just made me sleepy.”

“You could just as easily say that it’s a needed coping mechanism under the stresses of late capitalism,” I said. “It’s called ‘self-medicating’ for a reason, and at least it’s not contributing to big pharma’s hold on our mental health.”

“Such a smarty pants, even when he’s hung over,” she said. “I know. Let’s go for a hike this morning. Sweat out all the alcohol and mary jane.”

My mother had developed a fitness routine involving increasingly challenging activities, from yoga to hiking to cycling. She’d always gone through phases: exercise machines would appear then move to a corner of the television room, then finally the garage. Since I’d left for college, she’d dedicated herself to it. I wasn’t excited to go, but I couldn’t claim I had anything else to do.
I changed and went outside to the car, where my mother was already stretching.

“That’s what you’re wearing?” she asked.

She had on bright, patterned athletic clothes. I looked down at my jeans and t-shirt. “It’s all I brought.”

“Why don’t you borrow some of your father’s workout clothes?”

I said I was fine.

We got in the car, and as we backed out of the driveway I saw our house through the front window. The clean, bright walls and red tile played against the blue sky. The home was designed in the 1920s to reinforce the city’s mythic past: a rustic basin dotted with Spanish ranches, an escape from the dreary, overcrowded cities of the east. That fantasy that sold the city, and people migrated to L.A. from the east, from around the world. They didn’t find that rustic land, but a bustling, segregated, corrupt city. The weather, at least, was good.

My mother drove south on La Cienega, the way we’d come the day before. I told her I’d looked up that interview she mentioned yesterday.

“Oh,” she said. “And what did you find about your mother?”

Because the interview was on black-Korean relations, it mentioned that my mother’s first exposure to black people was as a child in Seoul: G.I.s stationed there after the war. She spoke so little of her past, I said, that the detail struck me.

She said it was true. “There were white soldiers, too, of course. But we saw white people on TV.” She stared ahead, concentrating. “I remember we’d follow around trucks of soldiers, and say ‘choco, choco?’ and they’d throw us Hershey’s bars. I remember the
taste—we had nothing like that, of course. It was so rich and sweet. I got into a few fights over those bars.”

A spike of anger hit me. “The chocolate bars were clearly a tool of American imperialism, to buy kids’ loyalty to their occupiers.”

“Of course they were. But what did we know?” She chuckled. “Now, of course, I know that Hershey’s is crap. This was before I learned about 97% dark Belgian chocolate.”

I paused, and brought the conversation back to my mother. “I guess what struck me is that you somehow developed a racial consciousness, and a lot of Koreans didn’t, even though your early life wasn’t different from theirs.”

“Aren’t you impressed?”

“But seriously. What does it take to build racial awareness like that?”

“I found politics,” she said. “We were at Berkeley in the seventies: ‘Third World unity! Down with the capitalist-imperialists!’ So all these people who I’d never have anything in common with were suddenly our comrades. That’s why your mother isn’t afraid to talk to anyone.”

We came upon the hills again, but instead of following La Cienega, my mother took a right onto a small off-ramp. The road led into a park, and soon tall eucalyptus trees shot up around us, arching over the road and shading the ground. We parked in a narrow lot abutting a large field dotted with picnic tables and jungle gym equipment. Large hills rose on the other side of the field, and I saw, with some hesitation, that we would be climbing them.
I followed my mother as she strode briskly towards the hills. She was several inches shorter than my father and me, but walked just as quickly. The cement walkway gave way to a dirt path that cut through low, dry brush. It felt good, despite my hesitation, to walk. The air was dry and smelled of dirt and sage and eucalyptus, instead of the usual acid and minerals of car exhaust.

The incline increased, and the dirt road began to loop back in a series of switchbacks. I began breathing heavily and felt sweat gather at the small of my back and under my jeans. I realized my mother was right—I should’ve changed clothes. But I didn’t want to admit it to her.

“Tired?” she asked. Her breathing was heavy, too, but came in a steady rhythm.

I shook my head and followed her. I was struggling, and it took all my concentration to take one step, then the next. My calves and thighs began to burn, and the trail showed no signs of leveling off.

We came at last to a small clearing. The scrub and trees opened, onto a view of the city. The long corridors of Wilshire and Olympic stretched from left to right, along which clusters of tall buildings shot up: Century City, K Town, downtown. The rest of the city was flat single- or two-story buildings, stretching in every direction like a field, until the Hollywood hills stopped them, an immovable curtain in the north. The light seemed to come from everywhere at once. Los Angeles only looked good from a distance.

“Not bad, huh?” said my mother. She was standing beside me, swinging her arms out from side to side. “Don’t you feel accomplished?”

I nodded reluctantly. My breathing came back to normal.
“Let’s buy you some exercise clothes so you’re not sweating through your jeans.” She took a lock of my hair between her fingers. “While we’re on it, you could use a haircut, too.”

I began forming a combative response about how market forces had not only created a new synthetic uniform for exercise, but invented a whole aspirational leisure class to buy it. And how my mother was reinforcing a certain beauty standard. I recalled CJ’s advice the night before, and decided to focus instead on my questions.

“You keep talking about self-care,” I said, “and how you didn’t do that back in your movement days. What exactly were you doing?”

“Let’s keep moving,” she said. The trail leveled off, thankfully, and became a walking path encircling a grassy field. “Yesterday, I mentioned my friend recruiting me to that reading group in college,” she said. “The reading groups were really just recruitment for cadre: people who were in the vanguard.” She said that several months into the reading group, she got a call late one night to come to a meeting at someone’s living room in Oakland. She got there and found she didn’t know most of the people. There was a man sitting in the corner of the room, and the other people were questioning his class loyalties.

I asked her what that meant.

“It was called a struggle session,” she said. “The point was to reveal your bourgeois tendencies and undo them. So when it turned out his father was a doctor, they said, ‘Does he serve the people? Are you willing to denounce him? Will you give up material wealth and re-educate yourself as a proletariat?’ That sort of thing.”
I said that sounded harsh, but also made sense. “Without that kind of radical questioning, it’s easy to go along with your unconscious class biases.”

“Maybe,” said my mother. “But I think we went too far. A lot of people were really traumatized by those experiences.” She grinned. “Lucky for me, I grew up dirt poor, so my class position was excellent.”

I said it sounded like the guy being drilled that night might’ve been one of those people.

“That man was your father,” she said. “We were hard on him.”

I stopped walking. My mother continued a few steps, then stopped. She didn’t walk back, but stood there and began swinging her arms again. It was as if she’d expected this response from me. Questions popped in my mind faster than I could sort them.

My mother spoke first. “That’s why he understands you wanting to drop out. He had all that class guilt stuff drilled into him, and so of course he wanted to get rid of it. But you can’t. None of us choose what we have.”

I landed on the dullest response. “I didn’t know that’s how you and dad met.”

“Not exactly a rom-com, is it?” She continued walking, and I jogged to catch up with her. “We made the decision not to tell you too much, until you were old enough.”

I asked how they would know when that was.

“Well, it sounds like you’re going through some of the same questions. Why burden you with all this stuff unless you needed it?”

Was knowledge a burden? I asked.

“Of course it is,” she said. “You have to know when someone is ready to hear the truth.”
IX

We drove down Pico Boulevard towards Roscoe’s Chicken and Waffles. My mother said that we deserved a treat after hiking. “All this thinking about the BK Coalition brings me back,” she said. “We’d be in South Central all day, and Roscoe’s was the only decent place to eat.”

“Because it was a food desert,” I said. “Wasn’t a lot of the resistance to Korean stores that they were liquor stores, instead of the groceries the area needed?”

“They didn’t have the capital for that,” she said. “There was this big misconception that Koreans were getting government loans to open. But actually a lot of it was ggeh, money circles.” She explained that Korean immigrants would pool their money, and take turns paying it out to one member at a time. This provided many down payments on their stores. “Plus,” she said, “the margins on liquor are higher.”

“That’s a little cynical,” I said. “Peddling liquor because it makes more profit.”

“I never said my people weren’t ruthless.”

My mother turned right into a parking lot. The restaurant’s roof angled downwards and cantilevered over the sides to shade the windows. Thin columns held up a walkway in front of the building, which was also lined with low, stone planters sprouting waxy desert plants. I said that I’d learned to call this, in an architectural history, the googie style. “They streamlined buildings to look as if they might launch into space, like the Jetsons. Another fantasy of Los Angeles’s future that looks quaint and retro, now.”

“So you are learning in class,” said my mother.

I said I could’ve learned that from Wikipedia, too.
We passed under the walkway. The bright day gave way to its shade, and then to the even darker interior. Large, dark booths extended in every direction. The pink-tinged neon lights did little to alleviate the gloom. I’d become used to natural light as a precious commodity in New York, but in Los Angeles, the light was just as often oppressive, something to be kept out.

A host showed us to a table in the back. I’d remembered coming with my family as a child and being one of the few non-black customers. Now, though, the tables were filled, in addition to black customers, with Latinos and a handful of whites and Asians. Food had become a city-wide pastime in the city, where ferocious bloggers crisscrossed the sprawling neighborhoods in search of “authentic” tacos and ramen.

We slid into the low seats of a booth, which gave us a view of the dining room. I pointed out the clientele to my mother.

“See?” she said. “Maybe race relations are improving.”

“Or, cultural tourism is more accepted. People aren’t coming together over some shared vision of liberation, but to post food pics to their instgrams.”

“Uhuh,” said my mother. She was scanning the menu.

I asked her not to order too much this time.

“When do I ever order too much?” The waitress came over to the table and my mother looked up. “Hey, sister. I remember you!”

The woman looked about my mother’s age, and her hair was teased and highlighted in terra cotta curls. She arched her eyes. “You do?”
My mother explained that she used to come there all the time for meetings with a brother named Bobby. They would always sit in the back with a notepad, sometimes for a couple hours.

“Oh, sure,” she said, nodding at my mother. “You were always having some heavy discussions.”

They bantered a bit and my mother order two combinations of dark meat and waffles, with a side of grits. It sounded like a lot of food, and rich.

The waitress left and I asked my mother why she called her “sister.”

“You know,” she said, “it’s one of those cultural things.”

“I know that,” I said. “The point is, we need to stop appropriating AAVE, African American Vernacular English. Non-black people are always lifting phrases like they own them.”

My mother blinked rapidly. “I came to America, and two years later I was living in Oakland. It was the seventies. ‘Right on, brother,’ and ‘fuck the man.’ That’s where I learned English.”

“Well,” I said, “that was a particular time. But it sounds different now.”

“How should I talk, then?” She was impatient.

I didn’t have a response. “I’m just saying.”

The waitress brought the food: two large, fluffy waffles piled on a beige plastic plate, and a chicken thigh and drumstick on another. I looked at all the fried, colorless food and felt like some variety. “Excuse me,” I said to the waitress. “The menu said you had greens. What kind of greens?”

“What kind of greens?” she asked. “Greens!”
“Oh. Could we have a side of those, please?”

She nodded and left us. We ate in silence. I sliced the crispy chicken open and spreading the generous ball of butter into the waffles. I looked up and realized my mother was smiling.

“I could’ve told you that,” she said. “Greens.”

My mother reached across and tapped my cheek, her affectionate slap. I pulled away, my face burning. I kept eating. The waitress dropped off the small bowl of greens and I thanked her. I was hungry from the hike and as I ate I saw that I’d finish my meal, but I didn’t want my mother to see that she’d ordered the right amount.

“I’m teasing,” she said. “This is what I was telling you: you say something, you get scolded, and you try again. If you walk around all the time afraid that you’re going to slip up, you’ll never get anywhere.”

I said that maybe that worked during the days of Third World Unity, but today if you spoke like that on twitter there was a good chance you’d be taken down, and that takedown could go viral.

“See?” she said. “That’s the problem with all that tweeting. You don’t even know these people who you’re arguing with, so the conversation gets out of hand.”

“If you’re careful with what you say, it shouldn’t matter.”

“I just don’t think that’s a healthy place to start organizing.”

Our conversation reminded me to check my phone, which I hadn’t done all morning. I put down my utensils and put my phone on the table. My mother gave me a sidelong glance, but I opened twitter anyway and scrolled through.
“He was indicted!” I said. “The grand jury indicted him.” A bright, crackling feeling rushed up from my chest through my head. I scanned an article, confirming the news. My body felt light, relieved that we’d won—that for once, a cop had been held accountable. “This is a big win,” I said.

My mother nodded and kept eating. “That’s good,” she said. “You need some wins to maintain momentum.”

I stared. “You’re not excited.”

“I think it’s fine as a strategic step. But what is this doing for the bigger picture? Sending an Asian cop to jail?”

Her words pulled me back like an anchor. I was surprised. “That’s exactly what the opposition is saying: that this cop is being scapegoated because he’s Asian, that none of the white cops were.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but if we focus on that, what we’re really asking for is white privilege. In this case, the privilege to kill black people without consequence.”

My mother stopped eating. “Of course I’m not saying that. What I’m saying is: why are you focusing on this cop, when it was the whole system that sent him to that housing project with that gun that night? That built the projects and profiled the man he killed?”

“We’re asking for NYPD reform, too.”

“I guess I’m surprised you’re so eager to see him go to jail,” she said. “I looked up an article on the cop, and I felt for him: you can tell that he was put in this terrible situation.” She paused. “My first job when I came back to L.A., before I worked with the
BK Alliance, was to work with Asian American youth. These kids were lumpenproletariat: they were poor, they came from messed-up families. They didn’t have the politics I did, and definitely not the opportunities you did. I see Liang and he reminds me of those kids. Being a cop was probably the best job he could get.”

“I don’t think this is the time to have sympathy for the killer.”

I expected my mother to retort. Instead, her face softened, as if she’d realized something she’d forgotten. “It’s fine to think that way when you’re young,” she said. “Maybe it’s the only way.”
Back in the car, my mother turned the air conditioning on high. The car had absorbed the sun’s rays, and the stifling air seemed resistant to moving. My mother took a lock of hair between two of her fingers, as if measuring where to cut it. “You really do need a haircut,” she said. “When’s the last time you got one?”

I said that my friend had cut it, maybe a month or two ago.

“Your friend? A month or two? Honey,” she said. “You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

“I’m trying to move away from an economy where every little aspect of life is monetized, towards one where we actually rely upon each other,” I said. I explained that in exchange for the haircut, I helped her hang a shelf. “How are we actually divesting from capitalism?”

“Divest all you want,” she said. “But find a friend who knows how to cut hair.”

My face prickled. I’d been proud of my new system and those small gestures.

“Let me treat you to a real haircut,” she continued. “Do it for my sake. I have this new barber my friend swears by.”

I shrugged. In our conversational game, I’d decided to cede certain pieces in order to push others forward. If she were happy taking care of me, it also made her more open to my questions.

“Do you think you could introduce me to Bobby? I’d like to ask him about the Black-Korean Coalition.”

She started, but then nodded as if it were a natural request. “Sure,” she said. “I’ll text that old grump. He’d love to talk about the old days with you.”
I wondered about the comment. I asked if I should know anything about him before we met.

My mother’s mouth drew downwards. “One of the first times we talked, Bobby was screaming at me. It was crazy. He was saying me ching-chong and who the fuck do you think you are because I overstepped or something in a meeting. I just stopped and stared at him.” My mother’s face flushed and her eyes darkened, as if she were in that moment again. “I said, ‘Hey, motherfucker! You can’t talk to me like that.’ Bobby was shocked. He didn’t know I’d lived in Oakland. The two of us stood in the middle of the office screaming at each other.

“I don’t remember how it resolved,” she continued. “Eventually, we got into a little routine. We’d cuss each other out and then the next day we’d joke about it.” She chuckled.

I’d assumed, I realized, that the two of them got along. That’s how I’d pictured them driving around South Central, eating together at Roscoe’s. If the co-chairs of the Coalition weren’t even on good terms, I asked, how did they get anything done?

“Oh, it wasn’t that we weren’t on good terms. It’s just that we had anger problems. That’s one thing blacks and Koreans have in common.”

I said I couldn’t imagine working long-term with someone who I got into regular screaming matches with. I’d inherited my father’s temperament.

“That’s why everyone’s afraid of your mother,” she said. “You know, I saw Bobby not too long ago. It was cute: he came up to me and said, ‘I’m sorry about that time I screamed at you.’ I laughed. I was like, ‘Which time?’ He was really surprised. I realized how deep his anger issues went. We didn’t really have the language for it back
then, all this stuff around trauma and mental health. So I just thought he was a crazy
motherfucker. And probably vice versa.”

I was reconsidering my request to meet him. My mother looked over at me and
read my face.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “He’ll be nice to you. He’s mellowed out a lot—the man
is pushing eighty. And if he isn’t,” she said, “I’ll come kick his ass.”

We were back in Koreatown. I’d been so absorbed in the conversation I hadn’t
noticed the switch. K Town had spread south, adjacent to the black neighborhoods south
of Olympic. Los Angeles was segregated, but it was also intimate.

My mother turned into a small strip mall. Despite being on the corner of two large
avenues, I would’ve never noticed it. A standalone flower shop occupied a corner of the
parking lot, and besides the hair salon, the beige, faux-wood structure held a locksmith, a
cheap sushi restaurant, and a copy center.

I asked my mother if she and her friends didn’t bring a scavenger hunt mentality
to their finds in K Town. It seemed like the more nondescript, secretive, or out-of-the-
way the business was, the better.

“It’s because we’re Korean,” she said. “If there’s two things we love, it’s gossip,
and finding the best.”

“Now that you say it,” I said, “this makes me think of Bourdieu’s idea of
distinction: the way we constitute an identity is around our taste, which is of course tied
to class. It’s the only way to distinguish yourself under late capitalism.”

“That’s what happens when you grow up poor in a poor-ass country,” she said.
“You appreciate things.”
I wanted to ask her more about that, but she parked and got out of the car. The salon was tucked into the corner of the strip mall, with a glass front that showed the entirety of the small interior. There were eight chairs, but most of them were empty. Four stylists lounged around talking, plus a woman reading a magazine, her hair painted with dyes and crimped in foil. Each chair faced a full-length mirror, tilted at a flattering angle to the customers and catching the warm spotlight pointed at it.

A woman, a little younger than my mother, jumped up when we walked in. She wore a neat blue dress over black jeans and boots. I could see why my mother trusted her—she had the unassuming but elegant style my mother prized. I took up my usual position of smiling and nodding as my mother introduced me and translated. Another person in the salon exclaimed that I was handsome, one of the few phrases I understood. My mother rolled her eyes and waved away the comment, the sort of false modesty she loved to display. A third, an older stylist with her hair dyed green, added something I didn’t understand.

My mother showed me to the changing room in the back. “They think you’re so handsome,” she said. “That all you need is to get rid of those pock marks.”

“Wow, thank them for the advice,” I said.

“I’d pay for it, you know, if you ever wanted to.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t sure how serious my mother was, but I didn’t want to even engage with the idea. I went into the closet and wrapped myself in one of the red smocks hanging there.

The stylist stood in the center of the room and gestured for me to lie in one of the hair washing stations at the back. I looked for my mother, who was sitting on the far side,
by the entrance, reading a Korean beauty magazine. I lay back into the reclining chair, but my shoulders rested where my neck should’ve. I was too tall. The stylist laughed and nudged me down, so that my legs splayed over the floor, and my lower back came off the chair.

Her hands were strong and held my head down as she sprayed a strong, warm jet of water into my hair. Then I heard a squishing sound and felt her hands work a generous helping of shampoo into my hair, her nails lightly scratching my scalp. My skin tingled from the touch, and the shampoo transformed into a rich lather. I suddenly understood why people would pay for someone to do what the rest of us did every day on our own. It was a bit like being tickled—I could never feel that sense of release, the tingling comfort, on my own.

The warm jet came back and scoured my hair of any trace of shampoo. The stylist lifted me up by the neck, deftly wrapping my sopping hair in a towel that she gathered at the crown of my head, and led me to her chair like a swaddled child. The stylist used the towel to rub my head dry, then tossed it aside. She picked up strands of my hair from the top and sides, and looked at them with concern, as if asking herself what to do.

“Bad, isn’t it?” asked my mother in English, for my benefit.

The stylist, too polite to agree, laughed. “Who cut your hair?” she asked me.

I said a friend.

She smiled and shook her head. “Go to a barber. Please.” She seemed sincere in her concern, the way the man who scrubbed me had for my epidermal health. I assumed that explaining my barter economy wouldn’t help the situation. Instead, I nodded.
I was used to barbers who snapped a plastic fitting onto a mechanical clipper, and roughly shaved the sides of my head. This stylist, though, leaned a comb against my scalp and navigated the clipper, no fitting, by hand. She switched to scissors, and circumnavigated my head several times, at first attacking clumps of hair, then becoming finer in her cuts, until she was snipping single hairs that strayed from her careful design.

She guided me back to the sink to rinse and condition my hair, then back to the chair to blow-dry it. She ran a thick clump of styling wax into her hands, and rubbed my head with it, then molded the hair into a sort of cascading wave—high on top falling into short bangs. I recognized it as the kind of hair style popular in Korea, but it felt ridiculous on my own head. I smiled and nodded.

My mother came over to appraise the cut. “So much better,” she said.

The stylist beamed. Another stylist repeated that I was handsome.

My mother handed the stylist a couple of bills, then instructed me to bow and thank her, which I did. As soon as we got into the car, I flipped down the mirror above the passenger’s seat and mussed my hair out of its sculpture.

“All that careful work and you’re going to do that?” said my mother.

I said that it wasn’t my style.

“Fine,” she said. “At least it doesn’t look so damn messy anymore.”
We returned home and found my father in the kitchen.

“Notice your son’s haircut?” said my mother.

My father blinked. “Nice,” he said.


I offered to help my father cook dinner that night. I knew my father wouldn’t need the help, but I wanted to get his perspective on some things. “Perfect,” said my mother. “I like it when the two men are in the kitchen.” She said she’d be in her office, doing yoga, and we could call her when it was ready.

I stood at the island peeling ginger while my father sliced eggplants. My parents had renovated the home recently, and my father’s only request was an expanded kitchen. The new one had granite countertops and a light wood cabinets. It was the only way he allowed himself luxury—if it were attached to something functional.

“Liang was indicted,” I said.

“Oh?” said my father. “What’s the next step?”

I told him that we’d continue showing up to the courthouse to make sure he was sentenced. Some of us would probably sit in the courtroom with Gurley’s family. We weren’t allowed to bring in signs, but we could wear a color, maybe.

“That’s going to be a tough one,” he said. “Cops are rarely found guilty.” He smiled, as if remembering something. “We used to have this chant at protests, ‘Today’s pigs, tomorrow’s bacon.’”

I laughed. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I asked my father what their communist days were like.
“Well,” he said, his voice dipping. He didn’t look up from his cutting board. “During the seventies, a lot of young people were very attracted to Marxist ideology.” He explained that they were inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China, and the other communist revolutions around the global south. It made sense that people of color, recognizing their position within America, would turn to that ideology. The communists were, after all, winning.

“So of course you were anti-police,” I said.

“Only in as much as they were called in to enforce the rights of the bourgeoisie.”

I’d guessed that he would talk about the past in this depersonalized way. It was as if he and my mother were two parts of a text: the primary document and its footnotes. But of course, both of them were there. I could find out the context for my mother’s organizing from him. I asked when they joined the group.

“Oh, maybe my sophomore year.”

I waited for him to say more, but he didn’t. I asked how long they were a part of the group.

“About ten years,” he said.

“Ten years! That’s, like, your entire youth.”

My father grimaced a little and kept slicing the eggplant. “We had a lot of energy when we were young.”

I did the math. “So, like, you were doing that right until Mom started the Black-Korean Coalition. Why did you stop?”

“It wasn’t exactly a good climate for revolutionary politics,” he said. He cited the Reagan administration and the deep anti-communist sentiments that pervaded the end of
the Cold War. The organizing they were doing was intensive, and hard to sustain collectively. “Also, we were thinking of having you. So we needed real jobs.”

I asked what kinds of jobs they were doing before.

My father’s face closed, as if he needed to calibrate an answer before talking again. He put the eggplant into a bowl and turned to me. “There was this idea, back then, that we needed to be re-educated,” he said.

“Sure, from Mao,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, wincing. “So we were sent to work in different places. Factories, mines. To align ourselves with the proletariat.”

“You worked in a factory?” I asked.

“For a little while. We were reassigned a lot. Sometimes to different places.”

The details clicked in place. I asked if that was why they came back to Los Angeles.

“Ding ding ding,” he said, with fake cheer. It was as if he were trying to distance himself from the fact.

I asked what year that was.

“1980,” he said, and turned back to the cutting board.

“But,” I said, “you were still in college then.” Even as I finished my sentence, the realization struck me. I lit up, as if I’d won something. “You dropped out! You and mom dropped out?”

“There was this idea,” he said slowly, “that education was bourgeois. It was impeding our revolutionary activity.”
The rest of dinner preparation passed in a blur as my mind churned through this new fact. I was vindicated. Resentment blurred into a jittery excitement. We sat down to dinner and, again, ate mostly in silence. My mother complimented the two chefs, and said I could come home any time to help cook. The roles had reversed from dinner the night before, and I turned to my mother.

“I asked Dad about your organizing past,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “Get more perspective on it.”

My father focused on his food.

“You dropped out of college,” I said.

My mother stiffened. She didn’t look at my father. Then she shrugged. “Yes, we did. We were ordered to.”

I waited for her to say more. She kept eating, apparently content with her response. “OK,” I began, as if I needed to explain the obvious, “isn’t it a little hypocritical that you’re putting so much emphasis on my education when you dropped out yourself? And when were you planning on telling me this little detail?”

She shrugged again. “I wasn’t planning on keeping it a secret. And this doesn’t change my stance—it was a different time.”

I felt she were robbing me of a victory. A victory over what, I wasn’t sure. “So you regret dropping out.”

“Not exactly,” she said. “But in retrospect, I see that it was more a test of loyalty than it was the actual politics. Like, what did it matter if we got a degree while we were organizing? And it was easy for the leadership to say—they were older, they already had degrees.”
“That’s messed up,” I said. “But that’s not my situation. I’m making this decision.”

My father spoke up. “You know we’ll understand no matter what. But think about the long-term.” He said that I might want a family, and that I’d need to think about supporting them. “In this economy, a bachelor’s degree is almost mandatory.”


“I just feel like you’re doing this classic Asian parent thing of displacing your experiences onto me,” I said. “And emphasizing education as if it’s some magic ticket to life. There are people dying because of white supremacist state violence every day. Some degree isn’t going to help that.”

“We just want the best for you,” said my father. It was a cliché, but he said it with meaning.

“What I didn’t have,” my mother added.
The next morning, my mother found me at the dining room table again and announced the day’s activities. She suggested I visit her new acupuncturist for a diagnosis. She’d also heard of a gallery exhibition downtown that sounded interesting. “Get in a little culture in between all that self-care,” she added.

I’d always been amazed at my mother’s ability to shed embarrassment. She no longer had any ground to stand upon, insisting I stay in college. But she’d somehow constructed a narrative in which she wasn’t at all a hypocrite.

We decided to do the gallery first, and got into the car. I was readjusting to the rhythm of L.A.: stepping out of the car and feeling my limbs, only to get back in and surrender to the numbing stillness of it. My mother took the 10 Freeway east, a massive gray chute cut through the middle of the city. Downtown began to loom in the distance, the one part of L.A. that looked, to me, like a real city.

I noticed a new skyscraper rising above the others, higher than the crown-topped California Tower that had been, for my entire life, the tallest. The new tower rose in a curve, like a ship’s sail. A glowing logo of twinned red and blue circles appeared on the façade, piercing the haze. I blinked to make of what I was seeing. I pointed it out to my mother.

“Interesting, isn’t it? Korean airline money built that thing.”

The logo seemed detached from the building, from the rest of downtown—a blazing beacon hovering in the brown haze. The logo disappeared, replaced by another. I said that even in the eighties, urban theorists were pointing out the influx of money from the pacific rim into L.A.’s developments. It’d sounded conspiratorial when I read it, but
perhaps there was something to it. It didn’t help the misconception that Koreans were wealthy and taking over parts of the city.

“That’s the issue we were dealing with back then,” she said. “Our whole line was, ‘Korean merchants are disempowered, too.’ This is a class issue, not just race. But of course the media loved to talk about race.”

“It’s true, though, that even if Asian America is very stratified, we do have more wealth, on the whole.” I cited the statistic that average household wealth was similar for whites and Asians. “And there’s, for example, my private college education.”

“Your father’s parents helped us with that,” she said. “We wouldn’t have sent you to Columbia if it weren’t for them.”

“And how did they have that wealth?”

“I’m not saying you’re not privileged. But throwing that away isn’t going to solve anything.”

I decided to let it rest for a while. I’d given up on convincing my mother to support the decision, but I wanted her to at least admit that my reasoning was sound.

We turned off the freeway, down a steep off-ramp. The asphalt under the car was cracked and filled with potholes, and the car rumbled. My mother turned left, so that we passed under the freeway. The headlights came on automatically, and I was shocked by what I saw. A cluster of tents had taken over the area. A shopping cart overflowed with bulging plastic shopping bags. A blue tarp stretched between a chain-link fence and the sidewalk. The sidewalk was barely visible under the flattened cardboard the covered it, a sort of makeshift living room floor.
My mother noticed my discomfort. “Sad, isn’t it?” she said. “Welcome to the Third World.”

We re-emerged from under the freeway. The headlights switched off and we turned onto a wide boulevard. The street passed through an open-air Mercado bustling with shoppers and vendors. The buzz of mariachi horns blared from a stack of speakers. Stalls specialized in plastic toys or flower arrangements or bright ruffled dresses. We passed more encampments. Chain-link fences abutted the sidewalks, separating the street from the large, beige warehouses and garment shops behind them. On each block, the fences were lined with more tents and plastic tarps—thin roofs against the constant sun and occasional rain.

“The thing is, most of these are newly homeless,” said my mother. “A lot of these people lost their homes in the financial crisis. Or they were priced out of a building. Or they got sick—you know how fucked up the healthcare system is—went into debt. There might be fifty-thousand homeless now.”

I tried to imagine that many tents—the size of a small city—lining the streets around downtown. I said I was having second thoughts about this outing.

“The area where we’re going is safe,” she said.

“It’s not that,” I said. “Downtown has this infusion of wealth at the same time as poverty and gentrification are pushing people out of their homes. Driving through all of this to go to an art gallery seems like too much. Speaking of class stratification.”

“There are tents even by our home, on the Westside, under the freeways. So it’s not like you can escape. It’s these damn politicians. Everyone knows they need to build
housing, but no one wants it in their districts. Anyway,” she said, “we’re almost there. And I want to see these photos.”

We passed into another warehouse district, but this one looked nothing like the area near the freeway. The warehouses had been converted into coffee shops or restaurants or condos. We pulled onto a small side street and my mother parked. I saw the gallery right away: a narrow, boxy structure painted all white on the outside. I was used to these signifiers of the art world, the transformation of industrial spaces into luxury, an extended symbol of America’s transformation from a society that made things into a society that bought them. The same deindustrialization that removed the jobs from South Central after the war, and led to the situation my mother stepped into.

The exhibition title was printed in neat, modernist black letters on the façade: *Photographs of Post-War Seoul, 1953–65.*

“My childhood years,” said my mother.

She hooked her purse in her elbow. She was wearing a light, silky jacket over her t-shirt. My mother adopted a certain pose when we attended cultural events, or went shopping, and she walked briskly and upright into the gallery.

I wondered if she were taking me there as a sort of educational outing, to tell me something about the world she came from, the childhood she kept hinting at.

It was cool inside the gallery, and the hazy light outside gave way to neon lamps. That light bounced off the high, white walls, and the small photographs in black frames looked, as intended, as if floating in space. My mother and I circled the gallery, leaning close to the photographs in order to see them. They were printed very small, only a few inches across.
The photographs were mostly street scenes in Seoul. Each had a little element of strangeness. A man standing outside a theater, smoking a cigarette—his shoes covered by white spats. A group of woman in flowing hanboks passing by a group of men in pinstripe suits. Children dancing in a circle, all of their heads shaved close to the skull. A street vendor with a flood of used magazines on a tarp in front of a new movie theater advertising dramas, reading a Bob Hope comic. Another child up close, wearing a fur cap that said USA in block letters, a leftover from the military. It was a country under occupation, remaking itself out of the detritus of war.

“This brings back memories,” said my mother. I went over to where she stood, in front of the photograph of the children playing.

“I know the game they’re playing.” She muttered a few sing-song lines in Korean, then lifted her arms and dropped them. “You know the one?”

I shook my head. My mother had never understood the shared cultural references between my father and me, and of course neither of us understood hers. I asked if shaved heads were the style for the boys in those years.

“There was a lice epidemic after the war,” she spoke in a flat tone. “That’s why they shaved. At school, they’d spray us with DDT. Clouds of it.”

I tried to picture those same children in a cloud of the poisonous gas, tried to imagine what it did to their bodies.

She moved on to the next photograph. “Halmoni told me that when I was a kid, I’d stand in front of the movie theaters and beg people to take me in with them.”

I asked if it worked.

“Sure it did. But I don’t remember the movies.”
She continued to circle the gallery. I followed her at a distance. I wasn’t sure if she wanted her own experience with the photographs alone, first. But I wanted to hear more of her memories, which she rarely shared. I felt like a hunter, luring out her stories.

She paused at another photograph. The camera looked down on a cityscape. The foreground was a snowy clearing, and a cluster of homes began behind the children and stretched into the distance, where they covered the side of a small mountain. “Our neighborhood looked like that.” My mother’s voice softened. “It was such a poor fucking country. It was always cold, and we had to heat them with these bricks of coal. When we came to L.A., Halmoni didn’t understand why the rich people all wanted to live in the hills, Hollywood. In Seoul, that was where the poor people lived.”

I took out my phone and snapped some photographs of the photographs, as if to hold them for later. “I knew Korea was poor before the neoliberal dictatorships wrenched it into an industrial power,” I said. “But I didn’t know how poor.”

“Kind of shocking, huh?”

“More than the poverty, I feel like it’s the pretension to hide it that makes these sad,” I said. “Like the man with the white spats.”

She stopped at another photograph and pointed. “Halmoni had a dress just like that,” she said. The photograph showed a woman walking down the street, very upright. Her dress was a dark color and form-fitting, with a collar that folded outward in a soft curl. It might have belonged to a secretary in New York. “She was so proud of that dress. Back then, everyone wanted to look Western. So she’d wear that dress every day, over and over, until it was ratty.”
I stared. I’d stumbled upon the source of my mother’s incessant attention to clothes, to fashion. It was more than taste.

My mother gave a nod and we walked towards the door. A gallery assistant, a young white man wearing all white, stepped out from behind a hidden door.

“Let me know if you guys have questions,” he said.

“I was born in 1956,” said my mother. “I know this world.”

The man stared for a moment, then closed his mouth and nodded. “Oh, wow, um.” He disappeared into his office and came back with a sheet of paper. “Well, if you’re interested, here’s a price list.”

“Oh,” said my mother. “How much are these going for?”

“Well, some of them aren’t for sale. The smaller ones, three-thousand. The bigger prints, five. And if you see an image and want it larger, we could probably arrange that, too.”

“Five, huh? We’ll think about it.”

“Sure, yeah. Sure.”

I mumbled a thank-you and followed my mother out the door. The two of us stood for a moment in the hot sun. I struggled to take in all that information, but my mother seemed invigorated.

“That was good,” she said. “Let’s get some coffee.”

I followed her next door, into another warehouse retrofitted with a large, glass opening in front. We stepped into a vaulted space, where a skylight shed soft light onto a massive café. Despite being the middle of the day, it was full of people, mostly young and white, either at laptops or in conversations involving wild arm gesticulations. A
A curving, wooden bar occupied the center of the space, where intricate machines emitted a din of steam shooting through tubes, and metal burrs shredding beans into fine powder. The menu listed several artisanal coffees from the global south, the cheapest of which was twice the price I paid for my morning cup at the corner bodega near campus. The fruits of empire: drawing imports from the fertile soil and cheap labor of the global south, so that we might sample different flavor notes.

“This is ridiculous,” I murmured to my mother.

“My friend told me this place was good. I’m curious.” She strode up to the beanie-wearing man behind the counter and asked for his recommendation. He explained the flavor profiles of various items on the menu, and talked my mother into an expensive blend from Kenya. He asked me what I wanted, and I replied just a regular. He frowned, as if translating that to the menu, then tapped the pad in front of him.

We got our coffees, after a wait, and sat at one of the wooden tables far from the screaming machines of the bar.

“Oh, this is good,” said my mother. “Try it.” She handed me her cup, filled to the brim with a light brown liquid that looked almost like tea. I sipped it and was surprised: it tasted sweet and sharp, as if all the heaviness of coffee had been removed from it.

“You can get one, too,” she said. She glanced at the ordinary-looking coffee in my cup with pity.

I said I couldn’t conceive of spending that much for a single cup of coffee.

“Once in a while it’s fine to treat yourself,” she said.
I found it a bit jarring, I said, to be in this loud space full of stereotypically ‘L.A.’
white people, especially after passing all the homelessness, and the heavy photographs in
the gallery.

“Why are you upset?” she asked in a teasing voice. “It wasn’t your childhood.”

I blushed. “Of course it wasn’t,” I agreed. “I guess it’s a lot, because I realized I
have no context for the world you grew up in. I’ve never seen anything on postwar
Korea. I’m not sure if that world seems closer now, because I can picture it, or more
distant, because now I see how little I understand of it.”

“What does that have to do with you enjoying a coffee?” she said. She sipped hers
again and contentment spread across her face.
XIII

I lay on another elevated table. My back was exposed through an open hospital gown and my face pressed downward into a cushioned ring. The acupuncturist’s voice told me to relax. He would start with cupping. I’d met him briefly when we came into the office, but between filling out paperwork and getting undressed I hadn’t taken in his face. My mother was in the other room being treated by the acupuncturist’s wife, who worked as both a receptionist and his assistant. He pulled a cart closer to him that rattled as it moved. I turned my head and stole a glance: the cart held two plastic tubs filled with bell-shaped glasses. The acupuncturist lit a candle that stood on the top shelf of the cart, then soaked a piece of cotton in alcohol. He held the cotton between tongs and touched it to the candle. The cotton burst into a hot orange flame with a long, waving tail. The flame subsided, and he held it inside one of the bulbs.

“Face down,” he said. His tone indicated that he understood both how strange this seemed to me, and that he needed to treat it as a simple routine to put me at ease.

I put my face back into the cushioned ring. He pressed the cup on my back, just to the right of my shoulder blades. He explained that the heat from the flame created a vacuum, which would draw toxins through my skin. This was especially good for an asthmatic like me. I’d listed this somewhere on my intake sheet, but thought it more likely that he knew this from my mother. I felt more cups on my back. They didn’t feel so much like something sucking my skin, but a heavy pressure. Soon there were a dozen or so cups on my back, and I could not longer distinguish individual cups, but felt a general warmth pressing upon me.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” he said. “Just relax.”
An image came to me of the glass bulbs bursting: I’d move a little too much, or the pressure inside them would break them. Then I realized this was very unlikely—they looked sturdy, like tumblers for table wine. My anxiety came, perhaps, from having nothing to do. There was nothing to see except the carpeting below my face. I couldn’t move if I wanted.

I itched to check my phone, to respond to some planning emails for the next courthouse action. We were debating how to message our ask around Liang: whether to prioritize the NYPD reforms or his sentencing. I would be back to that reality in a couple days, and felt behind on the conversation.

The cups felt as if they were steadily increasing their pressure. It began to feel like the moment before falling asleep, when the body surrenders to its own tiredness. It was hard to concentrate on my thoughts.

I felt a hand begin to remove the cups from my back. They made a little popping noise as they came off. I hadn’t even heard the acupuncturist return, and it was unnerving to be so vulnerable.

“How’d that feel?” he asked.

I said it was relaxing. I was surprised.

He laughed. He pressed the pads of his finger into my shoulders. “Lots of tension here. You should get treated regularly.”

“That was what my mother told me, too,” I said.

“Your umma knows some things,” he said.

I laughed and said that she shared that opinion.
“Korean mothers…” he said absentmindedly. I realized he’d been preparing the next round of treatment. “I’m going to use needles now. You might feel a small pinch.”

My neck tingled. I’d always hated needles, the idea of something piercing my skin.

“Relax, relax,” he said, pressing my neck and shoulders, giving me a small massage. “So tense. Do you work out?”

No, I said.

“Why not?”

I paused. It was a simple question, but I’d taken it as such a given that I hadn’t formulated an answer. “I guess it’s a frivolous activity, when there’s serious work to do.”

I felt a small prick on my shoulder, and a couple more on my back where the needles went in. He tapped my spine and said I had a slight curvature there, which would get worse if I didn’t build muscle. “The things you do now matter for a long, long time. How’s your energy?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. “I drink a lot of coffee,” I said.

He laughed. “There are other ways to get energy,” he said. “Ten more minutes.” I heard his feet padding out of the room.

I resented the laughter and my back tensed again. As it did, the needles hurt more. I took a deep breath and stared at the carpeting. My muscles relaxed and the needles, too, seemed to exert a warm pressure on my back. It was as if he’d left a watchdog behind, making sure I didn’t tense. I wondered whether I could, in fact, do more if I were healthier.
I felt his hand pulling out the needles. The ten minutes had passed quickly again, and I hadn’t even heard him return.

The acupuncturist asked me to dress and sit down by the desk on the other side of the room. He sat across from me and for the first time I got a good view of his face. He was young, in his thirties, but his hair was lightly permed into a wave, which made him look older.

He asked me a series of questions: did I tend to get hot or cold? Was I high-energy or low-energy? What was my stool consistency, and how frequently did it come?

I answered with brief responses. It felt somehow more invasive than the doctor intakes I was used to. I felt I was being scrubbed all over, my body being prodded in new ways.

He placed a folding brochure on the table. Inside, it had a list of food types, and next to them, several columns. “This is your body type,” he said, tapping one of the columns. “Same as your mom. You need warming foods to balance out. Also,” he said. “Do you think a lot?”

I laughed. Of course I did, I said.

“Try not to think so much.”

I asked how I might do that.

If he heard my sarcasm, he didn’t show it. He stared at me. “Try relaxing your mind. Don’t worry about things over and over again.”

“Is this your medical advice?” I asked. “Or something my mother asked you to tell me?”
This time he looked offended. “I take this seriously,” he said. “You hold so much energy in your head. You’re out of balance, too much yang.”

I asked what the consequences were.

“It’s not a matter of something bad happening. I’m not going to say, ‘It’ll give you cancer.’ That’s not how acupuncture works. The point is to bring yourself into alignment now, so you can be in relationship to your body, instead of fighting yourself all the time.”

There was a knock on the door. My mother walked in and beamed at us. She looked refreshed, as if she’d taken a nap.

“So,” she said. “Did you get some good advice?”

I glanced at the acupuncturist. “I’ll think it over.”

He laughed. “Your son is very funny.” He handed me the brochure, and tapped his temple. “Try it,” he said.
It had started to drizzle by the time we left the acupuncturist’s office. Gray clouds like fish bellies hung low in the sky, and the buildings were drained of their color. My mother suggested we stop by to see Halmoni on the way home, since we were in K Town already.

I thought about looking at my phone. I wondered if there were dates set for the trail yet. I was missing emails, I knew, about taking next steps. I decided, though, to try the acupuncturist’s advice and be still for the car ride. I stared out the window at the emptied streets—no one in the city braved the rain, if they could help it. It was the kind of aversion to hardship that I’d moved away from L.A. to escape.

I told her that we were apparently the same body type.

“See?” said my mother. “I told you that you reminded me of myself.”

“Does having a yang body predispose one to being a college dropout?”

“Ha ha,” she said.

We pulled up to the rest home and ran through the rain to the front door. We resumed our seats in Halmoni’s dim room. A TV in the corner played a Korean news station on mute and my mother noted that someone had shifted Halmoni so that she wouldn’t get bedsores. Halmoni’s face had lost some of its luster from the facial the other day, and her gray hair was matted.

My mother opened up her purse and took out a photograph in a silver frame. She said she’d found it when clearing out Halmoni’s apartment, and that she hadn’t seen it in years. In the photograph, the family was out to dinner at a restaurant with a tablecloth: Halmoni wearing a silk wrap with a floral print, my mother and her two siblings in silky,
wide-collared dress shirts. The siblings all had their hair feathered. It A man in a brown suit sat in the middle, grinning.

I pointed at the man and asked who he was.

“Your Haraboji,” said my mother.

I stared. It was obvious he was my mother’s father—he had the same fleshy cheeks and rounded nose. But I’d only seen one photograph of him, taken decades before. I said I thought the family lost contact with him when they left Korea. I racked my brain, but he was a blank spot in the family story.

“Maybe you could illuminate some history for me,” I said. “Since I wasn’t even able to recognize my own grandfather.”

My mother stared into space, and her hands, which still held the picture, went limp. Rain plunked against the window. The happy chatter of nurses echoed down the hallway. Halmoni looked at us, then over to the TV, which played a commercial for a rice cooker. She straightened in her chair with a decision in her eyes. “I suppose you’re old enough to hear,” she said. “I never told you my story of coming to America.”

I shook my head.

“I was thirteen. It was the worst times—Haraboji was beating the crap out of Halmoni. He would hit us, of course, but Halmoni would have these big purple and yellow bruises.” She gestured at her face, drawing large circles around her cheeks. “I can still see them.

“One day, Halmoni disappeared. We sat on the stoop of our home, next to the shoes, waiting for her to come back. We were all crying, wondering where she’d gone.” It took a whole week, she continued, before an aunty took my mother aside. She told her
that Halmoni had somehow secreted away plane fare and looked up a cousin in Los Angeles. Halmoni hadn’t wanted to risk Haraboji stopping her, so she’d kept her plan secret. She promised to send for the children. Haraboji, by this time, was barely home. “When he was home,” said my mother, “all he did was sit at the kitchen table drinking and crying, feeling so bad for himself. Then he’d fall asleep and drool all over.”

Haraboji’s drinking continued, my mother told me, and he couldn’t hold down jobs. The family was evicted from their apartment and dispersed to their aunts, who took them in reluctantly, until he’d con his way into a new apartment and the cycle repeated. They moved so often that my mother couldn’t remember where the apartments were or what they looked like. One day, Haraboji disappeared again for a few days and the landlord evicted the children. My mother had to pack all of the family’s belongings into a cart and push the cart into the street. She and her siblings took turns rolling the cart, crying and aimless. “It began snowing,” said my mother. “We must have looked fucking pathetic.” She began laughing, shaking so hard that she wiped the corners of her eyes with her fingers.

The story was shocking, but it also clicked into place. I felt a strange sort of relief hearing it. So, I asked, when was that photograph taken?

“Haraboji found us,” she said. “I going to Berkeley then, but I was back home for break. He knocked on the door one night, just like that, smiling like it was this big fucking reunion.” Apparently Halmoni cussed him out, calling him kessuge, son-of-a-bitch. For the first time in his life, Haraboji apologized. He bowed his forehead onto the threshold of the apartment, and stayed there for hours. “I told Halmoni to let him stay there. But of course, she let him in.”
“Apparently, he was rich by then.” He told the family stories of traveling to Saudi Arabia and brokering deals for Korean shipping companies. He promised Halmoni that he’d start again, that he’d found Jesus and stopped drinking. “Except, of course, the motherfucker was pouring himself wine because it was a special occasion. Anyway, Halmoni believed his bullshit.”

My mother returned to Berkeley. She wanted to wash her hands of her family, which was, according to her new theories, becoming reactionary. “Halmoni started sending me postcards: the Eiffel Tower, the running of the bulls. She and Haraboji were taking the honeymoon they never had. She wrote me these delusional letters: we’d have a big house on the West Side, private school for your aunt, tennis lessons so your uncle could become an Olympic athlete. I know Haraboji was feeding all of these ideas to her, talking up a big game.

“I wasn’t there for all this, but I doubt he was faithful. I don’t think he was still hitting her, at least.”

One night, Halmoni found a lump on Haraboji’s throat. It was cancer. “Probably from all his goddamn drinking,” said my mother. Halmoni told him to see a specialist. Haraboji said western medicine was all a scam. He flew home to Seoul, where his cousin ran a hospital, and died.

“Oh, Halmoni was pissed. I don’t know if she spent more time crying or cussing the kessuge out.” Halmoni boarded the next plane to Seoul. One had to be present at the deathbed to hear the will. But Halmoni didn’t even know he was dead until after the fact, when Haraboji’s sisters wrote her a letter.
“When she arrived, the sisters said, ‘What money? The man was broke and a liar.’” My mother gritted her teeth. “I told Halmoni not to waste her time. But one thing about Halmoni, she was determined. And she’d learned the American way: she sued.” Halmoni flew back and forth between L.A. and Seoul for months. She hired a private investigator to find Haraboji’s money, she asked for bank records. “Of course, in the end, she didn’t find anything, and the court sided with the sisters.

“Honestly, I don’t know if the sisters were lying, or if Haraboji had a secret safe somewhere, or if it was all bullshit and he wasn’t rich. Anyway, I think that’s what really did it for Halmoni. She lost faith in Haraboji, sure, but really she lost faith in Korean people. Ever since then, she’s felt like life owed her something.”

My mother looked again at the photograph of the family in her hands. She held photograph in front of Halmoni’s face. “Do you recognize him?” she asked.

Halmoni’s head jerked up and her eyes turned fiery. She grimaced, showing her gummy mouth with its handful of remaining teeth. “Kessuge,” she spat. A dab of spit formed at the part in her lips. “Kessuge!” she rasped again, as if the word tore at her throat. I sat back, shocked by the sudden speech.

My mother burst out laughing. “I was going to leave this by her bed. Oh well.” She slipped the frame back into her purse. Halmoni’s head relaxed back onto her pillow. My mother glanced out the window. “The rain’s let up. Shall we take Halmoni outside?”

She stepped into the hallway and called over a nurse, who pushed in a wheelchair. She motioned for me to lift Halmoni’s legs from the bed as she and my mother each supported her under an arm. My mother handed me one of the pillows from the bed. I slid
my arm behind Halmoni’s back and put the pillow in place. It was the most contact I’d had with her since I was a child and she gave me the piggy-back rides I loved.

I wheeled Halmoni out a side door of the rest home into a small courtyard. A trellis wrapped by a few limp vines hung overhead. It had stopped raining and the sky shone silver. My mother and I sat on the lip of a concrete planter with Halmoni next to us. We watched the water drip from the stucco overhang above us. It was peaceful. I saw us as an outsider might: three generations of a family that had somehow survived, remained together.

It was strange to me, I said, how my mother’s anger lay with Halmoni. Halmoni, after all, managed to move them all to America. Haraboji was the abuser, the liar. If he hadn’t destroyed the family’s safety, maybe things would’ve been different.

My mother tsked. “What can you expect of Korean men? But your mother is supposed to protect you.”

I didn’t understand, but I also didn’t have an argument. There was no logic to it, only my mother’s experience.

Halmoni seemed oblivious to our conversation. Her eyes darted from the dripping water to a sparrow landing on the trellis to the breeze shifting the vine leaves, like a child’s.
XV

I’d never been to Bobby’s home, and hadn’t seen him for years. But after my mother called him, he texted to invite me over the next day. I was glad: it was my last full day in the city. It was the kind of formal text that older people sent, in which he signed each message.

I borrowed my mother’s car and drove to his home in Inglewood, a modest Spanish-style building not unlike my parents’. I rang the doorbell and waited for a few moments. I was nervous. I knew little about this person who’d been hovering through my conversations with my mother the last few days.

Bobby answered the door. He was over eighty, but looked more or less how I remembered him: thin, with a goatee and curly gray hair pulled taught into a ponytail. “Come in, come in,” he said. “You can leave your shoes on. I don’t know if you remember this, but first time I came to your house was for a party. I walked in and everyone turned around and yelled, ‘Bobby, man! Take off your shoes!’”

I laughed along with him and, though it felt strange to me, followed him into a cool, dark living area with my shoes on.

“I apologize, I have to sit. Have these three pins in my hip now.” He grimaced as he clutched the sides of a low armchair and lowered himself down, then gestured for me to sit in the couch across from him.

“Your mom told me you were in college, and I thought, Whew. I remember you when you were about as high as this chair. Congratulations—it’s no small thing getting there.”

I decided not to tell him about my decision, and thanked him instead.
He asked about my father, then started to tell me about his children. He pointed to a large photograph above the fireplace. Five young adults smiled at the camera, arranged in a cluster on a park bench. I got up to look closer, and he motioned me to the picture on the other side of the fireplace. It was a large portrait of Malcolm X, done in a black and white stipple. “My son did that in high school,” he said. I said it was very good and Larry nodded. “I guess we’re a family of artists,” he said. “I used to play the trumpet, you know, in the air force.”

I sat back down.

“Now that we’re caught up on family, what can I do for you?” he asked.

I said I was hoping he could tell me about the Black-Korean Coalition.

He nodded. “Uh-huh.” Sitting, there, his tall frame folded in to the low chair, he looked imposing, someone used to being interviewed. He began talking in a fast-paced, raspy voice. I’d come prepared with questions. But I quickly realized that I wouldn’t have control over the conversation.

“I have to start with my background—New Orleans so-called creole. I say ‘so-called’ because creole means a lot of different things around the world. The important thing in our context is that we’re still living, more or less, with the one-drop rule.

“People don’t understand this, but creole folks didn’t necessarily want to be white. They also didn’t necessarily want to be black, but they didn’t necessarily want to be white. That’s important. Now, look at my parents.” He gestured behind him, without turning around, to a wooden bookshelf. Two portraits sat on top. “My mother, she was almost passing. But she married my father, who was darker-skinned.” The portrait of his
mother showed her in her wedding dress—white frills clasped her neck, and a curtain of white hung from her reddish, curly hair.

“When we talk about race, racism, that’s where you have to start. Because it’s with you right from birth, your particular story. I come from New Orleans, and we go to Los Angeles thinking that that’s the place to be.”

I asked if Los Angeles was the ideal they’d hoped for.

Bobby fell silent for a moment, as if choosing a memory to illustrate his point. “I went to high school at Fremont, which was an all-white school that we started integrating. My mother thought it would be a good school. My first day the white students held a walkout. They hung tar babies from the trees. Their parents stood in front holding a big banner: “No Niggers.” It was a good education but the social aspect, you could say, was pretty heavy.”

He talked about his history in the Air Force, where he played trumpet, until he sliced open a finger in an accident. He returned to Los Angeles afterwards and found a job as a parole officer for the County, which led him to join the commission where he met my mother.

I asked him to pause. What years was he in the Air Force?

“Oh, fifty, fifty-two.”

Korea, I said.

He pushed his lower lip up and nodded. “Yes, Korea. I never saw combat, you know, playing trumpet.”

I wondered if being around Koreans then influenced his work with the Korean American community later.
He frowned. “You know, I never thought about it. Possible, very possible. I can’t say we interacted much, over there. I was mostly around the base. And of course there was the language issue, which ended up being a problem here, too.”

His story clicked. “Did you ever give chocolates to kids there?”

“Sure,” he said. “We’d sit on the back of pickup trucks and toss it to the kids. They loved it.”

“Did my mother ever tell you a similar story?”

“Your mother never talked much about her childhood,” he said. “Some things, here and there. I know it was heavy for her. But she never did tell me much.”

I decided to move forward and ask him to talk about the Coalition.

“Your mother and I started the Coalition. That wasn’t an order from anybody. We had a lot of leeway. At the same time, we started the Black-Latino Roundtable. You know who the co-chairs were?” He gave me a knowing look and named the former mayor and one of the current County Supervisors.

“It so happens I was working with blacks on Korean issues. Korean-black problems were heavy. Just the way it was. It started with Korean merchants and black residents being at odds. Some of it was legit, some of it was not. Tensions were heavy. As a matter of fact, we were in tense, potentially dangerous situations.”

I asked about the danger.

“The situations were hot. I mean, killings. Usually a merchant, not always. The kickoff frequently happened in stores, liquor stores especially.”

“What were the strategies you used to address the violence?” I asked.
“Times like that,” he said, “emotions ruled, not logic.” He explained that they instituted a committee structure to work with merchants. The idea was to provide an alternative to the hostile, distrustful environments where they were encountering each other: the stores, the streets. “We were providing space for people to express themselves.”

I said that it struck me how much their work was about emotion, and not politics.

“That’s the whole thing,” he said. “It’s not different. Racism is internalized. It’s about access to resources, yes, but it lives here.” He tapped his chest with his hand. “That’s the tricky thing. So if you want to move people, that’s where you’ve got to move them.

“That’s why I’ve got to say—your mother. I’ve worked with a lot of people and she’s one of the best. No, what I mean is, she’s the most honest, the most truthful. Not afraid. That’s what we need, people who are fearless.” He raised his lower lip as if weighing the statement, and nodded for emphasis.

I smiled and said that ‘fearless’ was a good description.

“You smile, but it’s a rare thing.”

And then the L.A. unrest happened, I said.

“The thing is, I’d been there before. Watts, 1965. I remember those days. I was young. And I didn’t go out. I was working for Bradley back then, who was in the City Council. So I couldn’t. But if I wasn’t working for him, you bet I would be out there. I dug that anger. I felt it.

“And so for years, I’d been saying to people, it could happen again. Nothing’s changed. When Rodney King happened, I told people, ‘This could be it.’ Because we
hadn’t fixed the structural issues. Even today, you look at housing, employment, schools in South LA, there’s virtually no change. The problem is that the motivation and will to deal with it remains very small. Very small. Even if it were large, that would only be the nucleus of something, because it takes years to change minds.”

“Considering all that, and the fires afterwards, what do you think you accomplished, politically-speaking?”

“Accomplished? No, no.” He raised a hand, his elbow still resting on the armchair, and opened it so that his palm was facing me, as if he were delivering a divine pronouncement. With each syllable, he ticked his hand to the side for emphasis. “It’s hard to deal with reality. By reality, I’m talking racism. Class. All that. That’s what we tried to do: deal with reality in an honest way. Whether or not we succeeded was not the motivating factor. The thing people don’t see is: the outcome is not so important. It’s the struggle itself that matters.”
XVI

“So,” said my mother. “What did you learn from that old grump?”

We were driving south on the 110 Freeway, which sunk below street level, bounded on either side by high, concrete walls. It was as if the freeway were a sort of tomb, an alternate world shuttling commuters through and under the city. I’d asked my mother if we could visit South Central that afternoon, after talking to Bobby. We’d been circling the actual fires, moving backwards to all the things that led up to my mother’s work. I needed to understand the event itself, and I thought going to their epicenter might help.

I laughed and said Bobby had been very friendly. One thing, I said, was that he emphasized the interpersonal aspect of the work. That it was about providing a space to vent.

“Funny, isn’t it?” she said. “Who would put your crazy mother in charge of getting people to vent?”

“I was also struck that he said you weren’t focused on results,” I said. “That it was ‘the struggle’ that mattered. I guess I can’t understand that.” I thought about the trial. “Why do anything?”

“I don’t know about him, but at the time, I did want results. At the same time, you can’t just focus on that. If you do, you’ll just burn out.”

“Pun intended?”

“Ha ha,” she said, flatly.

We exited the freeway onto a three-lane avenue. I was always struck by how the different neighborhoods in the city looked like iterations of a blueprint: the same low
stucco buildings, the same wide streets opening to the sky. But here, they were a little quieter. My mother pointed to a strip mall. “I think that was one of the places we had our give-aways.” She explained that one of the Coalition’s strategies was to do a Christmastime gift drive. My mother would go around to Korean stores and swap meets and solicit toys and electronics, which they’d offer to the mostly black residents as a symbol of good will. “We’d come down here and wear Santa hats and play music and try to start conversations.”

I imagined my mother and Bobby standing there, twenty-five years before, both of them wearing Santa hats. It was comic, or absurd, considering the seriousness of the problem. I asked how it went.

“Some people liked it, but a lot of people said, ‘This is just a Band-Aid,’ and ‘This doesn’t solve anything.’ So we stopped after a couple years.”

I asked if that made them reassess their strategy.

“You know, no one likes charity, especially from people you don’t trust in the first place. It’s demoralizing. In those Coalition meetings, they kept saying that Koreans needed to give up things. But when it came down to it, people complained. I mean, your mother the Marxist could’ve told them that. But we thought it was a nice gesture, at least.”

We drove alongside a metal fence that guarded a pair of train tracks which bisected the homes of the neighborhood like a wound, then turned onto a dead-end residential street. My mother parked and we got out.

The towers were smaller than I’d imagined, three odd cones a few stories high each. A white metal fence encircled them—a sign explained that the towers were under
construction, and so closed to the public. I squinted against the light to look up at them piercing the blue sky, silhouetted by the sun. They were like a sketch of towers made real, pointed cones made of metal girding that bulged at its joints. I peered through the white fence at the odd constructions inside: benches and walls inset with glass shards, and domes made in the same manner as the towers.

“Kind of ugly, huh?” said my mother. She wore her sunglasses and trailed a few feet behind me.

“I wanted to see them because Bobby mentioned having lived through Watts in ’65.” I noticed about twenty-five years passed between those two uprisings, and wondered if L.A. was due for another.

My mother shrugged. “Personally, I don’t feel the anger like I did back then. The problems are still there. You can’t buy a home for under a million on the West Side, but then you saw the homelessness downtown. And the black population is disappearing. I’m not sure why people aren’t more pissed, to be honest.”

“Scholars are calling it re-segregation,” I said. “Neoliberals dismantling civil rights gains under free market principles, which of course only end up reinscribing class and race separation.” A realization hit me. “I, for example, have lived in L.A. most of my life but never visited these towers.”

“I mean, there’s not much to see.” My mother took a tissue from her purse and dabbed the sweat from her forehead. “Ready to continue our history tour?”

I took some photos on my phone—not sure when I would look at them, but feeling I needed to preserve something of the visit—and got back into the car. We turned around on the dead-end street. There were very few trees, except for palms. A pair of
men on low-riding bikes swooped through the streets like grounded birds. A man stood on a corner beside a metal cart, displaying cut mangoes on a bed of ice. If Seoul had been transposed onto K Town, the South had been translated here: the slow pace of life, people waving to each other on the street.

My mother suggested we stop for a bottle of water. She maneuvered into the driveway of a strip mall and parked, the hood of the car edging just over the walkway in front of the deli. I followed her inside. A sensor above the door made an electronic ding as we entered.

The lights in the drop ceiling were dim compared to the bright sun. I blinked to adjust to the darkness. My mother walked straight to the back of the store, where rows of neon drinks glowed in a bright white refrigeration unit. She produced a large bottle of name-brand water and carried it over to the register. The ground beneath the register stood a foot above the rest of the store. Thick, bulletproof plastic framed an opening a couple of feet wide. A Korean man wearing an argyle sweater sat behind the register, barely visible in the darkness. He was watching Korean news on a small TV mounted on the wall.

The man rose slowly and turned to us. His face was dotted with liver spots. He rang up the water without looking at us.

My mother handed him the money, then straightened. “I remember you,” she said.

He looked up, and his heavy-lidded eyes moved across my mother’s face.

She switched to Korean, and said something excitedly about meetings and the Coalition and twenty-five years ago.
The man rasped from the back of his throat—a sound I’d only heard from older Koreans, a signal that words were below him, or that his feelings were beyond words. He shook his wrist as if waving away a bug.

We left and paused outside while my mother unscrewed her water bottle and drank. “What an asshole,” she said. “I spent a lot of time talking to him, back in the day.”

She handed the bottle to me. The cool water almost hurt as it ran against the back of my itching throat. I hadn’t realized how thirsty I was. “Maybe it’s too painful for him to think about that past.”

“See how much work your mother did to process that shit?” She looked around. “I might have even helped clean up this store, after it was looted—it looks familiar, now.” She explained that after the fires, she and Bobby would go around with other volunteers and clean up stores: hauling cinderblocks, sweeping shattered glass, salvaging unbroken canned goods. “At that point, it was just another gesture. The damaged had been done.”

The sun was at its peak and the light fell heavily, broiling the asphalt of the lot and the metal of the cars, and causing the air above them to shimmer. “It’s because of men like that guy we couldn’t get anywhere,” she continued. “When shit really started to go down, none of the merchants would make a stand. They wanted to just shut their eyes and pretend it wouldn’t effect them.

“Not a lot of people know this,” she said, “but a lot of Koreans were being killed, too. There were all these robberies where the person working the register would be shot.
One time, it was a seven-year-old girl, the storeowners’ daughter. She saw the man robbing her parents, and he panicked. She survived, though.”

I was surprised—I hadn’t heard about that. I asked why that wasn’t a bigger part of the story.

“It was an impossible situation. You know, every time something happened to a black person, even if it was someone trying to rob the store, all these community groups would make it into a headline. But on the Korean side, there was this silence, this sense of not wanting to draw more attention. And even if they tried, how would that look? ‘Hey, we’re being killed too!’ Even if we tried, I don’t know if the media would’ve cared as much.”

“There’s still the power deferential,” I said. “The police would always protect the interests of the property owners—the Koreans.”

“The police weren’t helping Koreans,” snapped my mother. “During sa-i-gu, all these merchants called 9-11. You know what happened? They hung up. A few people said the dispatcher even laughed. The police chief, that asshole, was only concerned with protecting rich white people on the West Side. That’s where they set up their barrier. They left the Korean businesses to burn.”

“When Soon Ja Du shot Latasha Harlins in the back of the head,” I said, “and got off with probation, wasn’t that proof of the criminal justice system aligning with Koreans against blacks?”

We were silent. It was as if those famous seconds of security footage were playing on a screen before us: the two of them reaching across the register, exchanging
blows, Harlins turning to walk away, Du producing the gun from behind the counter, and the blast from it knocking Harlins to the floor.

My mother suggested we get back into the car. It was hot, even in the shade, and I had begun to sweat again. I handed her the water bottle. “You finish it,” she said. The bottle was still mostly full. She’d made this stop mostly out of her concern for me. In the car, she turned the air conditioning on full, and rolled down the windows to let the hot air out.

“First off, that judge fucked us over.” My mother spoke loudly over the blasting air vents and street noise. “What was she thinking? If she didn’t let Du off with probation, I honestly don’t think as many Korean stores would have burned. Classic white liberal, trying to do good.”

“Du a middle-aged woman, a storeowner,” I said. “And Harlins was fifteen.”

“Obviously there’s no justification for the killing. But, you know, they exaggerated the story. The media just played the few seconds of Du shooting the kid. If you watch the whole tape, there was a back-and-forth when the two of them were smacking each other, throwing things. It’s also obvious she wasn’t comfortable with the gun. People talk about it like it was some cold, calculated killing, but it’s clear Du was out of her mind.

“Then Du’s family hired a black lawyer, this guy who would take any case. I thought that was really sick, so obvious. But I guess the judge fell for it. Anyway,” she sighed, “by that time the Coalition was essentially over. No one was going to take Du’s side. And this was just a few months before the Rodney King verdict.”
The air from the vents had cooled. I rolled up the windows and turned down the air conditioner. It was quiet again in the car. I felt we had hit another impasse.

I asked if we might drive to the intersection of Florence and Normandie, the epicenter of the fires. “Your trauma tour?” she said. But she navigated there anyway. We approached the intersection, which aside from the famous sign names, I would never have noticed.

“Perfect,” she said, pulling into a gas station on the corner. “I needed to gas up. You know, I get fifty miles a gallon on this thing, I sometimes forget to refill it.” She pulled the car under the gas station awning, with its bright orange and blue stripes. I got out of the car with her and we stood on either side of the Prius. The sour odor of gasoline hung in the air, and it was warm even in the shade.

A second gas station stood across the street. These bland structures were oddly famous to me. I thought back to the shaky footage captured from a helicopter circling above the intersection on sa-i-gu, broadcast across the city, as reporters warned people to stay away from South Central. People gathered at these gas stations and hurled bottles at cars, men dragged that truck driver from his cab and beat him. It was the primal Los Angeles fear: the car no longer safe.

“Being here,” said my mother, “the thing I remember most from that day is peoples’ eyes.” She followed my gaze across the street as the tank filled with gas.

I became excited, sensing that we’d finally approach the story I wanted. I focused on my mother’s words.

“Bobby and I were in the middle of some meeting when the verdict came out,” she continued. “Someone ran in and interrupted the meeting. In those days, we all
gathered around the TV. We watched the jury deliver not-guilty verdicts for all four. I remember thinking, ‘Motherfuck.’

“The plan was to all meet at the First AME in South Central for a peace convening. So we drove down there, and because it’s L.A., Bobby and I took two separate cars. I was alone. I arrived and all the parking spots near the church were taken. L.A., right? I finally parked, a few blocks away on Manchester, across from one of the Korean merchants. I think it was the Kim family, a liquor store in a corner of the strip mall. Later, I saw that deli on the TV—it was on fire.

“I got out of the car, and I was walking, and I noticed people staring at me. I stopped. It was like I saw myself from the outside for a moment: I was this Korean woman in a suit, and they didn’t know who the fuck I was, or what I was doing there. I got back in my car and drove home.”

I waited for her to say more. She didn’t, her gaze soft and lost in a middle distance. “What?” I said. I was stunned. I’d never known my mother to run from a situation, especially an important one. “The whole point of the Coalition was for you to show solidarity, to be in the same space together.” I became agitated, as if this were a meeting and she’d changed the plan. “How could you leave just when you were supposed to show up?”

“Like I said,” said my mother impatiently. “I will never forget their eyes: it was like their pupils were trembling, and they were rimmed with red, as if they had just been crying. I knew from your Haraboji what someone looks like when they are going to be violent,” she said, as her own eyes went distant, “and that was it. There were four blocks between me and the church.”
“I just don’t understand how you could assume people were going to hurt you.” My throat closed down over the words, as if restraining from yelling. “It’s like you turned your back on the whole project.”

“I’m not some martyr,” she snapped. “And, you know, it’s not like it was during my radical years.” She turned towards me, and I saw that her eyes weren’t angry, but sad. “It was one thing to be reckless back then. But your father and I were thinking of having you. You realize you’re living for something besides your own ideals, and that changes things.”

The gas pump stopped with a dull chugging sound.

“I didn’t ask you to do any of those things for my sake,” I murmured.

My mother closed the gas lid with a clunk. “See everything you wanted?” Again, it wasn’t a question, but an end to the conversation.

I looked around again. It was a serene day. Cars crawled through the intersection. The sun cast everything in a dull, pale sheen. I nodded and got back into the car. We drove up the ramp of the freeway, and the windshield was filled with the sight of the empty sky. I looked out the passenger’s window at the rows of homes lined up at right angles, a field stuck with palm trees.

In fact, I hadn’t seen anything I wanted. The neighborhood had jogged my mother’s memories, but her work was as opaque to me as before. It was as if that single moment, when my mother looked into the eyes of strangers and got back into her car, had cut a rift in the past. I finally heard her story, but it wasn’t the one I’d wanted.
XVII

The next morning, my parents walked me to the car with my luggage and my father hugged me goodbye. “Keep us posted on what you decide,” he said.

I said I would.

It had been a tense, quiet morning with my mother. She said that she wanted to run one errand before driving me to the airport, at a marina near LAX. I didn’t know why she wanted me there, except, I guessed, to process the day before.

She insisted on loading my bag into the trunk. I offered to drive, at least. We didn’t speak except for her to give me directions. We drove south on La Cienega again, passing the white strip mall.

“Maybe you were right,” she said. “That mall did burn down. So much happened those three days, it’s hard to remember.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” I said.

We climbed onto the freeway onramp, and the low roar of the tires speeding across the ridged concrete surface highlighted how silent it was.

Finally, my mother spoke. “I just want to say, I don’t think it was fair what you said yesterday. You weren’t there. You asked for my story, and I told you.”

I blinked. I wasn’t sure if I was angry or resentful or guilty, but the feeling choked me. I couldn’t remember the last time my mother had said I’d hurt her. By asking about her past, I’d tipped the scale of our relationship: suddenly I had agency, I was no longer the blameless child. “You’re right,” I said. “I asked. I suppose what happened is that I’d made up a story of what I wanted to hear, and then I was upset that it didn’t match reality.”
“I understand,” she said. “Lord knows I did things like that back in my day.”

I was going to point out her use of AAVE again, but let it pass. I asked if she could speak more about what happened during the actual fires, and the Korean militias that formed.

My mother exhaled through her nose. “Before that, no one knew Koreans existed. Then people all across the country saw these videos of Koreans wearing headbands and shooting semi-automatic weapons. Korean men—I swear.”

“That’s true for me, too,” I said. I remembered the moment when, flipping through my high school U.S. history textbook, I came upon an image of a Korean man standing on a rooftop, a hazy Los Angeles day behind him. He was wearing a red polo shirt and carrying an AK-47 pointed in the sky. He was grinning. I told my mother that was the first Korean face I had ever seen in any official text. On one hand, it disrupted the image I had of Asians as passive and weak. On the other, it was so violent, so eerily cheerful.

“You fuck with people long enough,” said my mother, “and they turn violent. Military conscription is mandatory in South Korea. A lot of the Koreans who came here even served in Vietnam. The South did terrible things there, just like the Americans. So when sa-i-gu happened, everyone, even Bobby, was like, ‘How the hell were they ready to shoot like that?’ Simple.”

“So the colonized become the colonizer.”

My mother sighed. “My people.”
She directed me to exit the freeway, and follow signs for the marina. Soon we were in a large parking lot lined with buildings and advertisements for seafood and water activities. I smelled the brine of the ocean.

We got out and I followed my mother through the lot and down a boardwalk. White boats rocked back and forth against their wooden posts and the water lapped against them with a soft chugging sound. We went over to a small kiosk. A kid in a polo shirt slouched sideways thumbing his phone. My mother approached him and told him we had an appointment. He nodded and mumbled into a black walkie-talkie, then resumed looking at his phone—the kind of entitled stance I only saw in white kids. A man in a starched captain’s shirt and creased blue pants appeared, and walked towards us with an upright soldier’s clip, his arm outstretched.

“Captain Bob,” he said in a booming voice. “I’m terrifically sorry for your loss, miss.”

My mother explained that her mother was still in a rest home, and that we were just here to make preparations.

“Yes, ah,” he faltered. “Wise of you to make these arrangements. It’s always easier this way.”

He walked us over to a small white boat. The rear was printed with the name “Incorrigible II.” They spoke for a few moments about the length and cost of the trip, and whether we would like bottled water available for the passengers, or rose petals to be tossed with the ashes, each for an extra fee. My mother said ‘fine’ to both, but with an edge in her voice that warned him against trying to upsell her. Captain Bob’s face shifted,
and he seemed to reassess my mother. He promised to send my mother a contract, and then shook hands again with both of us.

My mother suggested that we walk down the dock a little further before returning home. When we were out of earshot of the kiosk, my mother said, “Well, what do you think?”

I asked what she meant.

“You think Halmoni would like it?”

“I didn’t know much about Halmoni’s feelings about dying, or about anything, really. The captain talked as if he were selling a gym membership. He’s clearly formerly navy and doing this as his retirement plan.” I paused. “A little ironic, considering it was the U.S. military’s incessant bombing and then colonization of Halmoni’s country that brought us to America.”

We walked along the dock. I looked down at the planks, worn smooth and warped into odd undulations. Finally, my mother spoke. “You know, Halmoni and Haraboji met on a U.S. military base. So if it weren’t for the War, neither of us would be here, in any country.”

A thread in my stomach jerked taught. I didn’t know that story, I said.

“Yes,” she continued. “I don’t know the details. Haraboji was doing translating work. He must have faked his way into that job, because his English wasn’t great, and he never finished high school. He could be charming when he wanted, though. A job in the military was one of the best, especially during the War, when everyone was hungry.”
I felt queasy. “I’m not sure what to say,” I said. “I wouldn’t be alive, without U.S. empire, without the Korean war? Without Haraboji and Halmoni getting a paycheck from the very people that invaded their country? What am I supposed to do with that?”

“Fucked up, isn’t it?” she said. “Now you know why we’re crazy.” She made a fake grimace, jutting her lower teeth out and popping her eyes.

I laughed along with her. If I hadn’t, I would’ve had to scream.

We walked out onto a small pier that offered a view of the harbor. Two walls made of massive boulders encircled the water like arms, leaving an outlet to the ocean. We sat on a wooden bench facing the water and listened to the small waves made by passing boats break against the dock. The sun cut a glassy shimmer across the harbor. I remembered how, as a child, I’d stare at the horizon thinking that if I looked hard enough I might see the continent across it, where my mother was born.

“I look at Halmoni lying on that bed and wonder why she hangs on, why she isn’t ready to pass,” said my mother. “And I think she’s giving me time to forgive her. I finally understood that she didn’t choose her life: I used to blame her, and I did everything I could to be different from her. But now I look back at sa-i-gu and think maybe I was caught by my circumstances, too. The point is, each of us did what we thought we had to do. And you have to figure that out for yourself.

“So I support you. Halmoni was never able to look past herself and appreciate my choices, and I don’t want to be that kind of mother. I don’t know if I agree with you dropping out, but I’ll support you no matter what.”
I paused. If she’d told me that two days earlier, I would’ve felt vindicated. I would’ve felt I’d won. But I was on the other side of the knowledge I’d gained from the last two days. I felt hollow.
As we walked back to the car, my mother produced a white envelope from her purse.

“Here,” she said. “Yongdon.”

I blushed and said that she didn’t need to.

“I know. But New York is an expensive city. Get yourself a new pair of jeans—those are looking a little raggedy.”

I looked down at my jeans and saw, as if through her eyes, the worn kneecaps, the faded rectangle where my phone rubbed against the pocket. I realized what she was doing. Rather than embarrass me about receiving help, she framed it as a favor to her. I stuffed the envelope into my pocket and got back into the driver’s seat.

“So,” said my mother as we drove. “Did this history of black-Korean relations solidify your desire to drop out?”

I laughed. It was as if she saw into my mind again—I wasn’t sure any longer. I said that she hadn’t convinced me of anything with the Coalition stories. “But I feel like by taking me hiking and to the acupuncturist and spa, you were showing me how to sustain activism in the long-term. I have to consider all of that, now. Very sneaky.”

“Did I do that?” she said, the familiar satisfaction beaming from her face.

We turned off the freeway and onto La Cienega. We passed a stucco furniture store having a sale on full-length mirrors: they were stacked against the side of the building, titled at an angle so that they each reflected a piece of the sky. It was an odd effect, as if they were each a doorway into a blue field with white clouds.
Soon we were in the hills dotted with pumpjacks churning oil. I watched them perform their tireless work. Two round weights swung in circles, tipping the hammer-headed beak of the machine forward into the ground, only to swing up again, like a great broken beast. I was amazed that they could do this day after day, stuck in one place, and still find fresh oil.

“So,” said my mother. “Are you surprised at the things your crazy mother did?”

I laughed and said that she was turning the interview around. I saw that my mother felt vulnerable talking about her past, under her toughness. My mind flashed through our conversations. I’d started with a small, nagging question about a burning city, wanting to shine light on a small square of my mother’s past. Instead, I’d clumsily thrown back a curtain, casting some events in sharp light and others in even deeper shadow. “I was surprised,” I said. “At everything.”

“And do you feel you understand me now?”

A wave of heat rose through my body. I didn’t know how I could reflect back what meaning I’d made of her through our conversations, though I felt it was fair of her to ask. Instead of understanding, I felt more keenly the gulf separating her experiences, her life, from mine. I blinked. My throat tightened but I spoke anyway, letting the words tumble out, afraid that if I stopped speaking, I’d hold them in a painful silence for a long time.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know if understanding is even possible, considering how different my life is from yours. I started asking these questions because I wanted to understand politics. I thought if I could see the work you did, I’d be able to apply those lessons to my own organizing, everything that’s going on now. But each
thing I asked, it was like you destroyed my question with your answer. I wanted to know about the Coalition, and you started telling me about Halmoni. I wanted to know about your early organizing and you told me about dropping out, this die-hard devotion. At some point, I saw that I didn’t even know what to ask because, really, I didn’t know you at all. And so it was like I was being flooded every day with all this anger at what you lived through. At Haraboji and Halmoni, at dropping out, at Koreans, at sa-i-gu. At America.

“Before this, I only had my imagination of what happened,” I continued. “I realized I’d wanted to hear some sort of political fairytale, where everything turned out the way it should have. But of course that’s not true. There’s no justice, or even reason to what happened. Now, I have new fragments, new bits of the history here and there. And now I have to learn how to live with that, to put those fragments together into a new story.”

We idled at a stoplight. I realized I was breathing in quick, shallow spurts. My mother was silent and the sound seemed to fill up the car. We were caught in a reversal: I’d shared something difficult, and she was considering how to respond.

“Now, I realize that the real question I’d wanted to ask you was not about the Coalition at all, but, “Who are you?””

The car came to the crest of a hill. We could see for miles in front of us, where the city flattened again into boxy office buildings and homes. White airplanes hovered tentatively in the air as they approached the landing strips of LAX, caught in the layer of brown haze that always appeared with enough distance. I stole a glance at my mother and saw that her eyes were watering. I blinked. Mine were, too.
“But,” I said, “I wouldn’t take back those conversations for anything. More than the stories themselves, it matters to me that you trusted me with them.”

“Thank you,” she said. She reached out and tapped my cheek with her palm, and for once, I didn’t wince. “My son.”