



HOMECOMING

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ing our lives in the same enthusiastic fashion as he lived his own. I guess he is here in spirit . . .

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Sadly, the time comes to pack up and leave. Our farewells are accompanied by much hugging, and as we walk down the track to the bus, one of the villagers roars up beside me on his motorbike. Looking at me with a cheeky smile, he points to me and then back to his bike. The next thing I know I am perched on the back of his Suzuki, charging through the village at quite a speed. I laugh helplessly as we pass a blur of houses, chook pens, pig pens and duck ponds, with the rest of the villagers waving and cheering us on.

As our bus pulls out, we wave goodbye and drive at a snail's pace over my beloved white-pebbled track. I fall back in my seat, smiling and speechless. I can't wait to call my family in Australia and tell them of my experiences – of the path freshly pebbled for my visit, of my uncle's wok and, especially, I can't wait to tell them how deliriously happy I feel to be a part of this enchanting, extraordinary and energetic family.

This is an edited extract from *My China* by Kylie Kwong (Penguin Books, 2007). Reproduced by kind permission.



The Face in the Mirror

Blossom Beeby

When I was a child, my mother would amuse herself with stories of how I'd come into the world. Perhaps I had arrived on the front lawn in a spaceship, or had been sent to do the cleaning. In the late eighties, people were not accustomed to seeing white parents with a smiley Asian kid in tow. Curious ones would ask my parents why they had a 'Chinese daughter,' and I think my mother liked the idea of shocking them with unexpected responses. I don't recall her ever saying this to anyone. It was kind of a secret joke between us.

There are of course some truths that my mother shared about my arrival. When I was born on the first of February in 1984, the temperature was thirteen degrees below zero. It was in a city in the south of Korea called 'Pusan.' These are two things I have always known about my birth. For a long time, though, I pronounced the '-san' part of Pusan in a hard, Australian-sounding way, to rhyme with the word 'can.' It should have been a softer 'sahn.' My parents gave me the middle name 'Soo Jeong,' which in Korean means 'crystal' and was my first name when I was a baby in Korea. These details were hard-wired into my brain: interesting morsels to satisfy curious people, but static and scripted, with little current meaning.

Parents who acquired 'Made in Korea' babies in the 1980s received scant care instructions. Don't treat delicately. Allow to integrate. Take special care not to acknowledge Asian-ness. My parents heeded the tag, I think. Asian adoptees often talk about their experiences with mirrors. To many of us they have a sad significance. Inside we identified with the Caucasian people who made up our families. If we closed our eyes and imagined ourselves, we would see rosy white kids. When we looked at our faces in the mirror, though, foreigners would appear. I internalised my Asian face, but it didn't mean that I liked it. I just accepted it.

My mother had bought a large coffee-table book with beautiful images of Korea inside. There were tranquil countryside landscapes and serene images of cherry blossoms falling on courtyards. In one of these, there was an elderly woman, hunched over and gazing at the camera. I was repulsed by her brown wrinkledness. I thought about becoming like this in my old age. I genuinely believed that with the progression of time in Australia, I would eventually evolve into a fully-fledged Caucasian and would never have to face the possibility of being a shrivelled-up old Asian woman.

For much of my childhood, my Asian-ness was pushed to a crevice in the back of my mind. My friends were white, my family was white, my world was white. We lived in tolerant, white neighbourhoods. In both my primary and high schools, I was the only Asian kid in my year. The characters I read about in books and watched on television and in movies were white. All my concep-

tions of beauty were white, and I wondered if boys would ever find me attractive. To me, Asian people were not attractive and were in no way sexual beings.

It was quite easy to forget I was Asian when everyone around me was white, but there were occasions when the façade wasn't entirely effective. Asian people scared me silly. When I was a kid, South-East Asian guys with long, centre-parted hair used to squat, cigarettes in hand, in Adelaide's Rundle Mall. They would look around listlessly and talk amongst themselves. If I ever walked through that part of the mall with my dad, I would stare at the ground and subtly urge him to walk faster. I don't know what I was fearful of. Perhaps if I'd acknowledged that these people existed, I would have had to look in the mirror again.

I spent many summers flipping through my grandmother's trashy weekly gossip magazines. One day I came across an advertisement for pantyhose. The ad featured an Asian woman standing in a boxing ring. She had glistening black hair and was wearing a figure-hugging red dress with a split all the way up her leg. She was wearing a pair of sheer, black pantyhose and impossibly high stilettos. Heavily made-up to look smoldering, her facial expression was confident, if a little smug. She was beautiful and she gave me a glimmer of a hope.

In the latter years of high school, I began a rebellion of sorts. I started going to nightclubs with my best friend, who was half Ghanaian and had grown up mostly with a white English mother. We were both a little culturally confused and suddenly found places where there were a lot of people who looked like us. There were Asians, Arabs, Africans, Indians and every ethnicity in between: the white kids were the minority. It was a cultural hodgepodge and a comfort zone I'd never known before. I felt at ease asserting my ethnicity among the throngs of other black-haired people who gathered in those dark, smoky venues. It was the first time I'd felt comfortable being an Asian, around other Asians. It may have been a very seedy way of achieving it and not one to be advocated in adoptive parenting handbooks, but I was finally kind of glad to be Asian.

I had fully acknowledged my Asian-ness and was proud of it. I met more Asians and felt comfortable around them. I would ask

their nationality and they would ask mine. As with the facts about my birth, the response 'Korean' became automated. But if you'd asked, I couldn't have told you one thing about Korea. I didn't feel I needed to delve any deeper.

My university boyfriend was a Japanese-Australian. He determined very quickly that I actually was Korean. He was sensitive and genuinely wanted me to learn about the country. Being proud, I couldn't tell him that I was scared. So I went along with it.

He took me to the Korean food stand in Chinatown. I ordered a generic chicken dish and sat down with it in trepidation. He told me to try the *kimchi*, Korea's national dish. I shoved it in my mouth and chewed. It was a nerve-wracking experience. I wonder now if he detected that. 'Not bad,' was all I could muster.

From then on, I threw my fears aside and learnt all I could about Korea. Maybe it was the mystical healing properties of the *kimchi*. Smells of sesame oil and fermented cabbage and soybean paste brought me a certain comfort and epicurean happiness. I ventured timidly into the one Korean grocery store in Adelaide to buy *bulgogi* and *ramyeon* and anything else I recognised.

One day, while waiting for a lecture, I noticed a small flyer offering Korean language lessons in exchange for help with English conversation. I hastily ripped off a tab and stashed it in my wallet. I called the number that night and spoke with a young Korean woman. We met up the following weekend and over potato wedges, with sour cream and sweet-chilli sauce, I began to learn my first Korean words.

My tutor began teaching me the basics of the Korean alphabet. To me, written Korean looked like someone had thrown down sticks and circles on a page. But I learned quickly and was soon able to make out the sounds they represented. I returned to Chinatown one weekend and stared at the sticks and circles: ?? ?? . They began looking less like meaningless shapes and more like words that I could actually read and say. It was like I had cracked a special code. My tutor was extremely patient and encouraged me. She told me my pronunciation was excellent and attributed this to my Korean tongue. I smirked and accepted the compliment.

The small snippets of information that I had always spat out

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on cue about my history now began to have significance. I had my university change my records so that my middle name – my Korean name, Soo Jeong – would appear on all my documents. I would sit and write my Korean name over and over in Hangeul: I could be ????? or Blossom Beeby. I began to think of my Korean name as the one connection between myself and Korea and my birth mother. I met people who had been to Pusan. They had stories of how Pusan people are tough, Pusan women have distinctive faces, the men are terse and uncompassionate and everyone speaks in a dialect that to outsiders gives the impression that they are yelling at each other. I wondered if I had inherited any of these characteristics.

I scoured my university library for books about Korea. To my dismay, there was scant contemporary material. The few books I could find, much like the country itself, were jammed between numerous tomes about its more glorious and fascinating neighbours, Japan and China. I was dissatisfied and hungry for more.

I decided that I wanted to see Korea. I won a scholarship to a language summer-school in Seoul. This would be the first time I had left Australia since arriving as a baby. I was wrapped up in anticipation and expectations.

I left Adelaide and stopped over in Kuala Lumpur. At the boarding gate in KL, it became increasingly clear that the flight was to be boarded exclusively by middle-aged Korean men in golf gear, Korean women with perms wearing visors and bum bags, and me. A man approached and asked me a question in Korean. I froze, turned bright red and shook my head. I was overcome with paralysing fear. I'd never been surrounded by Koreans before and they thought I was one of them. I was an imposter or somehow incomplete.

But I made it to Seoul. A bustling, smelly and baffling city. It was a fantastic summer. Surprisingly, there were no feelings of 'coming home' or 'finally belonging.' I just wanted to explore, eat, drink, party and in the process, throw away the scholarship. I was no longer fearful or anxious about Koreans. Puzzled and fascinated definitely, but the KL boarding gate feelings have never come back to me.

I was very lucky on that trip. I had approached my adoption

agency and asked them to begin a search for my birth family. They called me about eight weeks later. My birth mother was alive and wanted to meet me. The social worker happily announced that she would be travelling up to Seoul the next day by train from a country town in a southern province.

When I met my birth mother, she confirmed the reasons I had imagined for my relinquishment. I looked at her face and could immediately see myself. It was like her eyes, nose and cheekbones had been imprinted on my face. I asked how she had chosen my name. She hadn't. She'd handed me to the social worker the day I was born and had no say in the name I was given. This shook my comforting idea that my mother had given me my name in love.

I was able to travel to Pusan. With the help of my adoption agency and the local police, I located the building where I was born. In the eighties it had been a maternity home, where unwed mothers could have their illegitimate children in secrecy. Now it was a worn building. The top storeys were occupied by shifty looking offices with metal doors and deadlocks. The floors were cold cement. The thought crossed my mind that the map was wrong or that the policeman had made a mistake. This was not where I had imagined arriving into the world.

The adoption agency had printed out a map to help me find the building. I examined it and noticed that in the vicinity there were a lot of landmarks with the name Soo Jeong. I realised that my name had been given to me arbitrarily by a social worker with very little creativity. My heart sunk a little.

Slowly, it dawned on me that those little snippets out of which I had created Korean Blossom still had little real meaning. I had thought I had a foundation – a name, a place, a date and a temperature. But what did it all mean? Now that I'd learnt that those facts were so unromantic and inconsequential, I wasn't sure.

I have spent many hours contemplating what might have been had I grown up in Korea. It is a cyclical process and I am no closer to a conclusion. Had I stayed, most certainly I could never have had the opportunities that I have had in Australia. I might not have grown up with a loving and stable family. I would not enjoy the open and critical thinking that Australian education seems to encourage. But for each of these factors, another question opens

up, sending my mind on another adventure. For all of Korea's shortcomings, I have never felt such social cohesion and an almost familial insularity. As frustrating as it was, I miss that about Korea and I wonder what it would have been like to grow up knowing only that world.

I cannot know how my life might have unravelled had I lived it in Korea. I can't pretend to understand Korean society as though it were my own. But I do feel as though I stand on a kind of cusp, looking in. Material circumstances pushed my life to where it is now, but they might have pushed it in a very different direction. I might have had a life with my Korean family, in their dusty country town on the beautiful southern coast of Korea. I might have grown up with values and a language and temperament that matched my face.

I have come a long way since I was a little girl who recoiled at the image of a wrinkled Korean woman – now I know her as *Halmoni*, or Grandmother. It has taken some time for the different bits of me to fit comfortably, and I am sure they will continue to realign and I will continue to question. For now, I think questioning is good. It seems to makes things clearer.

Baked Beans and Burnt Toast

Jackie Larkin

The plane slaloms around the buildings, which seem to reach up to grab us. We're in a concrete jungle of chaos and neon when surely we should be above it. I don't know what keeps a jumbo jet in the air – something vague about low pressure and wind-flow over the wings I think I once read somewhere – but as our plane undertakes what is essentially a triple twist with pike, it seems as though the same rules don't apply in Asia. The sick-bags are in short supply as we are buffeted around the sky. I don't know if the laws of physics apply here, but it's clear that the noise pollution laws are also a little lax. Surely the sound of a 747 screaming past your apartment window would require more than double-glazing to keep out.