

to get a car of his own.

At the end of six weeks, he has enough money to buy the black '79 Mustang from Bill Moreno, the scruffy guy in 14A. Since the beginning of the summer, a fluorescent FOR SALE sign has adorned its rear window. Father knows it's a good buy because he's seen the way Bill Moreno makes his turns like an old woman, and the car wash and wax that happens on every Saturday without fail.

On the day that Father decides to approach Mr. Moreno, Mr. Lim comes looking for him. "My car just died," he says. "I don't know what I'm gonna do. I'm sorry, but I won't be able to give you a ride anymore." Father lends Mr. Lim a sizable part of his money – enough to fix the busted transmission – and dejectedly goes to a Ford dealer, hoping to get maybe a '75 or a '76 Mustang, then comes hobbling back with the station wagon.

"Why did you buy the car?" I asked Father.

"I don't know," he told me. "It didn't seem like I had a choice. I was gonna get one that day, so I was gonna follow through."

"You couldn't wait?"

"I wish you were here that day," he said.

It was just what I wanted to hear.

THE DAY THAT FATHER AND MOTHER decided to have me and Noona begin working at Father's store ("Our store, not my store," Father repeated until I got it right), Mother drove for the first time. She'd been taking lessons from Father, but it was obvious they weren't going well, for after each session, Father knocked back a double shot of his Cutty Sark and Mother ran into their bedroom, slammed the door shut, and cranked up her Korean lounge music to near-deafening levels.

I'm not sure why Mother drove that day, but I'm sure it was Father's idea. "You can do it," I hear him saying to her, coaxing her. "Honey, you can do it. It's the beginning of our new life here." Her hand squeezing the car key until it left an indentation in her palm, thinking Yes, yes, I can do this.

Mother twice swerved into the curb with her extreme right turns, twice almost hit the same car on Route 35 (the driver of the other car, a tiny Spanish woman, screamed with buggy eyes, twice), and ran over an already flattened squirrel. She cried after she did that, waiting at the traffic light, just hid her face in her hands and wept.

But when the light turned green, Mother stepped on the gas. And when the next light turned red, Mother stepped on the brake. After all, she was driving. She had a job to do.

AT OUR STORE, WE SOLD EVERYTHING ASIAN. That should have been our name, Everything Asian, but instead we were called East Meets West. Our store was one of "One-Hundred and Eighteen Fine Stores" of Peddlers Town, a depressed, second-class strip mall in Mannersville, NJ. A quick sampling of our shop: from Japan, we featured flowing kimonos, cloisonné bonzai trees, cone-shaped patchouli incense in tiny red sacks with gold drawstrings. From China, ceramic figurines of happy bald monks, shrieking dragons carved out of soapstone, silk pajamas with tiny Chinese eyehook buttons. And from Korea, a round black plaque accented with mother-of-pearl flowers, a guitar-like instrument that intoned sad and lonely vibes, a tall, regal vase with glassy cracked skin.

Despite all these beautiful things, Father was ashamed, maybe because there were no real doors to this store. Instead, he had to pull down on a loop of cable to roll up thick canvas curtains. It was like drawing up a gigantic window shade.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"It's heavy," he said, out of breath.

I grabbed onto a cable, lifted up my feet, and let my weight bring me down. It was fun.

"Is this okay?" Father asked.

"Okay?"

"Working here. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"What am I supposed to do?"

Father took off his eyeglasses, wiped the lens on his shirt, and put them back on. He surveyed the store. It was pretty large, much bigger than our apartment. Compared to the surrounding neighbors, we occupied the largest space. Father should be proud, I thought. It's a fine store.

"There," he pointed, referring to some customers struggling with an item. "That music box – nobody can figure it out. You know how it works; it's the one that Noona has."

I felt nervous. "So I show them how?"

"Yes. But do it nicely."

I didn't know how to do it nicely, but I got up my courage and walked up to the two women, probably mother and daughter.

"Hello," I said.

"Hi!" the mother said. "Can you help us with this contraption?"

I had no idea what she said after "Hi," but I didn't let it frighten me. I reached over and pushed in the little silver button on the base of the pagoda-shaped music box. Tinny-tiny music, uncoiled at last, came to life.

"It's 'Moon River,' Mom," the girl said. Her eyes were very green and a little scary. Her skin was white to the point of translucence, and there were brown freckles everywhere. She smiled and I quickly looked away.

"Thank you! What's your name?" the mother asked.

Name – I knew that.

"David," I said.

"David, you've been most kind."

"Thank you, David," the green-eyed girl said.

Feeling somewhat triumphant at surviving my first customer assistance, I turned back to where Father had been, but he wasn't there; he was at the register, ringing up some other sale, Mother wrapping and bagging next to him. In his place stood Noona, who watched me with a rueful smile.

My sister had unusually large eyes for a Korean, and her face was almost perfectly round. Or at least it used to be. She seemed not just thinner but older, and prettier, too, her cheekbones pronounced, her arms somehow longer and more graceful. Never again would she look the way she did in Korea. I don't know how I knew that, but I did.

"Good work," she said.

"No sweat," I said.

We sat inside the fortress of showcases in the middle of the store, she on the aluminum stool and me on the wooden one.

"Do you like it here?" she asked, and I didn't know if she meant this store or this country or this planet. I was going to ask for clarification, then I stopped myself when I realized my answer would have been the same.

"Could be worse," I said.

She nodded slowly.

"It can always be worse," she said.

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Everything Asian

I was waiting to use our apartment's only bathroom, shifting from foot to foot, when the door burst open and my sister walked out, her eyes raw and puffy, followed closely by Mother, arms tautly alert, ready to catch her if she fell, if she melted, **if she died.**

From the forthcoming novel by Sung J. Woo



MY SISTER HAD CHOSEN THIS DAY, my twelfth birthday, to try to kill herself, or at least pretend to kill herself. Looking back on that day now, I can see it was merely a stunt to gain attention, and even then I think I knew she was bluffing, but still, I couldn't ignore the blue dish and the paring knife sitting on top of the toilet seat, its tip pointing toward the bathtub like a compass needle. On the dish, a pile of white pills sat like an offering. I put the dish and the knife on the floor and flipped the seat up. As I peed into the bowl, I stared down at the silver edge of the blade, wondering how close it had come to my sister's wrists.

When I finished, I walked the stuff back to the kitchen. I let the pills roll onto the faded Formica and counted twelve of them. I arranged the tablets on the dish in a circle, placed the paring knife in the center, and mouthed the words "Happy birthday" in English. I wheeled the knife around until it pointed five past seven, the exact time my head would have poked out of Mother's you-know-what, twelve years ago to this day, the twenty-eighth of February, my squishy eyes slowly unsticking, wondering just why the world had gotten so cold.

I CALLED MY SISTER NOONA, Korean for "sister." Her full name was In Sook, and her American name was Susan. She wouldn't know this until later, but there was another name-in-waiting, Sue, one she would eventually grow into.

Noona, almost sixteen, had days when she didn't say a single word, not to me or anyone else. Then there were days when she wouldn't shut up. I would ask her if she wanted another ice cream bar and she would start cursing like you wouldn't believe. When Father wasn't at the store, he was in New York, striking deals with wholesalers and vendors, so he wasn't around to see these strange fits. Luckily, Mother was home to handle her. When my sister became deaf-mute, Mother spoke to her like there was nothing wrong. And when Noona became irate, Mother listened calmly and when there was a break in the yelling, she took her into her arms, where, for a moment, my sister would sink and disappear. When she resurfaced, silent bright rivers ran down her cheeks.

Noona was not taking the move from Seoul, Korea, to Oakbridge, New Jersey, too well. Unlike me, she actually had friends to miss, especially her boyfriend. She wanted to call them all, but Father wouldn't let her because it was too expensive, and besides, with a half-day time difference, it was next to impossible to get anybody at a reasonable hour. Noona called anyway.

"I only called four times," she said to Father when the phone bill arrived.

"Three hundred dollars!" he screamed, the first time I'd heard him scream. Before then, he was nothing but nice to us. "Where am I going to get three hundred dollars?"

"It's the least you can do," Noona said. Her voice stood at the edge of a cliff. Father had no rebuttal. He looked hurt, he looked tired.

That was the first month, the first phase of Noona's loneliness, soon to swell heavy and round like a full moon.

THE VERY NEXT DAY AFTER THEIR FIGHT, Father came home with the biggest tape recorder I'd ever seen. "Here," he said, showing Noona how to use it. It was the kind that you'd find in high school language

labs, the black rectangular monsters with one giant woofer on top. The buttons were so big, you almost had to use two fingers. When Father pressed EJECT, the lid sprang up like a catapult.

Noona put the tape recorder to work immediately. She spoke intensely, her long black hair falling around the unit like a cape, her lips floating over the tiny triple slats on the built-in microphone. The first day, she sat in her room and made five 90-minute tapes in a row, seven and a half hours of her fragile voice laid out on thin magnetic ribbon. How could anybody have that much to say? It was a miracle she was able to keep the phone bill under a thousand dollars. When the tapes were ready to be mailed, she insisted on accompanying Father to the post office with as much nervousness as a mother sending her child off to school for the first time.

The reply didn't come for three long weeks. When Noona saw the package from Korea with her name on it, she ripped into it with animal ferocity. There was a quick scribble on an index card and a tape that looked too professional to be an amateur recording. The note read:

Sorry you can't be here
This band is really good
We miss you

My sister listened to the tape once, slipped it back in its case, and buried it deep in her drawer.

SHE WASN'T EATING WELL

and losing weight. She chewed her food slowly and carefully, as if her mouth were full of broken glass. If her eyes weren't puffy or red, they were black and sleepless.

Mother was worried. I knew this because she came up with ridiculous suggestions.

"Maybe you should sleep in the same bed," she said. "You know, like when we were in Korea."

"I'm too old now," I said. "Says who?"

"Mother, we're in America," I explained. "In America, brothers and sisters don't sleep in same beds."

Mother nodded, stared at her hands, sighed. Her few stray grays had multiplied since our move. She looked old and scratched up like my second-hand dresser.

It was hard enough being Noona's roommate, let alone sharing the same bed. Nights were the worst. From the other side of the room, I heard her lingering sobs, how they seemed to come automatically, without any provocation. I tried not to be rude, but after a week of running short on sleep, I had to push off the covers and yell, "Can you please stop crying?"

She stopped. I couldn't believe it worked, just like that. "That's better," I said half-jokingly, but no response was forthcoming. I felt bad for yelling at her, but in an instant I was dreaming of sitting plush in a candy-striped La-Z-Boy on a soccer field, munching on barbeque potato chips, my new favorite food.

The next day was my twelfth birthday, when she did the knife-and-pill thing, so suffice it to say, I was not pleased with myself.

WHEN FATHER RETURNED FROM NEW YORK that day, Mother

merely told him that Noona was a noon-mool bah-dah, a sea of tears, and that's all she would say. But Father was no dummy. He knew sadness when he saw it.

"Tell me, Joon-a," he said, cornering me in the kitchen, the refrigerator cold on my back. He resorted to using my nickname whenever he wanted something.

"Why don't you ask Mother?"

"Good son," he countered in English. "My good son."

He knew I liked hearing these words from him, but he was using them too frequently. Six weeks ago, Father had been nothing more than a picture in Mother's album of black and white photographs, a man who stood beside her in various poses behind various backgrounds. He'd left five years ago to make us a new, better life in America, and now here he was, in the flesh. In the pictures, he looked taller than he actually was, maybe because Mother was sitting down while he hovered over her, but everything else was exactly the

same: his hair still short and parted to one side, his dark-framed eyeglasses too big for his face. He seemed harmless enough, but then I'd catch him on the phone talking to his wholesalers, looking sideways at me as he spoke, giving me a wink – and suddenly he looked like a different person, a fake.

I pointed to the dish that was still sitting on the counter. "That was in the bathroom," I told him. "Noona was in the bathroom with that."

He noticed the pills I'd arranged. "You made a clock out of it?" he asked.

"It's a cake. It's my birthday."

"Happy buss-day." "Do you know the song?"

"I forgot it was your birthday," he said.

"It doesn't matter." "How old are you now?"

"Twelve." "I know the song," Father said.

"Happy buss-day to you," he sang, running his fingers through my hair, "happy buss-day to you. Happy..." His voice cracked. I continued singing. "...

birthday dear Da-vid, happy birthday to me." He quickly wiped his eyes with his sleeve and cleared his throat. "What can I buy you?" he asked.

I wanted to take my time to compose a thorough list, but looking at Father's desperate face, I had to offer him something. "A frisbee," I said, telling him the first thing that came to mind and regretting it immediately.

"Wait here," Father said. He returned moments later with a white round disc approximately the size of a coaster. In the center was the familiar McDonald's golden arches. "I'll get you a real one tomorrow," he said, handing it over. "Happy buss-day."

So tomorrow I'd have two frisbees that I didn't want instead of one.

WE NEVER WENT OUT TO EAT ANYWHERE, so when Father told us we were going out, I knew something big was up. I was hoping for Friendly's, but we headed toward a Korean restaurant managed



by one of Father's friends, Mr. Lim. This didn't make any sense to me. Weren't you supposed to go out to eat food you couldn't get at home?

"Be quiet," Mother said. "This isn't about you." When we returned from busting our bellies with oxtail soup and pepper-laced rice cake, a piano had joined our living room. It stood upright and had a splotchy look to it, maybe because its two front legs were varnished a darker brown than the rest. Noona went to it like a person possessed, lifting the creaky keyboard cover and tracing the nicked rectangles of the ebony with her delicate fingers. The ivory keys were the color of Mr. Lim's teeth, but Noona didn't seem to mind. She sat down and played a couple of riffs.

"It sounds wonderful," she said. Standing between Father and Mother, their hands resting on my shoulder, on my head, I watched my broken sister give love to her piano. I didn't know it then, but she was playing Beethoven's Für Elise, a tune she could play with perfect execution from memory alone.

That evening, I listened to Father and Mother arguing. Apparently there was some confusion about where Father got the money for the piano. Mother thought he had it saved up, because that's what he told her. Actually, he borrowed the hefty sum from Mr. Lim.

"That's why we went there for dinner, to thank him," Father said. "You son of a bitch," Mother said. "You lied to me."

"You saw how much she needed it," he said. "What're you complaining about?"

"Don't turn this around. You're always turning everything around." "Come on. You can't fault me for this. Not this."

My parents' voices and Noona's piano were intermingling, becoming oddly sing-song. It wasn't beautiful and it wasn't ugly. It just sounded like my family.

FATHER WAS RIGHT, OF COURSE; the piano turned Noona around. Often I stood next to her as she played, watching her fingers flutter over the keyboard, her bare feet jamming the pedals below. With every note triggering the rise and fall of a hammer, how could you not feel better? Noona's negativity fled in droves as notes dashed out of the piano.

Financially, the piano was a horror. Within two weeks, we lost our telephone. A nice black man knocked on the door and said, "Good evenin', good sir," to my Father and slipped our rotary phone into a little canvas bag. We almost lost electricity, but somehow Father managed to sell enough merchandise at the store to get everything back before the end of the month.

It must've been difficult for Mother to live with Father again, constantly living on the edge of disaster. He was a smart man in a lot of ways, but not when it came to money. To this day, I'm unable to figure out exactly what he was doing wrong. I don't think he ever could, either.

THE BEST VANTAGE POINT FROM WHICH to see all the cars in our apartment's back parking lot was out the kitchen window, standing on a chair, looking down and to the right. This was how Noona and I decided that Father drove the ugliest car in the neighborhood. It was a '77 Ford station wagon in a shade of green that felt doomed. In the summer the car held a fishy stench. In the winter it shook while idling.

There's a story that goes with the purchase of this car: July to August, 1980. For six consecutive weekends, torrential rain soaks coastal New Jersey. This is great for business because Father's store is half an hour away from the beach and when people can't head for the shore, they head for the store. Each weekend he sets a new sales record. Mr. Lim has been kind enough to carpool with Father, the detour adding a good forty miles to his trip, so it's time for Father