

FOREWORD BY ALIA JOY

TELL ME THE DREAM AGAIN

Reflections on Family, Ethnicity & the Sacred Work of Belonging



TASHA
JUN

This is a beautiful book. When culture and the current events of the world cause us to lose sight of our souls, Jun's words invite us to journey into the most lost parts of our story. By reading her hidden hurts, I was able to reflect on mine. I was able to find a freedom I not only wanted but needed. Powerful, redemptive, and transformative.

ANJULI PASCHALL

Author of *Stay* and *Awake*

With fierce gentleness, Tasha Jun invites us to journey with her as she weaves her story as a biracial Korean woman alongside the age-old ache to belong. Through gorgeous prose, Jun masterfully reminds us that following the way of Jesus invites us to become more of our God-given selves, not less—and that ultimately it's in honoring the fullness of each of our ethnicities and particularities that we truly come to reflect the goodness and belovedness for which we were created.

AUNDI KOLBER

Therapist and author of *Try Softer* and *Strong like Water*

Tell Me the Dream Again is a beautifully written book about the tensions surrounding reclaiming an identity formed by growing up in both eastern and western worlds. Tasha Jun gives the reader a front-row seat as she describes her pains, joys, and challenges as a biracial woman. Woven throughout the book are scriptural teachings and the rich textures and flavors of her ethnic heritage. Tasha's offering will resonate deeply with other multiethnic readers and

provide needed insight for all of us who have friends and loved ones who live in liminal spaces.

VIVIAN MABUNI

Author of *Open Hands*, *Willing Heart* and host of *Someday Is Here* podcast for AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) leaders

The lyrical beauty of Tasha Jun's prose alone makes her a must-read author. But *Tell Me the Dream Again* is so much more than that. It's a vulnerable invitation into Tasha's spiritual and cultural awakening—a raw journey that is captivating to read while simultaneously beckoning readers to examine the complexities and pain points of their own stories. As someone without strong ties to my ancestors, I found that Tasha's memoir stirred in me a longing to learn about my family history, and even more, it stirred deeper compassion for those who feel like they've never truly belonged.

BECKY KEIFE

Author of *The Simple Difference* and *No Better Mom for the Job*

Tasha has painted a masterpiece in *Tell Me the Dream Again*. Her poetic and honest storytelling draws us into the many layers of being mixed-race. As someone who identifies as a mixed-race Asian American Christian, I was able to explore my own multilayered story and identity on these pages. As the world continues to grow in mixed-race population, we all need this book!

DORINA LAZO GILMORE-YOUNG

Author, speaker, and podcaster

Tasha killed me softly with her song in *Tell Me the Dream Again*. This beautifully written book shows the power of truth and the vulnerability of grace. This is a guidebook to embracing who you are and loving all God created you to be. *Tell Me the Dream Again* empowers us who believed we weren't enough to see our uniqueness as our divine contribution to the world.

TANORRIA ASKEW

Author, entrepreneur, and social justice activist

Tell Me the Dream Again eloquently and evocatively explores the universal need to be understood and loved. Leave it to an Asian American woman of mixed heritage to guide us through the gritty questions of belonging between worlds and finding our own voice on the other side. Tasha Jun is a master storyteller, and the words in her book were written for us all.

MICHELLE AMI REYES

Vice president of the Asian American Christian Collaborative and award-winning author of *Becoming All Things*

Tell Me the Dream Again



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TASHA
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Foreword

New Mexico was home to me from the time I learned to ride a bike down the bend in our road, the heat waves from the desert-baked asphalt heaving breath on my sunbrowned knees with every pedal of my legs. Most of my childhood adventures wound along the watermelon-hued switchbacks carved into the Sandia Mountains.

A place can hold both cherished memories and caustic reminders, and when you reminisce, the clock's years spin back as if cranking the handle of a jack-in-the-box. You brace yourself like an anxious child waiting to see what pops up. You anticipate complicated memories. Growing up as a multiracial Asian American girl was like that. Complicated.

I was raised from girlhood in the Badlands, where the plateaus were as flat as the contours of my face, the same face I was made fun of for. "Did you run into a door?

Why is your face like that? Can you even see when you smile, ching-chong?” the kids asked on the playground after pulling their eyes into violent, angry slits.

At night I pulled open the medicine cabinet doors around me and looked at my profile reflected in the folded mirrors. My cheekbones sat high and wide, and I pressed my palms flat against my forehead and nose and mouth. I opened my eyes as wide as they'd go.

I learned that by the slant of my lids and the curves of my face, I was somehow “other.” It wasn't until I was in third grade and the bullying intensified that I realized that “other” was synonymous with wrong.

I felt God had somehow made me wrong. I wasn't fully white, and I wasn't fully Asian. Two halves of something that didn't seem to add up to a whole.

“Otherness” is something Asian Americans understand. We're perpetually othered and treated as foreign, even if we are born in America. We're asked where we're really from and what we are. We are congratulated on our English, even if it's our first and only language. We are mistaken for the other Asians because, people joke, we all look alike. Asian women are fetishized, while Asian men are emasculated.

I grew up thinking it was just me who was called “ching-chong China girl” in a singsong voice while kids pulled their eyes into slits. I thought it was just me who

could never pull off the eyeshadow tutorials from the images of wide-lidded faces in the glossy magazines.

I thought it was just me who had a well-meaning teacher suggest I do a “Who I Admire Most” speech on Connie Chung because she couldn’t think of any other Asian American role models. I was twelve before I read a book with an Asian American character in it, and I gobbled down books with a ravenous hunger for story. There were no shows with Asian American representation. I didn’t see reflections of me anywhere I looked. So while other kids dressed up like Michael Jordan, Molly Ringwald, or Madonna, I dutifully donned an oversized boxy blazer, grabbed a bottle of Aqua Net, and shel-lacked my hair into something resembling a helmet to give my talk on how I became the first person of Asian descent to anchor one of America’s major networks and the first woman to co-anchor *CBS Evening News*.

In retrospect, it wasn’t that Connie Chung’s accomplishments weren’t noteworthy. She was a pioneer because so few Asian Americans existed in the public sphere of popular culture, let alone were recognized as part of our history.

One woman, upon hearing my Connie Chung story, replied that it was ridiculous, that diversity was just a way to cause division, because we are all equal in Christ. Her dismissive response was nothing I hadn’t

heard before or since. Some people refuse to admit that all things are not equitable. Racism, racial profiling, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and the systemic oppression of so many people God created in his image have fertilized the roots of hate and pride and the narrowing of who defines what we exalt and what we justify. The sameness of the stories we tell and the selective mouths they come from stifle us all, leaving the witness to God's church soiled, skewed, or silenced.

We were made for more. Yet we often fail to see that diversity has often meant disparity. But ethnicity was God's initiative, his creative manifesto to paint humanity with vibrancy, color, and timbre. To make each freckle, each speck of color in the iris, to coil hair in wiry locks or lay them smooth like straw, to soak our skin in a thousand colors and paint them over the bodies of his creation. God chose to form languages that click and hum and roll off tongues or rattle in the throat like the whirl of a bumblebee, to make words that purr and sing in a prism of different notes.

In recent years, as I began to write publicly, I met other Asian American writers online who gave voice to similar struggles. We connected over common experiences, shared burdens, and kindred revelations. Some of us formed an intimate group of Korean American

Christian women writers and called ourselves the #kimchisisterhood.

When one of us was going through a particularly trying time, the sentiment we all chimed in with was: “Have you eaten?” A very Asian way of expressing love and care is to literally feed one another. A Korean mom will stuff you with love in the shape of dumplings or stews or all manner of steaming bowls. Since we’re scattered across the States, our love often arrived through DoorDash or Uber Eats. Nourishing bellies nourishes souls.

When Tasha shared her dreams for this book, I championed her voice and begged for the opportunity to gobble up the pages, because I knew the best books don’t just give us a glimpse into someone else’s story, they help us reveal our own. I knew her words would be nourishment for my soul, like seaweed soup (miyeokguk), a healing salve for new growth and flourishing and rebirth. A love song to all of us who haven’t always been taught we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

I dog-eared pages and scribbled notes in the margins of her manuscript. But I didn’t just see glimpses of myself, of my deep desire for belonging, or the ways our stories mirrored each other. In Tasha’s beautiful words, I saw an expansive view of a creative, loving, and merciful God who calls us good and invites us to shalom, to

be fully present in our unique identities. A God who made us purposefully, divinely setting us in body and place and ethnicity and culture, for such a time as this. A God who knew that only a body of many different parts would ever be able to reflect his glory.

Alia Joy

Author of Glorious Weakness: Discovering God in All We Lack

Prologue

You can keep as quiet as you like,
but one of these days
somebody is going to find you.

HARUKI MURAKAMI

When I was in high school, I guarded the front door of my home. I only let a handful of friends past the entryway. A rare few knew the smell of our kitchen, the sound of my mother's voice over the television that called out like an extra family member, and me, in the middle of it all.

One time a friend called on a Saturday morning to see if I was free. He wanted to ride his bike over. I'd already used up a handful of excuses about why he couldn't come to my place in the past, and I couldn't

think of any more excuses that particular morning. Backed into my own corner, I said yes and hung up, then panicked.

I checked the fridge first to assess the initial smell. I looked for kimchi and leftovers. I searched the family room for evidence: Did we appear to be normal? The low table we gathered around to eat at while watching TV suddenly seemed way too conspicuous. Asian crackers in a small bowl sat on top of the table. The bright pink heated floor pad sprawled beside it. All the things that were familiar and normal to me stared back as if we were in a face-off.

Whose normal would win: mine or my friend's? Whose normal was worthy enough? What I didn't have words for then was a need to show up, not normal enough, but white enough.

When I answered the door a few minutes later, I told my friend something had come up and I had to go. We talked for a bit on the doorstep. I was wearing a hoodie and stretching the sleeves over my fisted hands again and again as we talked. He frowned while I fumbled through explanations that didn't make sense even to me until he finally gave up, then turned and rode away.

This wasn't a monumental moment but one of many little moments like it throughout my life. Thinking back

on it now, what stands out to me most is the way I blocked the doorway of my house as if there were a wild animal inside. If I close my eyes, I can still feel how tense my body was, how intent I was on not letting that animal out.

I'd come to believe the narrative that my ethnicity and cultural details would turn people away. I blocked the doorway to our suburban home, but the monster that would be discovered was *me*.

I thought I could separate me from me. No one in my family or my inner circles explicitly taught me this narrative of normalcy or told me that my ethnic and cultural identity should be a source of shame. From as far back as I can remember, my family encouraged me to embrace my biracial ethnic identity. Still, the message was everywhere, baked into everything from a lack of representation to an absence of historical education about people who looked and ate and lived like my family did. It was there when classmates pulled at the corners of their eyes on the monkey bars in fifth grade or turned up their noses when I opened my lunch box in the school cafeteria.

At a young age, I learned to believe my Korean normal was embarrassing—a barrier to belonging and an enemy of my deepest longings.

But I didn't fit in when I was in Korea, either. When I went there for the first time to visit my mom's family,

she spent a lot of time explaining that I was her daughter as I stood next to her in a store without my dad nearby.

I was stuck in this misfit middle place and had nowhere to go. And no one seemed to care how deeply this plagued me.

There's only so far we can grow in a relationship when we hide large parts of ourselves. There's only so long we can pretend to be color-blind and hide the evidence of our God-given colors. There's only so long we can offer just the front porch or entryway and fool ourselves into thinking this is the way we'll be accepted, the only way we'll be able to have genuine, meaningful relationships. With each new excuse for pushing someone away, we lock ourselves further into isolation.

The lie of cultural assimilation is that it leads to belonging.



For most of my life, I struggled to understand and accept who I am. And for many years, I thought my struggle was an individual one—and all my fault, because of something impossibly wrong with me.

I was wrong. This is my story of journeying from childhood curiosity to turmoil and rejection to embrace—and finally back to a redeemed, holy curiosity

about my ethnic and cultural identity. This is the story of Jesus' pursuit of all of me, in each of these stages, and how his perfect love convinced me that I am worth being made whole, worth being seen and known, and worth what it takes to live wholly loved and proud of the scent of kimchi—not only in my fridge but on my fingers and permeating the breath I breathe and the words I speak.

I've always been caught between worlds. Ready and not ready, English and Korean, light and dark, weak but prophesied strong, caught between the grief over things lost and the joy over things found. I wandered between these seemingly opposing worlds, struggling to find a voice to speak and a firm place for my feet to land.

There was only so long I could offer Jesus the outer rooms of my heart and pretend that's all there was to me. There was only so long I could fool myself by telling him that he could have everything while I was unwilling to embrace my everything. There was only so long I could keep trying to discard parts that God knit together in me—whether because those parts reminded me of pain or shame, or because those parts seemed to stand in the way of my belonging and my deepest longings. Finally, he called my bluff.

I don't know your story, but you and your details matter too. May my stories help you to bravely and

patiently look at your own and lead you back to who you were divinely knit together to be. May it help you see that your identity in Christ is tightly woven with the unique colors, scents, and cultural stories he's given you. May you begin to see the way God's perfect love and Kingdom are reflected in all our diverse experiences and table settings. May you come to know Christ's love for you in every deep part of your heart, mind, body, and soul.

I was blind, but now I see: wild animals are created to be free.

CHAPTER 1

DREAMS AND TIGERS

Once upon a time
when tigers smoked pipes . .

How do I begin to tell one story
when one story begins with two?

She squeezed the word out of her lips, her bright white teeth playing peekaboo: “Ho-raaang-eee.”

I’d asked my mother the Korean word for “tiger” after her story was done, moving my mouth to make the same shapes her mouth did, trying to catch the earthy, invisible sounds falling out of it.

As a child, I did everything I could to imitate my mother. I used to study her slender, brown hands, comparing them with mine. I liked to point at the tiny freckle below my right thumb and then at her darker

freckle in the same spot—a sign that I could become like her. I learned to laugh loudly, the way she does: mouth wide, eyes watering, and hand fanning our faces as if joy is a fire that can be tamed.

Outside of a few words and phrases, we didn't speak Korean to one another when I was young. However, the language has always pulled at me like a map that promises to show the way home. I can pick it out on a busy city street. I know the curves and movements of its sound. I'm convinced it rests deep within me, asleep and tangled in the beating muscle fibers of my heart.

It was there in my earliest moments, pressing into my bones and ligaments, speaking straight through my mother's thoughts, mouth, and body, helping form my innermost parts. It was the language she used when she fed me and comforted me, when she was affectionate with me, and when she was most angry with me.

It was the language of her womb, my first home.

In college I enrolled in a beginner's Korean course. I showed up for class and burst through the doors with my head high. The four other students in the class were huddled together, their desks pulled into a misshapen circle, talking and laughing in Korean. They were already fluent.

I'd hoped learning the language would bring me closer to home, but instead, I sat in that class for a week,

mute and foreign, wondering why I'd been so audacious as to think that I could learn my mother's tongue. The other students would get their easy credit, and I would give up on trying.

I dropped the class.

When I called my mom and told her about it, she was apologetic at first. "Aigoo," she said, trying to simultaneously comfort and patronize me, "I should have taught you more when you little." She kept going, like a song reaching its crescendo. "But you so stubborn! Even when you baby! You don't listen and don't want me to speak Korean. You only speak English. Just like the peas I feed you when you baby—you spit it all back out."

Finally, she reminded me that going to Korean school like other Korean kids would have been hard for me. "You different than other Korean kids. Other Korean kids already know how to speak and have both Korean mommy and daddy to talk to at home. You only have me, and you so soft, and we move all the time."

I remember the year I covered the wall of my room with teen *Bop* magazine pictures. My mom would come in, shaking her head, making comments about how American I was. I would overhear her telling my dad how she regretted not teaching me Korean and how she wanted to enroll me in Korean school. But

then she'd argue with herself while my dad listened. She knew the weight of bloodlines and the names thrown at kids like my sister and me, and she knew she wouldn't be able to shield us from those things. She didn't know that even if we didn't go to Korean school, those things would reach for us through geography and generations.

For a long stretch of years, moving kept us busy enough. After I was born, we moved to Wisconsin, then to New York, then to Japan, then back to Santa Barbara, and then to Indiana. Conversations around our dinner table were always about the next place we were headed and the things we'd need to do to get ready to move there. Boxes, missing toys, new streets, and new ways of doing things—all of this was the norm for us.

People and places were always slipping through my little hands, just like Korean words. With each new setting, I regularly checked to see if the freckle I was born with had stayed put.



“Tell me the dream again, Mom. What happened to the tiger?” I studied her features, admiring her high, rounded cheekbones and the way her black hair framed the edges of her face, falling stiff and sharp at

her collarbone, like the ends of a bristle hairbrush. She sighed at my curious insistence.

“It was night in my dream. Stars everywhere. I watch them, then one kept getting bigger. The light of that star got brighter and brighter. As it grew, it started to turn into a tiger. The white light changed to tiger colors, then I could see the tiger’s face. It opened its mouth and roared. It was so loud! My heart was shaking. Then I looked at its face, and it was you. Tiger was you.”

I hung on to every word, my heart lifting to the top of my chest. My face held as steady as a poker player, hoping against all odds that the hand I’d been dealt in dreams could actually play out.

“Ho-raaang-eeeeee,” I said. “Is that right?”

To this day, she has a way of letting me know that I don’t say it quite right. It’s a sigh, a giggle, or an eye roll, or maybe she repeats it back to me—all to remind me of the chasm of misunderstanding between us. How can there be such stark separation from the one whose body birthed my own? And what are the ripple effects of this kind of dismembering?

I once read that a tiger’s roar is so loud it can be heard up to two miles away, that its roar is twenty-five times louder than the average lawn mower.

But for most of my life, I’ve felt nothing like a tiger.

My voice got stuck somewhere between the plastic walls of an incubator in a California hospital room.

After telling the tiger story, my mom would lift her hands to show me how small I was when I was born. Her eyes bulging, she declared, as if it were the first time she'd told me, "You almost didn't make it! Did you know, you didn't even cry? I'd never seen a baby like you!"

My body hesitated at birth; it wasn't ready. To this day, my mom refers to that first hesitation as the reason I respond slowly to most things.

As I was wrapped up in her tiny womb, the God of the universe formed my limbs, shaped my eyes, and decided to give me my mother's thick, dark hair. Her songs and cries were the first I heard. It was the preferences of her taste buds that were passed down to me.

Her body couldn't keep me as long as it was supposed to. Her water broke at Knott's Berry Farm while my sister and Dad rode a roller coaster and she waited for them on a nearby bench, hands on her rounded belly.

I was forced into the world three months before my due date, ready or not. My lungs weren't finished developing, and upon arrival, I couldn't breathe. Six months of maternal words and songs weren't enough to break my silence. The doctors rushed me in a helicopter

from a small Goleta hospital to Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital. No one knew whether life would be too much of a burden for my frail lungs or whether, by a whisper and a prayer, I would come through.

I entered the world without a voice. Somewhere, someone announced, “It’s a girl!” But I couldn’t respond to their welcome.

For the first twenty-one days of my life, I lived in an incubator. Wires intruded on my isolation while connecting me to a possible future outside the hospital walls. Though I couldn’t be fully embraced, fingers and voices reached for me through holes. Prayers spoken to Hananim hung over my compact frame like a blanket.

After I was born, my mom said she felt stronger than she ever had. My dad provided evidence of her words on the pages of a bright pink seventies-era baby book. The cover featured a pale, cream-colored, cloth-diaper-clad baby with blonde, wispy hair and sky-blue eyes. In the margins, he jotted down details in pencil about how my mom and I were doing. He wrote that a few days into my mom’s recovery, she felt “ready to fight for [me] to live in any and every way she can.”

As a child, I stared at the baby on the front along with the pictures of me taped on the pages. I was half the size of the baby on the cover, and I thought my tiny preemie body with dark hair looked like an alien.

When my parents were finally able to bring me home, my mom fed me and fed me. She poured all her worry about my survival into baby bottles and then into spoons and rice bowls. By the time I was a year old, strangers would stop her as she carried me or pushed me in a stroller to comment on how chubby I was. She fed me until I resembled an Asian version of that blonde baby on the book cover, and more.

In Korean culture, tigers are symbols of strength and power. They are everywhere, from paintings to sculptures that guard tombs. Many Koreans even believe that the geographic outline of the Korean peninsula mimics the shape of a tiger lying down. Years ago, some Korean folktales began with “when tigers smoked,” the way Western folktales might begin with “once upon a time.” According to legend, there was a time when tigers not only roamed the mountainous land of Korea but also walked around smoking pipes like Gandalf the Grey.

The beloved tiger, the national animal of my mother’s homeland, is now extinct in Korea. But the stories live on, and every now and then someone claims to see one, whether in the mountains or somewhere in their dreams. I am the least likely to carry my own tiger story—I’ve always felt unfit as a Korean but somehow too Korean everywhere else.

The horangi, tiger, from my mother's dreams has lived in my thoughts, silently roaming the backdrop of my imagination, for most of my life. At some point, this tiger who became a girl among the stars went from a recurring dream to a story I clung to. I've kept this story tucked away like a treasure—a treasure I've come back to again and again throughout my life—a treasure I wanted to understand but was afraid of.



We often search everywhere else to find the story we're looking for. But the story we're born looking for is our own. It's the one pressed into our broken bodies at birth, strung among our thoughts and brain waves. It's the one that dances to the beat of our hearts, imprinted with our mother's and father's dreams and given to us with power and loving intention. It's this very story—our own story connected to those of our mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers before them—through which Jesus pursues us and is with us.

We're all born with curiosity and a longing to know who we are, because this knowing is inseparable from knowing God. When I walk through an art museum, stare at a painting or a sculpture, and read the small description beside it, I'm moved to learn how the work of art speaks of the person who made it. It carries a

message from the heart of the artist. To ignore the details of the piece is to miss the power of its voice. Each work of art drips with purpose and reflection, echoing the time in which it was made and the one who made it. Every color, shape, drip, expression, shadow, and medium was chosen intentionally.

In the same way, we are created beings, lovingly brought to life by our Creator. When we explore the facets and details of our design, the pages of our stories, and the palette of people and places we've come from, we find the purpose and loving intention of our Creator God. We've been birthed into the world with a collection of unfinished stories painted in brushstrokes alongside organs and skin.

My husband and I ordered one of those DNA testing kits a few years ago. We were both excited to spit into our little plastic containers and ship them off to find out more information about who we are. I thought about all the questions I've had stored inside since I was a kid—the ones I incessantly asked my parents, the ones I wrote in messy cursive across my journal pages, the ones tossed around in my mind like wet clothes turning in a dryer without heat.

We filled out our family trees, sending text messages and emails to our families to check names and make sure we got things right as we built one branch after

another. Each person added new hints to work through, and each hint led to new discoveries.

On my dad's side, I could go back in time, looking at names and documents from generations and generations before me. From Dutch immigrant farmers who signed their names at Ellis Island to Canadian immigrants to British pastors to ancestors from a specific area of Ireland, I followed the tree lines that reach back into the Netherlands and Great Britain and keep branching through time and generations.

I googled the cities where my ancestors lived, trying to imagine what life was like for them and what they woke up to every day. Countless pictures of villages in England, Ireland, and the Netherlands popped up on my screen. I couldn't get enough of looking at the images or saying the names out loud, trying to pronounce them while imagining the lives of my great-great-grandparents.

On my mom's side, I can go back only as far as her parents. My family tree looks like a one-winged butterfly. There are no hints or leads to filter through. There are only invisible questions. I have dreams and stories, tiny clues in my taste buds, and my dark hair and eyes. Whenever I ignore those clues that speak through every mirror, whenever I dismiss every craving in my mind and stomach, it feels like a personal rejection.

The lack of information on my mother's side—the inability to connect the genealogical dots—tells unnamed stories of injustice, wrongdoing, and oppression. There's an invisible enemy that's always been trying to kill my Koreanness, even before I existed. There's a war against my cultural being, and it's been raging since long before I was born.

I've been angry with God that I never knew my halmoni and haraboji, my grandmother and grandfather. The grief haunts me.

As a child, I felt sad in ways I couldn't grasp or explain. Now I know the sadness came from my mother's losses—not only her loss of my halmoni, but also the loss of an entire country and place. It sits deep in my bones, like a ghost that comes and goes—one whose existence I have no proof for.

My mom told me about losing her parents, then losing her baby brother to an orphanage, about carrying hot goguma (sweet potatoes) in her clothes to stay warm while walking to school in the winter, about being pulled out of school to care for her younger cousins when it was too much for her aunt. She told me they got so hungry that one day her pet rabbit disappeared. The rice was so scarce, there was often none left for her. She added water to help her tummy feel full when the rice couldn't fill it.

With my own privileged and protected view of the world, I would ask her how her parents died and why she had to stop going to school and why she didn't tell her aunt to keep her little brother.

"My dad disappeared in the war, and my mom died in a fire," she told me. "I stopped going to school to help my aunt take care of her kids and her house. My little brother was too young for her to take care of—there were too many of us. All so hungry."

She would list these responses off, one by one, knowing I couldn't imagine any of these scenarios. I would rub my stomach when she said "so hungry," trying to feel what she felt.

Before I was born, the answers to my questions about my maternal ancestors were taken away, put to death.

I would ask her, "How can it all be gone?"

She said most of her pictures were lost in a house fire when she was a girl. She would recount the few memories she had, but there were so many missing pieces.

Even so, God works in the realm of the impossible. He hears beyond the layers of silence. He makes movement where things have been put to death. If we listen closely, look intently, and stay awhile, we will find ways to rebuild what was removed or silenced.

The stories of our parents and grandparents, of nations and people groups, were never intended to

conquer one another. They were meant to be bound together. The world tells us that the only way to evolve is for one story to win while the other story assimilates until it's invisible. The world tells us that we can move on without those stories—that we can let the past be the past, as if there's a clean boundary when it comes to time.

But it was never meant to be that way. Our stories and our very beings are made to reflect the image of God together. The wombs we're born from, like the dust and rib God held and created from, are made to matter to one another. He placed his image in Adam and Eve. He looked into their eyes, male and female, and all who would come from them—like you and me—and saw the fullness of his own reflection.



A few years ago, my mom mentioned that she wished we could be together for Chuseok, an important Korean celebration in the fall. It was September, and the kids had just started a new school year. I asked her to tell me about it, and she said it was a holiday where families took time off work to be together. They ate rice cakes, and children bowed to their elders and dressed in traditional hanbok to celebrate the fall harvest.

I peppered her with more questions, and soon I could

tell she was overwhelmed and flustered by the amount of information I was asking for. I knew she wished I just understood, like a Korean daughter should, and yet I had no past experience to look back on.

It's strange to rely on Google and DNA apps to understand who I am and who my ancestors are. When my mom doesn't know how to describe something, I ask the Internet. It's how I learned what I was supposed to do for my mom's hwangap—her sixtieth birthday celebration. It's how I found out that most of the Korean words I know are lullabies, phrases about passing gas, or ways to cuss someone out. It's how I found maps to show my kids where their halmoni is from and how I found more Korean books and resources to learn things I feel I should already know.

And eventually, it's how I learned to start celebrating Chuseok and what this holiday likely meant to my family in generations past.

Last year I drove to the nearest Korean grocery store on a cold October day. I was the only one in the store, aside from the store clerk. I went up and down the aisles, studying each of the products. I found songpyeon and other rice cakes and stared at the packaging, wondering how I was supposed to defrost the one that felt hard as rocks, and I spent five minutes trying to decide which kind of gochugaru I needed for making kimchi.

At the checkout, I placed the big bag of gochugaru, the containers of gochujang and doenjang, rice cakes, frozen pajeon, kongnamul, shrimp crackers, and my favorite Nongshim honey crackers on the counter, but the clerk still spoke to me in English. He looked at the songpyeon and explained that it needed to be steamed from frozen, while the others could be set out to thaw. I decided to say thank you in English even though I knew how to in Korean.

I called my mom on the way home to tell her what I'd found, while chomping through an entire pack of injeolmi, the way I used to as a kid. We talked about how we would plan a belated celebration and mark the holiday together, like Korean families do, when our calendars and school schedules would allow.

I felt a surge of anger that we still had days on our calendar like Columbus Day to honor a man who didn't actually discover anything that wasn't already discovered, while some Americans like us find it nearly impossible to carry on the traditions and celebrations of our heritage.

My mom mentioned that she wanted to set up the table in a certain way, like she'd seen in one of the K-dramas she liked to watch. It hit me that she didn't celebrate Chuseok when she was growing up because she couldn't. Because of the war, her family didn't have

enough money for a feast of traditional foods, and there was barely any family left to reconnect and reunite.

My mom was born in the aftermath of a thirty-five-year Japanese colonization, with remnants of that oppression everywhere. And though the occupation officially ended before she was born, the ripple effects could still be felt.

She was five years old when the Korean War began and eight years old when it ended. For almost the first decade of her life, both her home and her family were in a constant cycle of disaster, restoration, survival, and trauma.

Her earliest memories were made in the shadow of war: leaving on foot for a safer city in the south that took days to get to, bringing food to her dad in a dirt bunker, seeing dead bodies on the streets, and not having enough food to eat. So while she knew about the holidays, she had very few memories of celebrating any of them.

Only now, as a halmoni herself living in Arkansas, nine hours away from her daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren, was she trying to piece it all back together with the help of K-dramas and Korean social media outlets.

After hanging up, I cried the rest of the way home, realizing my mom was rebuilding her own

Koreanness—piecing the lost things back together, bit by bit. These celebrations had been stripped from her during postwar times, and her lonely immigration to the US took whatever shadow remained of these traditions even further away. If she wanted to mark these celebrations, she didn't always have the language or the grocery stores to find what she needed, let alone the energy after eking out a living in a world where she didn't fully belong. For the first time, I realized she felt like all she had to pass on to my sister and me was scraps.

But those scraps—the same ones I often questioned or was embarrassed by, the ones that seemed easily tossed aside—are everything now.