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WHEN AMERICA ASKED IF I'd be interested in contributing to this collection, my first thought was probably not. Writing about my parents and their immigrant experience would be too tough a task. It's not that I don't love my mom and dad. Of course I do. Their struggles and sacrifices are the reason why I am who I am today. They are, more than anyone in this world, my heroes.

But here's the thing: I barely know them.

Now that might sound strange to some of you. But for me, and for many American-born kids of Korean immigrants, it's not that uncommon. The parents of my non-Asian friends growing up would talk openly about their childhood, past relationships, their struggles. Some would even talk about their sex lives (which to this day I find very weird). My folks, on the other hand, were never an open book. If anything, they were more like an instruction manual: there for setting up and for troubleshooting, but not the most riveting when it comes to story.

I don't mean to make them sound cold or emotionally unavailable. They were great parents. But they were never like the Keatons, the Seavers, the Huxtables or any of the other parents I grew up with on TV. My parents' way of saying "I love you" was to work *really* hard, to always have food on the table, to make sure that their sons prioritized education and stayed away from doing stupid things, like drugs, or one day becoming a professional actor. I guess in some ways, they succeeded, and in other ways they didn't. But I never once questioned their love for me.

I did, however, wonder why they rarely ever shared their personal stories with me. Sure, I'd get bits and pieces here and there, but they'd never go into much detail. I wondered if elements of their past might have been too painful. Or

maybe they felt that the cultural chasm between them and their American-born sons was too wide a distance to pass along something so delicate, so personal. Or perhaps, they're just very private people, even when it comes to their own kids. I don't know.

But as I've gotten older, I've become obsessed with learning more about them. Simple things like what their life was like in Korea, why they decided to come to America, and what those early years in this new country were like. (I'm okay with not knowing about their sex life though.) I guess something inside of me just wanted to connect with them on a more human level, and I wanted to do it before it was too late. Now that I have a wife and a daughter of my own, I've come to the startling realization that all parents are in fact *human beings*. With feeling and emotions. And, unfortunately, an expiration date.

So over the past several years, I'd ask them questions. I'd inelegantly slip them into random conversations and sometimes I'd bring them up, out of nowhere, like a pop quiz: "What was your childhood like in Korea?" "Why did you decide to come to America?" "When you got here, were you scared?" Invariably, my folks would respond with annoyance. "Why are you asking me this? Stop it!" my mom would yell from the other side of the bathroom door. "Don't talk to me when I'm on the toilet!" I'd come to the conclusion that maybe I would never learn these stories.

Then, America called and asked if I'd be interested in contributing to her book. And it got me thinking . . . What if I used this as an excuse to sit down with my parents and ask them everything I've wanted to know? If it's for a book, then it's kind of academic, which means they'll be more likely to say yes, right? Also, I know for a fact that my parents were fans of *Ugly Betty*, and quite frankly, who doesn't love America Ferrera?

So I strategized. I decided to ask my mom, since she's always been the more communicative of my parents and thus more likely to agree to do something like this. My mom was always the artist in our family. She's a painter, so I grew up with easels, tubes of oil paints, and canvases leaning up against the walls of our home. My dad, on the other hand, is practical, hardworking, humble, and not one to waste words. He'd for sure have no interest in being interviewed for this book. But if I went through my mom, there would be a chance.

I called her up and I asked if maybe I could take her and Dad out to breakfast to interview them for this collection of essays.

My mom casually responded, "Sure, why not?" I couldn't believe it. It worked.

The next Saturday morning, I set out to meet my mom and dad at Factor's Famous Deli on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles. I grew up having breakfast at Jewish delis with my family, so I figured the familiarity would help ease the process. I'd record them on my phone, background noises and all, and I'd keep my list of questions short and simple, because I wanted it to be as painless as possible. For example, I started off with:

Me: So where were you born?

Mom: In Korea. Taegu, Korea.

Dad: Southern part. Near Pusan.

Mom: It's the third largest city. Taegu, Korea. 1947.

Dad: Me, same thing. Taegu.

Mom: 1939, right?

Dad: 1939.

Wow. With one question, I got a plethora of information. Even a statistical fact! And within minutes, the floodgates had opened. As expected, my mom did most of the talking. But my dad would chime in every now and then, sometimes at surprising moments. And in one sitting, I learned more about my parents' pasts than I had in my entire life.

I learned about their childhoods, growing up in Taegu. We touched upon their college years at Yonsei University and Ewha Womens University in Seoul. I learned about my dad's move to San Francisco in 1964, where he studied economics while working as a busboy in a French restaurant in Sausalito, California. And how that experience somehow led him to study French at

Sorbonne University in Paris. I never figured my practical, no-nonsense dad as one to give in to wanderlust, but there it was.

Apparently, my parents met when my dad went back for a visit to Korea. He was thirty, and all his friends were getting married. Their families, who had known each other in Taegu, essentially set them up. My mom pretty much summed it up as an "arranged" situation. I was a little bummed to learn that their story wasn't more romantic, like the way my wife and I met. (We were both sitting in an audition waiting room going up for the same part. Neither of us booked the part, but we ended up booking each other!) According to my parents, in those times, things were generally more "practical."

Still, my mom, in her early twenties at the time, was excited to come to this country that had been romanticized in all the Hollywood movies she had seen growing up.

> **Mom:** But when I got here, I was really disappointed. Full of disappointment. Because in reality, your dad was poor. And as a young girl at twenty, twenty-one, I thought that when I'd come here, I would have some sort of standard of living. Like in the movies. But we didn't. We struggled.

This theme of "struggle" seemed to permeate throughout the entire interview. Despite having almost idyllic childhoods in Taegu, things seemed to change for my parents once in America. And despite the fact that these struggles were often shielded from my brother and me, they would play a major role in our upbringing.

For example, I always wondered why, unlike most Korean parents I know, my folks were never that adamant about their kids maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity. For most Korean families, holding on to Korean traditions and language and pride is essential. Yet for my brother and me, this wasn't the case. My parents spoke to us mostly in English. We rarely ever went to community events or the Korean church. The only consistent Korean thing in our home (aside from ourselves) was the food. There was even a time during my teenage years when I resented them for this. But I finally got a sense of why this was:

Mom: That was my fault. When I first came to this country, your dad was working all the time. I had two kids, and no family or friends, no help from anyone. At the same time, I was struggling to learn the language, the culture here. When your brother was born, I had a lot of complications. They gave me a shot in the back that gave me back problems for years. It was really difficult. I actually got depressed. That's why I never focused on that stuff with my kids. I didn't have the luxury. Every day, I was just focused on making this place my home. Our home.

Picturing my mom, in her early twenties, in a completely foreign country, sitting alone in a tiny apartment with two kids, while also in severe pain, gave me a newfound respect for her. And a deeper understanding of my own upbringing.

She would eventually learn English from watching television shows like *Gomer Pyle: U.S.M.C.* and *Gilligan's Island*. And once my brother and I started school, she would find an accounting job, where she'd work for the next thirty years. Meanwhile, when my dad found out the company he had been working for was relocating, he decided to stay in Los Angeles for the family. He ended up working several jobs, eventually opening up his own one-hour-photo store in Santa Monica, which would die with the dawn of the digital age. Ever the workhorse, he continues to work till this day. I could safely say that I got my work ethic from both of my parents.

One of the biggest struggles I experienced with my folks was when I told them that I wanted to pursue a career as a professional actor. I was already into my midtwenties, and having worked a string of office jobs, I was ready to take the leap and follow my dreams. But my fanciful "dreams" of success in entertainment wasn't a concept that my parents were interested in:

Mom: The way I was brought up, actors and show business meant a life of struggle. And I didn't want you to go through that. We already went through that.

Dad: In Korea, we admired the scientists, professors, doctors . . .

Mom: I remember one of your teachers at Hamilton High School said, "Randy's a very smart guy. I can see him going into science." And I never forgot that. We thought you'd become a scientist.

Me: Mom, I never once thought I'd become a scientist.

Dad: We thought, as an Oriental guy, to succeed as an actor in this country would be very difficult. That's why we worried. But you did a good job for yourself. We're proud of you. . . . Are we done yet?

Yes, there were times when my dad got antsy. And yes, he does call Asians "Oriental." I've given up on trying to correct him. But overall, the experience was incredibly rewarding for all of us. I was especially moved by how openly proud my parents are of me today. They expressed a keen understanding of how difficult it is to succeed in my industry, especially for Asian-Americans. Still, I came away with an even better understanding of why they would've wanted their son to take an easier, more traditional route to success.

During the course of our interview, I not only got closer to my parents, but I also got closer to myself. Despite being born and raised in the United States, there was always a part of me that felt like an outsider. At the same time, I always felt like I was never quite Korean enough. But upon hearing these stories, I began to feel more anchored to both sides of me. Getting more familiar with the details of my lineage fills me with a better sense of what got me here, to where I am today, and how my story is directly connected to theirs. These stories remind me that I am a person who is here, in this country, for a reason.

And the best thing about it all is that this was just a beginning. At the end of our interview, I asked my parents if we could sit down and do this again. My mom casually responded, "Anytime," as my dad nodded while finishing the rest of his hash browns. Good enough for me. Maybe next time I'll ask them: Why now? Why, after all these years are they willing to be so open? Is it because I have a family of my own now? Is it because I paid for breakfast? Is it because of their undying love for *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*? I'll get back to you on that.

My original plan was to publish the entire interview, but now I kind of feel weird about doing that. For now, I want to hold on to this experience for myself. Besides, this interview will be more meaningful to me than to any of you. To you, I say, collect your own stories from your parents, your grandparents, your guardians, and your mentors. Then pass those stories down to your kids, your grandkids, and anyone who can really benefit from them. And if you're having trouble getting to those stories, try making an event out of it. Take Grandma to her favorite restaurant, sit down with her, and make a meal out of it. Show her that these stories are important to you. It may feel weird at first, but see it through. It'll be worth it. Oh, and also, make sure to do it somewhere meaningful and not while she's on the toilet.