

Home

Photography by **Samuel S. Lee**

Longing

A longing for home is universal, but the pathways for exploring our roots and what we find may vastly differ. Old photographs offer a limited window to my past, disjointed strings tethered to moments of calm. While incomplete, they stir memories and mark early steps along my journey of discovery and realization.

A sense of displacement defined my immigrant American childhood—scouring the sky in search of a hole in the clouds to return back “home.” Amidst this uncertainty, *my grandmother was an oasis between worlds. When our worlds converged, it brought immense delight. She just allowed me to be.*

Many summers were spent with her in Seoul. During these childhood trips, I discovered she spoke Korean with a different dialect. Some neighbors referred to her as “eebuk halmunee,” or “grandmother from North Korea.” I noted this label with curiosity but didn’t dwell too long on it, continuing to bask in her affection.

As childhood bled into adolescence, my trips back to Korea and my grandmother’s trips to the U.S. grew less frequent. Questions about Asian American identity and family history remained unanswered, and my “eebuk halmunee” peeked back into my consciousness and searching mind.

By chance, I stumbled upon an organization that provides medical aid in North Korea. Ever curious, I accepted an employment opportunity, and a tiny portal to our past opened.





A Bridge & A Tunnel

My work in North Korea allowed more opportunities to visit my grandmother in the South, and during our time together, I discovered a new side of my grandmother. I was able to visit a place she dared not dream of—memories of her life in North Korea before she fled, leaving that part of her behind in order to survive.

We talked for hours. In this new space, my grandmother allowed herself to remember. Our time was sacred, sacrosanct. Flipping through her photos, my grandmother regaled me with wonderful tales of her childhood, exploits with friends by the river, and older cousins who gifted colorful dresses during the holidays. I constantly flitted between awe and curiosity in this space where her memories naturally flowed.





I often returned with items from North Korea—the first time, stones from my grandmother’s home city. She promptly placed them under her pillow and slept on them every night. It was as if my grandmother was trying to trigger memories that would take her back home in her dreams.

Each trip was an opportunity to bring my grandmother closer to her unreachable home. Seemingly mundane mementos spurred memories which wrapped us in a warm blanket. Together, we dove deeper into her memories.





During this season, I spent a lot of time with my grandmother. Listening. Learning. Our universes were different, but our stories were similar. We innately understood what it meant to not belong—and to long. *In her life, I found deeper meaning beyond individual identity and traditional notions of comfort.*

These memories and images of my grandmother remind me that *much joy can grow from a foundation of loss and sorrow.* She walked between worlds, and took joy wherever it came.

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A day like this one marked my final trip to North Korea. I was afraid of what this might mean for our newfound connection.

This time, I returned with a bottle of Pyongyang soju. That evening, my grandmother beckoned me closer and poured me a glass. Without words, I returned the gesture. My grandmother lifted her cup and softly cried out, “As I think of my home...”

EVERYTHING WAS NEW.

I WAS HUNGRY TO LEARN MORE.

I DIDN'T WANT THIS WINDOW
TO
CLOSE...

I will never forget her face in that moment, the voice of unquenchable yearning. With her heart-breaking evocation, we entered the final chamber of her memories together.

As we sipped, my grandmother shared harrowing details of navigating across the border with three children in tow—paying guides, hiding in stables, desperately silencing her crying baby, freezing in fear at the smell of smoke and potential presence of soldiers, and the agony of temporarily losing one of her children during the trek.

I listened quietly as she spoke of her younger brother for the first time. He hadn't made it to the South, and she suspected he was still in the North. She implored me to look into his whereabouts. *I quietly listened to her dwindling hope that maybe, just maybe, despite word-of-mouth reports to the contrary, her younger brother was alive somewhere.* My grandmother carefully articulated and repeated her brother's name and the name of her village of Kirim-ri so I would not forget.

I still have not forgotten.



Full Circle

Nearly two decades have passed since these seemingly ordinary moments brimming with extraordinary meaning were first captured, where we stood still and walked together, breathing and exploring in unison.

My grandmother has since passed.

In my final memory of my grandmother, she is playing with her great-grandchildren, showering them with the same love I once received. I am filled with emotion and comforted by these loving interactions. I know my grandmother is tired, but she springs to life. Her eyes sparkle. My heart flutters and trembles. I wish these moments could last forever. When we arrive together in these memories, our connections are not disjointed strings, but instead a circle, bringing us home.

My children may not understand how much their great-grandmother endured, but our existence owes itself to a brave woman's tenuous journey across a war-torn country in search of a new life. I hope the tale of their great-grandmother inspires and infuses a sense of purpose and confidence.

Within them lies the ultimate example of courage, resilience, and grit. ♦





할머니, 사랑해요.

WE MISS YOU.