

# preface

August 15, 2000. Just the day before, my father and I had been at the Kimp'o airport to see my mother and my sister off back to the United States. Once I left home in California for college, those times when the four of us could be together under one roof were becoming rare – and this summer, when my family was together for a whole month in Korea, was so precious. But we were being separated again, as my mother and sister returned back to California, while I stayed with my dad for a couple more weeks. Soon, September would come, and we would be scattered everywhere – my dad in Korea where he worked, my mom straddling two lives in California and Korea, my sister to New York, and I to Boston. I sighed sadly knowing that it would be some time before we would all be together again, the four of us. At the terminal, I stood there with a quivery smile trying to push down the growing tightness in my throat. "Come on, Janice, you'll see them in two weeks," I scolded myself.

Tightly holding my dad's hand, I waved toward my mother and sister as they became smaller ... and blurrier with the tears that won out at the end. Blame it on having a lot of *jung* [a Korean word denoting deep emotional attachment or fondness], but I always hated goodbyes like this, especially with my family. Though I believe in "goodbyes" to actually mean "see you again," I guess there is that part of me that deeply fears that this separation might be longer than I want it to be.

August 15 is an important day because it is Korea's version of "Independence Day" from the Japanese back in 1945. But this year, there was a new meaning to this day. The entire country of Korea – north and south – was mesmerized by the drama unfolding on television. There it was again, Kimp'o airport, but this time coming from the runway was a simple white plane bearing a North Korean flag on its tail, slowly parking among the fleet of sky blue Korean Air planes with their bright red-blue *tae-guk* embossed tails.

For the first time since the Korean War, the largest number of North and South Koreans ever were travelling to each other's worlds to be reunited with their families.

It had been painful enough saying goodbye to my mother and my sister that I would see in just two weeks. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be separated for almost a lifetime.

Perhaps these people had thought the same thing – *in just three days, a couple weeks, I will see them again*. But only half a century later, in a North Korean hotel, or a South Korean convention center, would then-10-year-old-sons-now-60 meet their mothers, now in wheelchairs and barely breathing. Or then-20-year-old newlyweds meet again at 70. Long-lost sisters rejoicing one moment, then mourning when the news of their mother's death a few years before is shared. When the moments of long-awaited reunion finally came, the language spoken was in wails and tears. Withered hands caressing faces etched with 50 years of pining and heartache.

All Koreans, watching these scenes, wept. North and South. Young and old. Even a Korean American, like me. Crying for this moment of joy, crying for the years lost, crying for these families that would again be separated in 48 hours and left to yearning again for their loved ones. What would make the "goodbye" all the more difficult and tragic this time is that they now know that all that it takes is a 58-minute plane ride, a mere phone call to see them, hear them, again.

Families are the bases of every culture and society. Not only that, the whole spectrum of human experience can be felt through the family. Families are where we most intensely experience our lives through times of joy, of sadness, of love, of hatred, of struggle, of tragedy, of triumph, of hope. For Koreans or Korean Americans, it is no different. And though we all come from different families and backgrounds, the fact that we all have these family ties allows us to deeply relate to one another. This is what our issue is about – as we share and learn about our family legends, lives, and legacies, we can come together to comfort one another in our brokenness and rejoice together in love.

— Janice Jia Yoon