

RUNAWAY JUNO'S PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The world is
waiting

JIYEON JUNO KIM

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Runaway Juno's Pursuit of Happiness: The World is Waiting

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Jiyeon Juno Kim
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To those of you who feel like
you don't belong anywhere.

And to my family, because you are everything.

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"Everyone deserves the chance to fly."
And if I'm flying solo, at least I'm flying free
To those who'd ground me, take a message back from me.
Tell them how I am defying gravity.
I'm flying high, defying gravity.

- Musical *Wicked*

Chapter 1

Happiness is Someone Else's Business

In Korea, it's pretty common to think that happiness is someone else's business, that only a select few can be happy in this harsh society. During my painful career change period, I got to know a lot about Koreans and how they think, maybe just about people in general.

Koreans don't think happiness is a given state or that it's a priority in life. It's something that only a select few can have. Their definition of happiness is different from the West. For them, happiness comes from the stability of life and level of success, more than how content you are. People actually strive to be one of the masses, to not stand out from the crowd.

If you were born with a family fortune (so you don't have to work), if you are married to a soul mate (which is not so common), if you are extremely handsome and beautiful, or supercalifragilisticexpialidociously talented so a job comes along no question, then you are one of the chosen ones. Otherwise, don't daydream about happiness. You can't have it.

Obviously, I'm not one of the chosen ones. But the thing is, people secretly don't want themselves or their children to be special. Of course they pray their kid has some kind of talent when they are young, but in the end being ordinary is the best thing. I think I'm special with all the gifts and talents I've developed through the years,

but that bothers my parents. There's an expression in Korea, *you are cursed if you have wanderlust*.

My biggest and most frequent encounter with other people's views on happiness was when I decided to leave my career as an engineer, which everyone thought was the best job in the world, to do what I really wanted, which everyone thought was a fake job. Photography has always been a big part of my life. I knew I was a creative person, and my office job wasn't supporting my creativity. I also wanted to see the world before it was too late. I wanted something more alive, more than just trying to survive each day.

Here's what happened. My first two years at the engineering job, I was extremely unhappy. Every day was agony. I wished the day would end the moment I woke up. I was living with my parents, and a Korean household is not so open to people showing emotion. It's everyone's duty to do okay and be okay. But I wasn't. Instead of showing everyone that I wasn't doing okay, I shut out everyone around me, just so I could get through each day without upsetting my family.

One day, I got a phone call from my mom. She said we needed to talk because we were not acting like a family anymore. And I heard my father's angry tone in the background. They were ready to blame me for everything. I was the miserable one who was ruining the whole family dynamic. In a Korean family, it's the youngest's duty to keep things light and happy. I needed to suck it up around everyone and make things smooth for their sake. But obviously, I wasn't really happy with that not-agreed-upon position while I was having my own problems. I wasn't going to let them blame me for their unhappiness on top of what I was going through. I knew now was the time. I needed to tell my parents that I was going to make some big changes in my life.

Now, one thing you should know about me, is I don't do well with loud noises, especially yelling. My heart immediately sinks down to my toes when I hear an angry voice. I don't do well with people who have a temper. Fast-moving cars freak me out, whether I'm in the car or it's driving by.

When I came home, they were already there. I unpacked my bag and sat down on the couch where my dad was. I initiated the conversation with, "I know you are not happy with me right now." His first reaction was, "Why is she talking to me now?" to my mother, ignoring me completely. *Okay, this is going to go smoothly*, I thought. But I went ahead anyway.

Without any smartass comments, I shared my honest feelings, problems, and what my plan was. I told them I had been extremely unhappy for the last two years, and it had led to bad health, made me an irresponsible person, and that my heart wasn't in the job. I said I wanted to do something I cared about much more, not just for the money, but because I was a young and passionate person. I had been thinking about it for a while but I wanted to tell them now before I handed my four weeks' notice to my company. I thought it was a pretty mature and sincere conversation.

The 'what I thought was a sincere conversation' exploded wildly in front of my eyes. There was a mixture of many bad words yelled at me that is still painful to think about.

I told them I was thinking of changing my career to a travel writer, and I was doing quite well with my blog, RunawayJuno.com, that had already been running for a year and a half. My dad was very angry, frustrated, and started pouring out these opinions of his that I couldn't really agree with.

"I should've broken your legs or locked you up when you went to travel, that way you wouldn't have known there's a world out there. You're not special. You're that way because you're hanging out with

the wrong crowd of people [unmarried, traveling foreigners]. Your mom made you this way because she didn't say no to anything. You're cocky because you can speak English. You're not special. You're not special enough to be happy."

Just like that. That's just a brief summary of what I heard for the next two hours. My parents, specifically my father, really wanted me to know that I wasn't special in any way. That meant I wasn't special enough to do anything extraordinary. I wasn't one of the chosen ones. I was meant to live an ordinary Korean life, working for a paycheck, getting married and having a family, maintaining mediocre friendships, being nice to my parents. Doing something else other than what was on the main path was taboo. If I couldn't be number one at what I did in the world (like getting a gold medal at the travel blogging Olympics or something), it was useless to try at all.

Pursuing happiness is seen as a selfish thing to do in Korea. And it is the same in a lot of other conservative countries. I recently realized that. No one cares about finding their own happiness or that other people have a right to be happy. Even though my life is technically mine, I have to live it according to my elders' expectations, because they gave me this precious life. Several times that night my father said, "What about what I want from you?" when I told him what I wanted for my life. Leaving your home and family to build your own life is considered extremely selfish.

The last tear-filled yelling encounter we had ended with my father saying, "I don't understand you, and I'm not going to try to understand you, ever."

As devastated as I was by the conversation I also understood their point of view. I realized it a while ago, that they couldn't really accept the fact that their kids were grown-ups. Me moving out and building a separate life was a sign of separation to them. They were never good at the concept of individuality. Me saying, "I want to travel

the world and become a writer,” sounded like, “I’m sick of you and this country.” It was hard for me to hear that they thought I was looking down on people who lived the normal life I was trying to escape from.

After several unpleasant but necessary encounters, I watched myself go through five major reactions. First, I was devastated. Even though I hadn’t grown up with a lot of support and encouragement from my parents, harsh words were not an easy thing to hear from them, the people who were supposed to love me no matter what. I couldn’t believe my dad had even said he wanted to physically hurt me so I couldn’t go out and find out about the world. Maybe he was too upset to think straight, or was just making up things to say to make the situation worse, I couldn’t tell which. But like another old saying in Korea, *Words are like water; you can’t sweep them back into a bag*. I felt abandoned. After the painful argument, I packed a day bag and got out of the house. I remember sitting in a dark corner and crying under a streetlight.

Then I questioned myself. I thought back to the things I’d been accused of and asked myself, ‘Am I really those things?’ Am I really not special? Am I really not smart enough to survive at what everyone does on a daily basis? Am I really looking down on people because they are living a normal life? I’m just weak and whiny. I dream things that I can’t achieve. I dream, that’s all I do. I never made any dreams come true. I saw myself slowly agreeing with all these statements and it crushed me even more.

Then I got angry. I got angry with my parents for making me feel this bad and doubt myself. All the questions I asked myself, I’d already gone through them when I was figuring out my life. I knew I wasn’t giving up but moving on. I looked back on what I wanted in my life and what I told them. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to work at something I was passionate about. I wanted to spend my young days doing something more meaningful. Is there something wrong with

that? I was angry at all the social conventions. Why couldn't we pursue happiness?

I tried to calm down. I was exhausted emotionally and physically. Most of all I didn't want to be angry. That's just not who I am. I was still mad and tired, but my mind was clearer than ever. I went to a café and sat down to analyze the whole conversation. It still hurt but the answers were more obvious this time. I looked at the facts and questioned myself about the circumstances and solutions instead of criticizing myself. Trying something new might be considered wrong, but it is only wrong if you let it be.

At last, I listened my soul. My ego was badly beaten up but my soul spoke loud and clear. I couldn't hear it before because I was too distracted with negative thoughts. Now I was all ears. The water was already spilled, everything was out, and it was time for me to move on and finish the game. *What did I really want? What was more important? Approval from other people, or my own happiness?*

It's funny how the moment of epiphany comes when you least expect it. It came after I spent that night at a 24-hour café in Seoul. The whole night I re-lived that conversation, the most discouraging conversation of my life. I headed down to the subway station at 7 o'clock in the morning with a heavy heart. I'd decided to take a day off from everything. It was morning rush hour. In the wave of black suits and high-heels, I was the only one wearing a green sports jacket, carrying a yellow backpack, and walking in the other direction. Like Moses parting the Red Sea, I made a clear path through the waves coming at me. Every single person in the crowd looked miserable and I remembered, *I was one of them*. Walking in the middle of the gray wave of people, I started feeling sorry for them. That was the moment I thought, *I've had enough*. I felt free walking in the other direction, I felt alive wearing something different, and I felt responsible. I had decided to take my future into my own hands.

I remembered my theme song, *Defying Gravity*, the one from *Wicked* that I had quoted in my Master's thesis, "Everyone deserves a chance to fly. Even if I'm flying solo, at least I'm flying free."

It was so right. I had been listening to that song for years and now it was time to *really* listen. If my parents were not on board with my plan because they cared more about social norms than their own daughter's happiness, I had to fly solo. Even if I had to fly solo, at least I'd be free. It broke my heart that I was going to disappoint them so deeply, and crush their dreams of having a normal daughter who married early and had kids, but it was also clear that they couldn't make me change my decision just because they wanted something different. I decided to quit my job because I wanted to be more responsible for my life.

That might sound like it doesn't make sense. How is quitting your job responsible? But living a life someone else wants me to wouldn't be responsible either. So what if my parents didn't think I was special, or that they wanted me to belong to the mainstream? They didn't want me to become an entrepreneur, but *I* did. Who knew if I really would make something out of this 'fake job' as they called it? But the question was, no one knew what was going to happen in the near future. For sure, working for a paycheck was less risky. A big company is less likely to fall apart in one day than a small business. But life is too precious to worry about what's going to happen tomorrow. Sometimes we just need to focus on what's going on today and how we can make it better. I'm not saying ditch tomorrow because today is more important. I'm saying if we can find how to make today better, we're more likely to be happy tomorrow. If you spend your time whining and mourning how miserable you are today, who'll make your tomorrow better? So I decided to be the one to make the change.

Even if I flew solo, at least I flew free.

Part 1. Little Jiyeon

Things that I grew up with stay with me.
You start a certain way,
and then you spend your whole life
trying to find a certain simplicity that you had.
It's less about staying in childhood
than keeping a certain spirit of seeing things
in a different way.

- Tim Burton

Chapter 2

My First Bikini

I'm not a bikini girl. I'm a big girl. I always have been. You know how, when you describe someone, you might say, "the blonde who wears glasses" or "the one who always wears thick makeup"? Well, since the 1990s, Kim Jiyeon right here has been described as "the tall, chubby one who wears glasses."

Beyond my earliest days, I never wore a swimsuit that showed more than what was absolutely necessary. My elementary school hosted an annual swimming trip and my mom, my brother, and I used to go every summer. I had several swimsuits, but they were in the Olympic style: black, and covering most of the upper body. If I could have worn a full-body suit, I probably would have. Of course this desire to cover up has a little to do with my culture. Koreans are naturally shy, and exposing bare skin in public, especially to the opposite gender, is culturally not acceptable. Cultural pressure aside, however, there is certainly a more personal reason why I chose not to wear bikinis in my twenties.

Growing up in Korea, where the average female height and weight hover around 157 cm (5'3") and 49 kg (108 pounds), was no walk in the park. I'm 168 cm (5'6") and definitely not 49 kg. I was not only too tall but also too beefy. My lack of confidence in my appearance naturally led me to wear bigger clothes, have a shorter haircut, and wear a swimsuit capable of covering up most of my skin and insecurities.

Friends who didn't grow up with me, or who aren't Korean, think I'm exaggerating when I confess to having poor body image, but it's true as true can be. It all makes sense in the context I grew up in. If you don't believe me, read on! Even in elementary school, I was already exceptionally taller and bigger than other kids. So goes the gift and the curse handed down from the Lee family, my mother's side. My brother is a whopping 185 cm (6'1"). Towering males, of course, are seen differently in my society than too-tall women. Anyway, I still vividly remember the details of an incident that occurred in PE class, around midterm, in third grade. We were taking a written test. One of the questions was, "What is *not* a symptom of being obese?" followed by four selections. I don't remember what the selections were, but one was definitely about skin. How do I know? Because some of the kids sitting near me started touching my face. They were testing the selections. On me! They thought I was obese. Kids can be cruel, you know?

Still here? Let me tell you another story. I was a big, strong kid who grew into a fine, sturdy professional woman employed as a mechanical engineer. Ironically, because some of the most brilliant men in the country spent their formative years cramped behind desks in small rooms studying, many of them had lower than average height. Surprise, surprise, when I got hired I was the big new girl in the mechanical engineering department. To my dismay, these shorties had no shortage of arrogance when it came to the opposite sex. One of my male colleagues, for example, had a very specific 'type'. She had to be skinny—that was the main qualification—and he married a skinny girl. There are plenty of skinny types in my country, I tell ya. I wonder if she makes him laugh, or think about the world differently, or if she's just good at fitting into a size zero?

For most of my life I went without hearing or thinking I was attractive. Boys treated me like I was one of the gang, girlfriends told

me I was like their cool aunt or older sister. They somehow associated my size with maturity. Maybe that's why I grew up quickly. In those awkward teenage years, I just assumed I was more boy than girl. I wasn't bad at sports, I was definitely very tall, I wasn't one of those cute girls, and I enjoyed wearing big clothes that didn't show my figure. Thanks to my father, my hair is also thick and dark. I'm certainly not the archetypal skinny Asian girl with pale skin and no body hair. During my first summer at the engineering company, Mr. Oh, the senior engineer who sat next to me, sincerely urged me to get laser hair removal treatment on my arms. He said it wasn't lady-like to have thick black body hair. Why he thought my body hair was any of his business is beyond me. Sadly, instead of punching him in the face, I laughed awkwardly and said I'd think about it. That was back when I still wanted everyone to like me, when I still cared what people thought about me.

I can't tell you how many times people told me I'd be really pretty if I could just lose a little bit of weight. "You know," they'd say, "just 10 kilograms." (That's 22 pounds!) "You're so tall and have such nice bone structure." Of course now, when I don't give a rat's buttocks what people think, I can see that the Mr. Oh's of Korea would think a scarecrow was attractive so long as it was well-dressed and skinny as a broomstick. But back then, during my dreadful office days, I just surrendered to the fact that I wasn't pretty because I couldn't lose the extra weight, and because I had the hair of a mountain goat, and because I was freakishly man-tall. I just decided I was, you know, "the one who is tall with glasses, and totally awesome once you got to know her."

Pressure from my own people is hard enough, but then there's the whole world of Hollywood: tall, blonde, leggy, and doll-pretty. Because of Korea's complex history with America and the West (the Korean War, post-war development, and North Korea), and because

Western culture (movies, music, and fashion) is such an influential part of mainstream society here, we Koreans look up to Westerners for their appearance and the opportunities they represent. Skinny and small have always been an essential part of Asian beauty, but now we somehow have to be blonde, blue-eyed, and proportionally different (longer legs and a smaller face) as well. Hence, the sharp increase in eye, nose, and jaw surgeries in Korea, and the continued demand for white faces by Korean advertising firms.

I did have one thing growing up: my skin was always pretty pale. I was born with beautiful milky-white skin thanks to my mom. Still, my high school classmates used to call me the polar bear. Again, kids can be cruel. In Asia, though, having pale skin was historically a symbol of wealth. It meant you weren't a farmer, laboring in the sun. This tradition continues today and explains Korea's continued obsession with skin-whitening products. Today I'm proud to say I'm rockin' a healthy tan, and that the polar bear kid is long gone. What happened? I made sure I got out of the office and into the sun! I've always known I was a square peg in a round hole when it came to Korea's standard of beauty. I'm no lithe-and-leggy baby-doll-beauty. And as I've gotten older (and wiser?), I've gotten more comfortable with being different. As with other parts of my life, I started finding a bit of awesome in the exotic.

Take my nine centimeter yellow high heels, for example. When my engineering job started to get to me, I wore these babies to stand out (literally). It was my way of saying, "I'm here, so *deal* with it," to all those cubicle farmers who were bringing me down with their constant nagging. It hasn't been an easy journey, but I'm happy to be walking down my own path with some perspective on my own culture. I don't hold a grudge against mean classmates or myopic officemates. I consider myself lucky to be able to see where Korean attitudes are

harmful and to not be part of it, to be strong enough to form my own opinions of this world.

Not that I've never tried to lose weight. I can't do anything about my height, but the weight I can manage. I've tried various methods, barring fad diets like Atkins or South Beach. I'm a pretty active person. Of course I can also be incredibly lazy from time to time, but who isn't? I regularly play sports, walk, drink plenty of water, and try not to overeat. But I can't deny the fact that I'm a stress eater. So the more stressed I am, the more I eat. Sad, isn't it? Since I always seem to be pushing myself to test the limits of my comfort zone, I seem to perpetually be in a state of stress. No surprise, I haven't quite dropped that extra 10 kg (22 pounds, people!) that everyone—or at least the voices in my head—seem to be going on about.

If you think it's taken me a long time to get to the point of this chapter, to actually *talk* about my bikini, well, that's because it took me a heck of a long time just to *wear* it.

Photo evidence shows that I had a bikini in my earliest days. But since I don't have much memory of that period, I want to talk about my very second bikini.

My progression from hip-hop jeans and oversized T-shirts to skin-showing skirts, daringly cut dresses, and colorful accessories was slow. I've always liked dressing up and being girly, but it took some time for my attitude to catch up to my tastes. I had to stop caring about comments like “you've gained some weight lately,” and “I think you need to lose some”, from people like my I-can't-believe-I-was-with-that-guy ex-boyfriend. I had to get past the fact that I couldn't shop in department stores because they didn't carry my size. What?! For your information, here in Korea the average women's size is 55, the equivalent of a size 4-6 in the US. The baby dolls starve to squeeze

into a 44 (US size 0-2), and the shops don't usually have above size 66, which is my size. (Confession: sometimes I feel a thousand times more comfortable in size 77, but it's still embarrassing to admit).

Shopping for pants that fit me was always an epic quest. And don't get me started on shoes. I wear 255 mm (US size nine) for sneakers and 245 mm for high heels. Surprise, surprise, most Korean girls have extremely small feet. The sales clerk always looked twice at my feet when I asked for my size, as if it was something I had control over. Well anyway, the whole buying clothes thing was always kind of a drag for me.

So what changed?

Of course, I'm still me. The Buddha belly is still there. I've just finally realized that I have too many good qualities to focus on a few less than perfect things. Yes, I am big, and yes I am fat (if they say so), but I am brilliant, passionate about life, creative, and courageous. Standing out in the engineering office for two years helped me realize some gem-like lessons. I learned that appearance is more important to people than what they let on. Some people at work ignored me, especially men. They didn't know what to think of me. I was the first female engineer they'd had in thirty years. And I wasn't one of the cute, girly girls they were used to either. They always chased after these young, typically beautiful girls, and said yes to whatever they asked for. The men in my office openly (maybe jokingly) admitted that they hired people by appearance.

I've also learned that attitude is much more important than appearance. You should hold your head up and be proud of who you are no matter what you look like. In Korean thinking, if you're a big girl you should wear black or cover up and be conservative with your clothes, not show too much cleavage. But I wasn't shy or quiet. I held my head high and pulled off wearing what I wanted. I wore big, chunky jewelry, wore high high heels, and painted my nails black. These were

no nos, but I didn't care. What you think of yourself is more important than what other people think of you as a person.

We were some of the most well educated people in the country, and we were working for its most prestigious corporation. Yet, their value system made no sense. They lived a closeted life, denied their unhappiness, and judged everyone else, including on their appearance. They openly drooled over hot, young girls because that's apparently a guy thing.

Why would you care about your coworker's arm hair if you were perfectly happy? They whined all the time about being tired or not having time to work out but never did anything about it. They knew how to whine, but not how to act. Who cares if I'm fat? I'm awesome. Deal with it you all! And deal with yourselves too!

Two years of jazz dance class helped me to gain more confidence as well, thanks to my gorgeous teacher who let me dance alone during the class. Not surprisingly, I was the tallest and biggest girl in the class, but it didn't stop me from expressing my emotions through dance. I showed up in my hot pink tights and off the shoulder t-shirts and marched right into the room of skinny girls. It was liberating. I had never danced in public like this before. It was an enclosed dance studio, but still, it was a small zone where I could be myself without caring about other people's opinions. My teacher was impressed by my passion (possibly inner anger) and the fact that I had great attendance despite my job. When I graduated the level 1 class, she picked me out to dance our latest routine in front of everyone. I felt weirdly confident and was proud of myself. It was a confidence I hadn't known I had before.

Finally, let's try to talk about this bikini again!

I bought my very first bikini (as an adult) just three years ago, right before I traveled to Bangkok. I didn't have a chance to wear my very

first bikini in Bangkok, but I did in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, just a month later. It was my first trip bikini shopping. How exciting! I dropped by the department store right next to my office. I was a career woman working at a fancy office, so I thought I could treat myself to a nice bikini for my romantic getaway (oh yes, it was). I went to the sportswear floor and carefully looked through gorgeous looking swimwear. So many, and so expensive! I had no idea two pieces of stretchy fabric could cost this much.

There were two pairs I liked, one had colorful stripes and the other was an egg-shell color with a few lines of stones in small patterns. Hard decision it was! I borrowed the power of Twitter. I'll talk about my life on Twitter in a later chapter, but I was practically living in the Twitter-ville at the time. I tweeted two bikinis and asked which one would be better for me. Answers poured in. I went home with the egg-shell bikini that I still wear to this day.

I was a bit nervous wearing this on the beach, but I didn't want to show that I was nervous. What kind of grown woman is embarrassed about being on the beach wearing a bikini? I was with Stephen, my then boyfriend, who I met more than 3 years ago. I don't think he noticed that I was flexing my stomach as much as I could. He has always encouraged me to be myself. Little did I know then what an important part of my life he'd be.

Our standard of beauty is totally subjective. My dear friend from New Zealand, Diana, laughed so hard when I told her, "I'm a big girl." People in New Zealand are certainly bigger than Koreans, and Diana herself is not a small woman. She explained the difference between skinny and slender to me. According to her, I'm not skinny but you could call me slender. In America I have to buy small sized belts and medium shirts. It made me smile when I purchased a pair of jeans that were not the biggest size in the shop. I'm certainly not small, but at least I'm average in most of the Western Hemisphere. I

don't stand out by walking into a shop in the West, and no one there really cares about the thick black hair on my arms. These experiences slowly broke the wall of mistruths I'd built up for the last twenty-something years.

Now I'm the proud owner of several bikinis. Yes, my belly is still here. Yes, you can still see my thick, black hair. I've been traveling with these bikinis for two years now, and yes, I've been wearing them no problemo.

There's a saying in Korean: "The frog in the well." It means that the frog only knows the world inside his small well. The frog doesn't realize that there is a whole world out there. That frog was me, and the people who used me as an example of obese were the well. They were so focused on the standard beauty in their society that they couldn't see the bigger picture. Whether you had personality or intelligence, they didn't care. They'd rather have a facial treatment than buy books, spend money on laser hair removal than travel. For a long time, I wanted to jump out of that well, but I let people get in my head and keep me from doing it. Now that I'm out, I am the same little frog, just swimming in a big ocean. Traveling the world helped me realize that there are so many more important things than being an attractive girl. Of course, it's important to be beautiful inside and out, but it's not the end of the world if I gain a few pounds while writing a book (which I'm afraid is what's happening right now).

If you don't hold a Guinness World Record as the biggest or the tallest person, you are probably average in most parts of the world. And if you do hold the Guinness World Record, you are earning a lot of money and fame so maybe it all evens out.

Don't let people get to you. Don't let anyone say that you are not pretty. Give your bikini a chance. In the 1500s, women with big butts were the most desirable. I've met men who thought my dark, night-black hair was gorgeous. Some people think my international

English accent is charming. But most of all, they like me because I am positive, bright, and shiny. Beauty is subjective; it changes so fast. Don't let what others think bother you for too long. It's okay to listen to others to let it help you to find yourself, or to push your limits, like trying new things with courage. But don't let other people's opinion decide who you are. No one has the power to do so but yourself.

I feel bad for little Jiyeon, who thought she must've been born the wrong gender because no one thought she was pretty. At least now I am making it up to her. I'm proud of my Buddha belly, and even more proud of myself for showing it to the entire world in my little bikini.

Chapter 3

I'm Korean Through and Through

I don't know what you know about Seoul other than 'Gangnam Style' and the '88 Seoul Olympics, if you are old enough to remember that, but it's not what you'd see in Seoul nowadays. For generations and generations my family has lived in this city, and there was no clubbing or whatever else they talk about in the song. You can still see the old part of the city here and there, but most of its remnants are gone now. Seoul is turning into one of the biggest metropolitan areas in Asia.

Different from what people know (or guess) about me, I do very much care about Seoul. I didn't leave because I hated it there. I hated the circumstances I was in, but never the place. It's my one and only hometown and it always will be. Koreans usually have a strong attachment to their homeland. Same with me. After all, I'm a Korean through and through.

I grew up in a neighborhood called Ahyundong. It was one of the oldest parts of the city, not too far from City Hall and the four main gates of Old Seoul. Our house, where we lived for fourteen years since my birth, was small but cozy. It was on the third floor of an old brick apartment building, located on a slightly steep hillside along with dozens of other similar-looking houses. There were six homes in the three floors, and we had a rooftop right above us. I still can't believe there were six families under that tiny roof. How could all those people fit in that building? Boggles my mind to this day.

You entered the building through a steel door and went up a narrow cement stairway. There was usually a pile of heating briquettes on your left on the way up. We used the briquettes as fuel back then. There were always black smudges from them in the stairway, more so on delivery days in the winter. We saved the used briquettes (they turned beige and brittle when completely used) on the side of the building for snowy days. When you threw the briquettes onto the street they broke into little pieces and kept people from slipping and falling on the ice, the way they use sand in some places.

Four flights of stairs led up to our old home on the third floor. Our door was a steel frame with frosted glass—not the best way to prevent thieves, now that I think about it. The entrance was always full of shoes, since we had four family members and the entryway was small. To the right of the entrance, there was a small balcony that looked down to the busy street of Ahyundong and doubled as a storage unit. My room was right next to the balcony. The kitchen and my parents' room (we called it the *anbang*, the main room in the house) were right next to mine, and my brother's room was perpendicular to the *anbang*. A small toilet was next to my brother's room, and a small hallway connected all of them.

The house didn't have a dining room. When we had casual meals without my father, we just pulled out a small sitting table and ate in the hallway right in front of the kitchen door. But our living room (technically it wasn't a living room, more like a hallway) wasn't wide enough for two people, so we had to eat meals in the biggest room of the house, the *anbang*. We used a hexagonal wooden table. There was a small TV in the *anbang*. I remember watching famous Hollywood movies like *Home Alone*, *Terminator*, or *Alien* on Saturday nights.

The kitchen was a fun place. It's nothing like kitchens you'll see in modern Seoul today. Our old kitchen was tiny and filled with my mother's touch. When you looked into the kitchen from the living room, you saw a cutting board and gas stove straight ahead, right under the small window. A fridge and microwave were on the right, pantry shelves on the top, and the *ondol* system (a central heating system that heats the floor) on the left. The whole kitchen was covered with small tiles.

Our house had a typical *ondol* system that used briquettes to heat the room. It worked as a big cooking stove as well. My mother cooked rice on the top of the briquette fire and we grilled chestnuts and sweet potatoes under there from time to time. Often kids missed school because of the minor carbon monoxide poisoning caused by the briquettes, but it was easily curable with a bowl of *mul kimchi* (radish-water kimchi). There was a jar of homemade yogurt on the corner of the shelf in the kitchen. My mom had been a master of healthy cooking long before I can remember.

On to the bathroom! The bathroom was basically a toilet bowl and a big bucket of water, we needed to boil a big pot of water, and we went to the public bathhouse every weekend. In the summer, we just jumped into a giant barrel of water in the bathroom. The water supply was often cut off, so we kept an emergency supply of water in the barrel. Later, we got a small water heater for the bathroom. It opened a whole new world for all of us. Although we had a sit-down toilet, sometimes we needed to pour a bucket of water down to flush because the pipe system wasn't so great. Also, we never flushed the toilet paper because the pipes couldn't handle it. We threw it into a small trashcan next to the toilet. For the first fifteen years of my life (and the habit continues to this day), I couldn't even conceive of flushing toilet paper.

The warmest room in the house was the *anbang*. It was closest to the *ondol* and windows faced east or south (meaning plenty of sunlight). The youngest in the family (that would be me) typically got the opposite room—colder, and without much sunlight. Not that there's any problem with the structure or anything, just that it's usually located next to the balcony and has a draft. But it was the biggest room in the house; that was my compensation. I created my little world in that room. I played the radio at night, filled up the bookshelf with my books, read as late I wanted (I read a lot), and my grandmother could sleep next to me when she visited. One of the good things about my room was that half of the floor got really, really hot during the winter (the other half was not). Even if my face was cold, my body felt melted under the blanket. Oh yes, just in case you didn't notice, we didn't sleep on a bed. We had sleeping pads called *yo* (sort of like a thin mattress) that we put on the floor.

Our house was small, but we had extra space outside: the rooftop. I had a lot of memories from the rooftop. We ate, played, and slept on that cement floor. One of the most important uses of the area was for hanging the laundry. All the zigzagging clotheslines on the roofs showed typical Korean life. At the same time, the rooftop was also my mom's garden and my playground, where we gained our bearings using the Seoul N Tower (Namsan Tower back then). It was a shelter for the wounded pigeon I rescued, a place to BBQ, and our campground on hot summer nights. It was also where we gathered to watch the fireworks that went off near the Seoul N Tower on national holidays. One time, pigeons built a nest under the roof of the next building, and the eggs hatched under my watch. It was a magical moment. Because all the houses were multiple stories without a back/front yard, having a rooftop was essential to our lives. I can't imagine my childhood without it.

Our street was full of life. I enjoyed looking out onto the street from the roof or the balcony. That's one of the many reasons why I liked this neighborhood so much. Seoul was kind of a dodgy place when I was little, but I was never scared to walk down the street at night. Everyone knew each other, and there were always people selling something or just enjoying life, talking.

When I walked down the street, pigeons, dogs, and cats always welcomed me. We had every kind of shop you could think of (and some unthinkable ones) on that street. It was one of the typical characteristics of old time Seoul. There was a mechanic right across the little street from our building. He could fix everything, from pushbikes to water heaters. He still comes to my parents' house to fix their plumbing or water heater to this day. Talented man he is!

We bought our eggs and chicken at a store uphill. The shop sold every possible part of the chicken: eggs, broken eggs in a plastic bag (handy for making *jeon*), a whole chicken, chicken organs, chicken feet, and quail eggs (quail eggs are very popular in Korea). My uncle's family (my mom's younger brother) lived right near the chicken shop. We were very close. Their son, Junhyup, and my brother and I were inseparable most of our childhood.

We had a big video rental shop in the neighborhood. Do you remember when you used to watch stuff on the VCR? The owner lady had a super cute puppy and she made jewelry as a side job. Two supermarkets (we called them supermarkets because they were super big and had everything for us, but it was like a local store by American standards) always competed to have discount rates. When I went to buy something, they always gave gum instead of change to kids (gum was 10 won. 10 won = 1 cent). There was a small arcade with ten or so video game machines. Sometimes I had to go in there to find my brother to let him know it was meal time. He played *Street Fighter* and

I played *Tetris*, the only game that interested me. Still to this day, I'm not a fan of video games, but I can play *Tetris* for hours.

There was a small playground right next to my uncle's place. We played *guseolchigi* (marble games), *sulraejabgi* (hide-and-seek), and all sort of games that I can't really write down here because it would look like a random collection of letters. Our playground had a bully. I think it's the same anywhere in the world. He always interrupted our games, hit little kids, or yelled at people. Other kids were afraid of him, including me. We only knew him by name, and that he had Down syndrome. It didn't mean much to us back then. I learned more about Down syndrome as a genetic disorder in biology class in high school, and I suddenly felt bad for that bully who might have just been socially awkward.

Our friend *Deokin Yackguk*, the pharmacist, (*Yackguk* means pharmacy) was also in charge of prescribing Chinese remedies. I hated the taste of them (I doubt any kid would like it), but I had to take some for a few months for reasons I don't recall. She tested which ingredients were good for me. She placed two opposite ingredients in each of my hands, and saw which one I reacted better to, or something like that. I don't know how she did it. She had her ways. It was interesting to watch for sure. She's still in business.

Then there's the throat doctor down the street who saved my life when I was a baby. My mom said I choked on a small fish bone (she thought I was going to die), but the throat doctor pulled it out from my tiny little throat. Also in the neighborhood was a women's clothing shop, a tofu maker, a pharmacy, a Chinese medicine man, and oh so many others. The Chinese medicine shop had a giant white poodle always standing right in front of the shop like a Sphinx guarding the Pyramids. When we had our dog Lucky (a miniature poodle), we used to visit the giant poodle at the medicine shop and be amused by their

size difference. On the weekend, we walked five minutes down the road to the public bathhouse.



Figure 1 Seoul Olympic 1988

Chapter 4

The Story of a Market: *Ahyun Sijang*

Now I want to talk about *Ahyun sijang*, the traditional market in our neighborhood (*Ahyun* is name of the neighborhood, *sijang* means market), the reason why I became such a food snob. I don't eat Korean food when I go out, especially not the dishes my mother makes. I rarely eat seafood, especially anything not in its original shape (like fish fillets, well-trimmed shrimp, and so on) because I can't stand the poor quality. My sixth sense can be used to detect the main ingredients of dish (my taste buds are a little bit more trained than normal folks' I guess). At home, I need to have certain ingredients in the fridge at all times (crushed garlic, for example). Most of all, I'm a very harsh critic of rice. I'm the biggest and meanest rice snob. Now I'll take you to the world of *sijang* that made me this way.

I'd never been to a supermarket (like Giants or Walmart) until I went to university. We—my mother, grandmother and anybody I knew—shopped at the local market. My mother still does. Now she lives twenty minutes away from our old neighborhood, but she goes back to the old neighborhood to visit people and shop everyday. As a proud female member of the Kim family, I always went to shop with my mom and grandmother. They taught me almost everything I know about ingredients and food to this day. I learned how to pick out a healthy fish just by looking at it. The key point is their eyes. Certain fish came in certain seasons, and the eggs were a treat if we picked a pregnant female. Raw crabs were hard to pick, but they were one of

the most delicious things from the sea. My grandmother could make one mean *gaejang* (marinated raw crabs).

I'm quite particular about seafood (because it's easy to tell the freshness) or any ingredient really, and the reason why is because I grew up near the market. It was odd to see just a fish filet sold by itself at the supermarket in foreign countries. Where did the other parts go? What did they do with it? Who skinned the fish? Was it a female or male? Did anyone check its eyes to see if it was fresh? Too many questions! The *sijang* made me a food snob forever.



Figure 2 Ahyeon Sijang, where I grew up

The market was home to so many different businesses. It was like one giant supermarket but outdoors, and filled with fresh stuff from the providers instead of packages on shelves.

There was always the butcher. A lot of Korean dishes are made with meat. We went to buy meat from them almost every day for different reasons. I know what to ask the butcher for after years of

eavesdropping. I was always fascinated by the meat slicer. You know the one that cuts ham in different thicknesses? That one. I just couldn't get over the fact that it could be so precise and automatic. He also had a big storage room where half-carved animals hung from the ceiling. Sometimes I could see the delivery truck unloading half-carved, stamped pigs and cows. Oddly, they didn't smell much. The butcher shop taught me the valuable lesson that pork is from pigs and beef is from cows. It's easy to know it in your head, but connecting those two dots takes some time if you're a kid.

I remember the first time I saw a bucket of cow's blood sitting outside.

"What's that, grandma?" I pointed at the bucket full of slimy brown stuff that didn't look like anything I knew.

"It's cow's blood. You like *sunjiguk*, right? That's *sunji*." *Sunji* literally means cow's blood.

It was one of those moments when a light bulb went on in my head, shiny and bright, and I hit my forehead with my palm and say "Duh!" Meat parts come from animals, and it doesn't look like something that just came out of a live animal. I learned my lesson.

Here're a few things Koreans buy at the market on a daily basis.

Sesame oil: It's the best thing. As one of the staple foods, it's important to have freshly pressed sesame oil, without any preservatives. There was a small shop with an oil-pressing machine located at the southern entrance of the market. The aroma of the sesame seeds roasting, that I can't explain in any other language, always pulled me. It was the smell of something good. To this day, we don't use a store-bought oil, always just fresh pressed.

Tofu: Homemade tofu is best when it's fresh out of the jar. It's a bit grainy, soft, and very soy-y. They produce some scraps during the process, and it's a great ingredient for *kimchi jjigae*, or kimchi stew. If you see *kong-biji-jjigae* on the menu, ground up soybean stew, please try it. The shop owners usually gave out the ground soybean scraps after making the tofu for free.

Dried seafood: my grandmother was a friend of the shop owner. When she hung out there, I kept myself busy snacking on dried anchovies and shrimp. That's when I first got into eating dried anchovies with *gochujang* as a snack. Dried shrimp isn't bad, but too salty for my taste.

Fish balls: There was a small factory that made *odeng* (fish balls and fish "balls" in flat-squares). I never liked it, but I started really not liking it when they told me what was in it. Basically they use other fish parts that we don't eat, or small fish. My desire to eat real food rather than food that's shaped like what it's supposed to be started here, I think.

Grains and rice: We usually got these from the shop across the street from the guy who made Chinese remedies.

Vegetables: My grandmother had a very good friend who sold vegetables. We called her Juntae *umma* (Juntae's mom). Her shop was full of various kinds of vegetables. The selection always changed by season. The little shop was buried under mountains of cabbage during *kimjang* season in the fall (when people made *kimchi* for the year). She still runs the business to this day. She has been there, in the same spot, ever since I could remember, and she still has the business, with the same adorable stray cat that decided to live there. She is an everyday superwoman. By selling 1,000 *won* of bean sprouts, 500 *won*

of carrots, and 200 *won* of spinach, she put her son through the college.

The shop ladies were friendly, some of them had known the families for years, so going to the market was like visiting someone's house. It took ages. They usually shared some other snacks with us: raw chestnuts, steamed or raw sweet potatoes, roasted pine nuts, and so on.

We loved all the merchants, not just the ones selling food. The market had clothing shops including *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothes), underwear, socks, stockings and casual clothes. We always wrapped up our shopping trip by buying two 1-liter cartons of milk at the entrance of the market. The market was wet, busy, and lively. It was the center of a living scene. I didn't realize how much I enjoyed this place until recently when I returned to Seoul for a visit.

This very natural way I lived the first fifteen years of my life has become a precious one. Now everyone's looking after what's more authentic, and not touristy. What's real and what's not. *Ahyeon Sijang* is definitely a place that is authentic and keeps the old market traditions alive. It was here that I learned the precious value of living things and fresh ingredients.

Part 2. New Zealand

New Zealand is not a small country but a large village.

- Peter Jackson

Chapter 5

New Zealand: A Lot of Firsts

In September 2004, everything in my life changed. I stepped into the world of backpacking and my life got richer, bolder and stronger.

It was supposed to be my junior year at university, but I'd decided to take a year off. (The Korean school year starts in March and ends in December.) For the first time in my life, I hated studying. I was always a good student who got good grades, and my curiosity led me to study hard because I wanted to know everything, but university was different. Everything was harder, and it made me see how lacking my abilities were. Statics, fluid dynamics, thermodynamics, and all the other subjects bored me. I felt like I was falling behind more and more, so I didn't go back the next year.

I did a lot during that gap year, but at the time it seemed random and disjointed. For one solid month I did nothing but play games online. I played *Ragnarok*, and I leveled up to 80 as a magician named 'Arwen,' like the beautiful elf in *The Lord of the Rings*. It was also a serious and complex time in my life. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I got a temporary job at the school library as a researcher for new books. It was a pretty cool job for a book nerd like me. They gave me the power to choose whatever books I wanted to purchase behalf of the library. Then I moved back to my parents' house and just hung out. That didn't last long. I got a part time job at a local sandwich shop. It was located in the trendy section of Seoul called *Sinchon*, and I had a lot of foreign customers. My job description included just about everything: making sandwiches, salad, fruit juice, coffee, and

cleaning. I started on the afternoon shift, but I moved up to the morning shift because, apparently, I was so good at my job. Well, I didn't think it was hard to be good at a \$3-an-hour job. So I worked there for about three months and had some encounters with foreigners during that time. All of a sudden, I had a thought, *What if I go backpacking?* The word backpacking was one I'd never thought about before. I knew some people who'd gone on a backpacking trip to Europe, but I never saw myself on such an exotic continent as Europe. Also a 15-countries-in-one-month kind of trip never interested me. But backpacking, why not? I had time, I had some money, and it sounded interesting.

The problem was I couldn't speak English at all and I didn't know where to start. I could read the letters and I could say, *How are you? I'm fine thank you, and you?* the classic book-English greeting, as far as I was concerned, but that was about it. I had had no interest in English in school because it bored me, but now I decided to go to an English-speaking country to test myself. To get ready, I joined a couple of online communities that dealt with backpacking and traveling in general.

I met Greg, who was an English teacher from a small town in British Columbia, Canada. He was a regular customer at the sandwich shop because it was next to the language school where he worked. I told him about my vague plan to go backpacking and he suggested visiting his mother's house in western Canada. He said Canada would be a fun place to travel. I told him how I'd always wanted to live overseas, more than just hop from place to place. For some reason I couldn't explain, I wanted to rent an apartment somewhere new and have a normal life, learn the area, and do everyday things. Greg said I could do that, living overseas, at his mother's. From the conversation, I got the impression that a lot of people in rural Canada had huge houses with extra rooms where they could have several guests. I

hadn't been to British Columbia, so I couldn't confirm the theory yet. Oops, spoiler alert—back to the story. Funny enough, as soon as I mentioned Canada to my father, he passionately rejected the idea. To him, everywhere in North America was dangerous based on news related to terrorism and shootings (it was 2004, only a few years after 9/11). Now I know Canada and the USA are two totally different countries with very different laws and politics, but it was all same-same to us in Korea back then. Seemed like Canada was out of the question. So where to go instead?

I mentioned my desire to live abroad to my parents and they suggested I talk to my aunt who was vice principal of an elementary school. They said her school had some kind of exchange program with a school in New Zealand. So I did. I didn't know anything about New Zealand, but I knew this was a country I never thought I'd go to. She listened to my story and promised to look for a room to rent for a month in Auckland. That was it. I was going to New Zealand!

I bought my very first flight ticket and a heavy loading backpack, and got my very first passport. Everything was so exciting and new. I got a New Zealand Lonely Planet guidebook. After I carefully flipped through the guidebook and many articles about backpacking trips online, I got a money belt and traveler's checks (do you remember the time when people still used those?). I wrote down all the contact numbers for the Korean Embassy, and my bank account and credit card numbers. The first five pages of my notepad was full of (what I thought) practical information. What I didn't realize was that I was going to one of the safest countries in the world. But how could I know? It was my first time going overseas.

A week prior to departure, I still hadn't heard anything from my aunt and the people who promised me a flat. I'd read everything about New Zealand and backpacking by then, the only problem was I didn't have a place to stay. I called her multiple times, and the people

in Auckland, but it seemed like I couldn't get a straight answer from any of them. So I panicked, as inexperienced travelers do. I had spent more than \$1,000 on tickets and my bag was all packed, but my dream of living overseas was crumbling. The thing was, I didn't totally trust my aunt in the first place because our relationship wasn't so great. I was starting to think the apartment plans were going to fall through and I was devastated, but after a few panic attacks I made another plan. I'd read that New Zealand had a lot of places they called 'backpackers'. Why not stay in one of those? I might find somewhere I really liked where I could live for a while. So the plan was: book three nights at a backpackers in Auckland, find some place nice to stay for about two weeks, and figure it out from there. A pretty solid plan for a first-time backpacker, don't you think?

A few other important decisions I made:

I decided not to take my CD Player. (That's right, in the year 2004 I was still using a CD Player. I was a hard-core music lover who didn't trust the quality of mp3 files). Even though I loved my music, I thought maybe it would be nice to listen to what was around in my first foreign country.

I borrowed an electronic dictionary from my brother. I barely spoke English at that point, and I didn't want to end up in the middle of nowhere because I couldn't express myself.

I packed the most basic clothes because I thought, *What's the point of dressing up?* (I've changed a lot since then).

Because I was a dedicated film camera user, I traveled with my beloved Pentax MX, a tripod, and dozens of different kinds of film, along with a borrowed digital camera. No regrets there.

I packed one packet of *gim* (fried seaweed) and a tube of *gochujang* (red pepper paste), two Korean staples, just in case, like many Koreans, I didn't care for foreign food. (Turns out I have a super appetite, regardless of where the food comes from).

For my very first time packing a *real* backpack, I did a pretty good job. It was a few hundred grams shy of 20 kg for my one-month trip. (I've improved a little since then.) Wearing that 20 kg backpack felt strange, but I felt alive.

My Very First International Flight

With my backpack packed, I headed down to Incheon International Airport, alone. Seoul has an excellent public transportation system, including the airport limousine bus. My 12-hour non-stop Korean Air flight to Auckland was scheduled to leave that night. I made sure I got a window seat for the plane and sat down to wait at the boarding gate.

It was my first time flying overseas. I'd only ever been on a domestic flight to Jeju Island, about an hour away from Seoul, back when I was thirteen years old. Before the plane took off for Jeju, I wondered what flying would feel like for my body. Would I feel different? Was it like a roller coaster ride? (I hadn't ridden a roller coaster yet back then). I asked my older brother, who was on the flight with me and had way more life experience than me. He said, "You'll feel a strong weight pushing down on your body. It's like riding a rocket. You know how a rocket works, don't you? It's just like that." His words scared the living little girl out of me. On the plane to Jeju, I

closed my eyes and clutched the armrest as hard as I could when the plane taxied down the runway, as if the armrests could save my life. I was already in the air when I opened my eyes a few minutes later. The strange feeling was quite minor. The plane was flying, I was sweating, and my brother was grinning.

I still remember the feeling when I stepped through the security gates at Incheon International Airport to take my first international flight, a Korean Air red eye direct from Seoul to Auckland. I had that feeling that I used to hate, like something was wiggling around in my stomach during the descent of a roller coaster, I felt that exact way even though my feet were still on the ground. It was a short moment in my life that I'll never have back again. I'm glad I was old enough to feel and remember the special moment.

I consider myself to be quite brave, but I'm also a chicken in many cases. One of my biggest fears is earthworms (or any long and slimy creatures), even though I know they are good for the soil and can't hurt me in any way. It's just one of those things I can't get over. Thunder makes me jump, I'm afraid of the dark (ironically, astronomy is a big part of my life), I can't watch scary movies, and the smell of carrots freaks me out. But I managed to buy a flight ticket to a foreign country that I didn't know anything about, and use a language I didn't speak. I didn't think about it that way at the time, but now I can see how that was a pretty bold move.

After going through security check, I sat down near my gate and looked out the big glass window. Many things about the airport excited me. When I was young, I had wanted to be a rocket scientist so I could work with all kinds of flying things: airplanes, rockets, satellites, and spaceships. This was my very first time looking at a real (and very big) airplane this close. The planes to Jeju had all been small. This big mechanical wonder was glowing orange from the runway lights, and looked so majestic. I took a lot of pictures of the

plane that evening. Even before I started traveling, my heart was already crossing the ocean.

The next twelve hours were intense with joy and fear. Airplane travel is an exciting thing. It still excites me to this day, even though I fly way more often than I did ten years ago when I took that first journey. For me, the twelve hours on that non-stop flight were like going in and out of a haunted house twenty times in a row, a mix of excitement and fear. I was excited about the in-flight meal one minute, then woke up from a horrible plane-crashing dream the next. It was three years after 9/11, and the fear of a terrorist attack was still there. I couldn't sleep any longer than an hour at a time because I kept having nightmares that the plane was going to crash. In one scene in my dream, I was looking at the debris of the plane floating in the ocean. Thankfully, none of my fears happened in real life.

Soon we were about to land, which meant time to fill out the arrival card. I could understand a little English, but I was quite nervous about the whole process because I wasn't confident about what I was supposed to do. I peeked over at the older gentleman sitting next to me. Because I didn't have an address in New Zealand, he kindly gave me his address to fill in. Now that the longest flight of my life was over, there was a new hurdle to cross: Entering my first backpacking destination. It wasn't too smooth for me. Why? New Zealand has tough rules on the import and export of living goods. In my travels during the last nine years, I can't say I never brought any goods that were not allowed (like dairy, fruits and stuff), but it was nothing major. I didn't cause any environmental disasters (I hope). New Zealand is especially tough about those rules. This is a country with a very unique ecosystem. It still has no snakes and only a few kinds of poisonous spiders, thanks to strict Customs rules. That day, the Customs office caught me off guard. I was nobody, just an average traveler, nothing special, but they wanted to check my bag for some

reason. They found the pack of seaweed and *gochujang* (remember that I packed those?), and wanted me to explain what they were. Who knows the word for *gim* in English? Maybe a lot of people, but I didn't! I could barely say, "How are you? I'm fine, and you?" in English. I was too panicked to remember the fancy electronic dictionary I'd borrowed from my brother, and just stood there speechless. The kind gentleman from the airplane rescued me by explaining the stuff to the Customs officers. I want to make it clear, the Customs officers weren't rude or anything. I was just scared of a lot of big white people (because I'd never met so many big white people in my life). In the end, they let me go even with my little Korean emergency food. Because it was completely sealed and it was a dry food, they didn't mind. Maybe they were just genuinely curious to see what those were.

I spent so much time and energy to make this trip happen, but all the effort had finally paid off. I officially entered Auckland! I knew exactly what I had to do at that moment. That was the one thing I had planned out very carefully. First I called my parents, who might be worried sick about my flight. I had already bought the international phone card (do you remember back when we used this plastic card to make a phone call?) at the Incheon International Airport for this particular occasion. After all, they didn't want me to go to Canada because of 9/11, so I knew they would be worried. Talking with them on the pay phone, I felt vulnerable for the first time in my life. I'd felt lonely, sad, and many other complicated things in my life, but never vulnerable. I realized for the very first time, that I was truly alone here. In Korea, there were always people who would help me when I was in trouble. But here, at the moment when I was on the phone with my parents who were across the ocean, I knew I was in this alone. I hung up, wiped a few tears, and went down to the next thing on the list.

The Information Centre was the key to traveling in New Zealand back when there was no such thing as smartphones. It worked like a travel agency. They booked accommodations and various tours. I went to the one in the Auckland Airport and asked for the location of a few hostels from my guidebook. Soon, I had my very first reservation at my very first backpackers in New Zealand. I took a taxi to the hostel (I still remember looking curiously at the hostel from the inside of the cab), and settled into a mixed dorm room. I'd read in the guidebook that there was such a thing as mixed female/male dorms in the world of hostels. When I was staying at the dormitory at my university, it was strictly divided into female and male rooms. But I had lived with my brother for the first 15 years of my life, so I thought it would be like that.

My Very First Hostel

My very first hostel room was covered in pink: pink blankets, pink beanbag chairs, and pink walls. The six beds were spread around the room. There was a shared bathroom on one side of the room, and we had a big window. I chose a bed near the door, since I didn't want to get cold by the window. It was supposed to be early summer, but it was still quite cold. There was a German guy and a couple of other guests that I didn't see at all for two days. He was the first person I ever met who had blond hair. My first day in Auckland and I was already checking off a lot of firsts!

The hostel had a giant trampoline in the front yard and a cozy common room. I have to admit I never went to the common area because I was scared of non-Korean speaking people. I was barely communicating the bare essentials at that point, and didn't want to put myself in a tough situation. I didn't have a chance to speak to the

German guy with the beautiful blond hair because he left the next day. But he left a batch of brownies and a note saying, *It was nice to meet you all*. If I saw that now, I wouldn't give it much thought, but this was a whole new world for me ten years ago as a first-time backpacker. These strangers actually met and befriended each other. It was fascinating.

The first couple of days in Auckland were full of schedules. I read the guidebook front to back (at least the Auckland part), and had so many things on the list. The Auckland Zoo, the Aquarium (to see penguins), Victoria Park (to shop), and the Stardom Auckland Observatory were a few important ones. Before I started my schedule I made an important stop in downtown Auckland. My desire to actually live overseas was still alive, so I wanted to settle down some place comfortable. After reading the entire guidebook, I made my decision to settle down in an area called Ninety Mile Beach. Because I grew up in a big city, being near a good beach was always part of my dream. With the help of the Information Centre downtown, I successfully made a reservation for 14 days at a hostel up at Ninety Mile Beach. I made the payment before I got there, and went off to enjoy my last few days in Auckland before leaving for my new home. This was my very first big travel mistake ever made.

Chapter 6

Diana and Keanu, and a Few More Firsts

As an astronomy buff, I worked the Stardome Observatory in Auckland into my schedule. They ran a stargazing tour in the evening. I made a reservation (proud of me!), and headed down there one night by bus. The observatory was at the top of One Tree Hill. There were a lot of sheep along the way. It was a very New Zealand moment. I made it to the top, into the observatory. I had worked as a staff member and teacher at Ansong Observatory for a few years back home. I'd taught the same stuff to visitors like me, and it was one of my favorite jobs I've had to this day. I set up my photography gear (camera and tripod) at the back of the tour group to catch photos of the great sky and the observatory dome. In the sky right in front of me was the backward Scorpio, Southern Cross, and numerous other constellations that I had only dreamt about. It was magical.

I was lost in the beauty of the moment. Then I looked at the time.

“Shit!”

I didn't say the word, but I would've if I swore. The time was suddenly 9 pm and it occurred to me that I wasn't in Korea anymore, where everything stayed open 24 hours. I'd read from the guidebook that most of the shops in New Zealand closed at 6 pm or so, and I'd

experienced it the night before. My panicked amateur backpacker thinking led me to believe that the bus service might end around 6 pm as well. It was New Zealand, who knew? My hostel was quite far from the observatory and I didn't have enough money to take a taxi. I had a written down the hostel address in my notepad, and I had a map, but that was about it. Also, I'm notoriously bad at directions. The Information booth at the observatory was empty. I paced back and forth, thinking about my next move. I didn't know what to do! Finally someone came by and I desperately explained my situation in my extremely broken English:

“Ah... Bus! Finish, early? No? Hostel, name, here. Ah... lost!”

You know, the funny thing is, if you are not fluent in a foreign language, panicking doesn't really help. I blurted out a few words and made big gestures for things like bus, hostel, night, and finish, hoping someone would understand how desperate I was to get home. *I can't become a missing person in only two days!* I thought.

Enter Diana, my sparkling guardian angel. If this moment were in a movie, this would've been the moment where she floated down the path toward me with a halo glowing on her head.

“What's the matter, hon?”

She patiently listened to my broken English and took over the conversation from the poor girl at the information booth. Diana and Keanu, her then eleven-year-old son, were there for the AAAS (Auckland Amateur Astronomy Society) meeting. They were very kind. She offered me a ride back to my hostel. Because I didn't know enough words to express my gratitude, I mumbled, “Thank you very much,” about ten times. I quickly packed my photography gear and followed

her to her red minivan. There was a surprise waiting there. When we got closer to the car, I saw a big furry creature in the back of the van. The minivan only had two seats in front, and the back was empty (it later became our home for a week, but more of that story later). That was also my first encounter with the lovely dog Gaia, the first Alaskan malamute I'd ever met. She was only four months old at the time, but as tall as Keanu when she stood up.

I sat in front, and Keanu was in the back with Gaia. Diana was extremely patient with me. Even with my poor language skills, we had a few in-depth conversations. She was a traveler herself, and, with 'the great kindness of New Zealanders,' she was very understanding of my situation. I didn't realize there was a big Korean population in Auckland, but she had known the community for a while. The short ride home was like a dream. *Serendipity!* I thought, *to meet such great people in such a totally random way.* And here my life took another turn.

"What's your plan?" Diana asked.

She was about to drive up north to visit her uncle on the day that I had a reservation at Ninety Mile Beach. The hostel was on her way. She offered me a ride and I took it without a blink. Now that I remember it, I don't know what I was thinking. She could've been a bad person (she's one of the sweetest people I know), I could've ended up in the middle of nowhere, but the thought didn't even occur to me. Thank God I was in New Zealand.

There was a significant moment on the third day of my trip. I now call it the Three-Day Rule for first-time travelers (more on that, later). In the morning I woke up with a terrible headache and runny nose. Because the weather was changing a lot, my allergies were

acting up. I felt tired, sick, lonely, and hopeless. *Why am I here again?* I thought. I stayed in bed for a while, but my mood didn't change. I was hungry but I didn't know what I wanted to do about it. Eating out was expensive, no matter how excited I was to eat a different cuisine. I went to the supermarket and bought some bread on super sale and sliced cheese. My dinner was a packet of peanuts from the airplane, ginger beer, bread and cheese. I ate them on the floor of my dorm room with a cloud of gloom over my head. My headache and loneliness almost pushed me to call the airline and book myself a ticket home as soon as possible. But I fought against the urge. *I'm here, I thought. I already spent a lot of money and effort to get here, and it isn't a rational decision to quit at this moment.* That's my Three-Day Rule: When things get miserable three days in, stick with it!

The next day, the dark moment passed. It was moving day. At the time we planned, Diana's minivan pulled up at the front gate of my backpackers. There was one more friend, Wayne, to share the ride. I can't even describe how happy I was during the drive. The view was so beautiful, like from a movie. I made a few good friends, and everything was so foreign (in a good way). I couldn't have felt more alive. They took me to a few attractions along the way. The glowworm Milky Way at Waitomo Caves was unbelievably cool. The glowworms created an illusion of moving stars on the cave's ceiling. *Glowworms. Wow! Everything in New Zealand is fascinating,* I thought. We arrived at my hostel late in the afternoon, shared contact numbers, and parted ways.

It was a rainy day. My heart was full of warmth and joy. I was so proud of myself for meeting such great people. The hostel manager took me to my dorm room, and I settled into my new home for the next fourteen days. But everything about the place was different from what I'd read, the opposite of the heart-warming feeling I had. The room was dark and damp (I hate dark rooms), the bed was

uncomfortable, and there was no blanket or towel (pretty standard in many hostels in New Zealand, I found out after). The so-called beautiful beach was stormy, and colder than Auckland. I didn't like this place one bit. Maybe it was because I was having too much fun with Diana and the mob (as she called it). If I sucked it up and stayed a few days, maybe I would have enjoyed the place. I tried to stay in the room for a while, but I just kept noticing things I didn't like. My first hostel in Auckland was like a palace compared to this place.

I went into troubleshooting mode; my brain spun fast. I knew Diana was driving back to Auckland tonight from her uncle's. *What if she picked me up on the way back, and I could go back to the hostel in Auckland instead?* I thought. I called her and left her a couple of messages saying what I was thinking. She didn't answer her cellphone for a while. I packed my bag and went out to find the manager. It was after six o'clock, that magical closing time. The front desk was empty with a sign 'work hour until 6pm.' I desperately rang the bell to talk to someone. I didn't want to miss the chance for Diana to pick me up (without knowing if she had agreed to my plan). A man peeked his head out from the sliding door behind the front desk. He reminded me that working hours were over and it was his time for him to play with his daughter. I fully understood the situation, but I asked him to please listen to me. I wanted to get a refund and go back to Auckland. He was strict about his work schedule. He said I had to come back in the morning because he was off duty. I may or may not have cried at that point (there's a good chance I cried like a baby). He took me into his home behind the front desk and made me a cup of tea. He must have thought something terrible had happened. I calmly explained my situation. He said he couldn't refund my money because he hadn't received it from the Information Centre in Auckland yet. Because I made the reservation from the city, it took a week or so for him to get the actual money. It was a rookie mistake that I don't make anymore.

Ideally I should've called the Information Centre that booked my accommodation, but of course it was after 6 pm. My money was stuck somewhere between Auckland and Ninety Mile Beach, and I couldn't think of a solution. Fourteen days of accommodation in New Zealand was about three hundred dollars. I couldn't just throw it away because I was too immature to stay at a place I didn't like. If I had been more experienced, I would have toured the town and found another place to stay. But I wasn't. Did I mention that?

Diana called back, finally. She had gotten my panicky messages. She talked to the manager and said she would pick me up. Did I tell you that she is like my guardian angel? Her red minivan pulled up, I got in, and we went back to Auckland. She offered to let me stay at her place that night, and Jason, her boyfriend, would go into the city with me to solve the problem of getting reimbursed. I settled down on her cozy sofa that I ended up spending a lot of time on after.

Jason and I went to the city to solve the situation the next morning. He made some phone calls and said I would get the money back except a cancellation fee. That was more than I expected. On the way to the city from their house in New Haven, he asked how I ended up here. I took a deep breath and told him about everything, from how I wanted to go to Canada, how I lost contact with the people in Auckland, and the incident last night that Diana must have filled him in on. He was a great listener, and a patient one, too. He said he might have a solution to help me achieve my dream of living somewhere in one place instead of moving around. He said he would discuss his idea with Diana. We finally got to downtown Auckland, and I retrieved my money having learned a valuable lesson: Never pay up front when you are not at the hostel, or not sure about your plans.

I hung out in Diana's living room the rest of the day until she came back from work. The very same day, she made a permanent

impression on my life. She offered that I stay at her home as long as I wanted. My desire to reside at one place was about to come true. Keanu's bedroom would be my room for the time being and he would sleep in the garage (more like a wooden fort—he was super stoked for the opportunity). She was the first person who showed me that people could be helpful to one another without wanting something back, even in an international friendship. In Korea, I grew up with the concept of *jung* (deep affection between individuals), a term that cannot be exactly translated into any other language, and I didn't expect to experience it outside of Korea. With that experience, I realized that people are the same, no matter where they are from.

My Very First Foreign Homestay

For the next two weeks I lived in New Haven with Diana, Jason, Diana's son Keanu, Jason's daughters Carmen and Mary, and our trusty guardian Gaia. My time in New Zealand in October 2004 opened up a lot of doors for me. I finally realized how fun English was, lived in a country with different customs, ate a lot of cheese, milk and yogurt, learned how to play chess from Keanu (and I beat him, an 11-year-old kid), experienced home-school culture in New Zealand, and learned about the generosity of strangers.

From the beginning I made it clear that I didn't want to be in the way of the daily life of their family. I wanted to see how they lived every day. We did a lot of ordinary (but highly extraordinary for me) stuff together. Jason asked me to take photos of Carmen's 13th birthday party, so I did. It was a lot of fun. Keanu, Gaia and I went for a walk every day, mostly for Gaia's sake, while she dragged me to every bush in the city.

Keanu was homeschooled. Occasionally I helped him with math and science (it didn't require much English). The homeschooling

system was quite established in New Zealand. Keanu had his homework just like any other kid in school (and he did everything he could to get out of it, just like any other kid in school). He also took a couple classes around the neighborhood taught by other homeschoolers' parents. Coming from a traditional education system in Korea, it was a culture shock for me to see how talented the homeschooled kids were in their fields and realize there are so many different ways to learn, other than school.

My Very First New Zealand Road Trip

For the last week of my stay in New Zealand, Diana, Keanu, Gaia and I went on a road trip to the south of New Zealand. We planned to hit Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua, and the Nelson wine region. Diana packed many different CDs for the trip. One important thing about Diana, her house was always full of music. She knew all the songs from her favorite radio station, and we often listened to CDs and records on her old record player. She was like a real life Lorelei from *The Gilmore Girls* (one of my favorite American TV shows). It was the first time I was introduced to Boy George and Matchbox 20. For the trip, Diana swapped her red minivan for her parents' bigger one. Since we were expecting to sleep in the back, we needed more space. At her lovely parents' house, I was introduced to peppermint tea for the first time.



Figure 3 The famous Paeroa (2004)

I don't have many photos from the trip (my camera battery died at an early stage of the trip and I mainly used my film camera), but I have strong memories instead. It was my very first (there were a lot of firsts on that New Zealand trip, as you can tell by now) proper road trip, and this new experience of seeing, eating, and experiencing things for the 'first' time continued.

One day I was woken up by the lake (we parked during the night, so I didn't know where we were) by a bloody-mouthed Gaia. Apparently she had gone hunting early in the morning and caught some baby ducks (or possibly black swans). It scared the living animal lover out of me, but I accepted that she was a wild animal after all. We made it to Matamata, where the set of Hobbiton was from *The Lord of*

the Rings. I wasn't sure how badly I wanted to go in since the admission was a pricy NZ\$90. Diana taught me a valuable lesson here. She told me an anecdote. When she went to Los Angeles a long time ago, she saw these beautiful boots. She didn't get them. And she never saw boots as appealing ever since. There are certain opportunities that we will never have, and the regret is not worth it. She didn't want it to happen to me during my travels, and at Matamata. There was a big chance that I would never go back to Matamata, and she knew how much I liked the movie. So I went on the tour. Guess what? I absolutely loved it.



Figure 4 Hobbiton

Road trip food in New Zealand was different from my expectations. While driving on the coastal highway we casually pulled over to get a steak for lunch. New Zealand is well known for high quality dairy and meat. I don't think I'd ever had a proper steak before that day (another first). We got our order and went out to sit on a bench by the sea. There was a plastic fork and knife, and the steak was wrapped in a paper plate. It was the most non-traditional steak

packaging I've seen to this day, and I still cherish that experience. I ended up eating the big steak by hand like the boy from *The Jungle Book*. Here's also where my French fry obsession started. There was a lot of deep fried food in New Zealand, but I liked the fish and chips the best. What a genius idea to deep-fry a piece of fish to accompany fries. We don't have this in Korea.

For other food, the grocery stores were a good place to go. We bought cartons of milk, orange juice and L&P (Lemon and Paeroa), one of my favorite sodas. My brother and I always drank more than 1 liter of milk every day growing up, and that habit stuck with me to this day. I bought different kinds of milk (heaven!) during the trip. We actually drove by the town where L&P originated, and I took a picture with the giant monument of an L&P bottle in the middle of the night.

Leaving New Zealand wasn't easy. It made me sad to leave a place that gave me so many meaningful moments. When I decided to go on a one-month trip to New Zealand, one of my friends back then looked down on my decision and said, "You are just going on a \$3,000 vacation." I worked hard to get the finances for the trip, but I also had to loan some money from my parents. What she said about my trip bothered me, and made me doubt my decision to stay in the same place for two weeks. I was still thinking about it when I went for a walk behind Diana's house one of the first days of my stay. *Should I go out and do something absolutely exciting? Is this my time to do something crazy that I would never do again?* But then I realized that even each step in this backyard in New Haven was something absolutely exciting and crazy. There's a high chance that I'd never come back to this very spot. (I went back two years later, but that's not the point.) Each and every step is meaningful. I was doing something exciting with this group of strangers every day. And that was my epiphany. The attitude

I developed from that moment is what made me continue my travels to this day.

I was permanently changed after that trip. For the first time in my life, I felt responsible for every aspect of my life. I truly started getting to know myself through the trip. What I really like, or don't, my opinions on certain subjects, my abilities to achieve goals, this was all new information to me. I was pretty independent before I went on the trip, but I feel like I really woke up to my adult life after that.

The Friendship Continues

Diana came to visit Korea a couple times after that. When she briefly lived in Daejeon for a few months in 2011, she asked me if I would have kept traveling if she hadn't rescued me in 2004. My pride wanted to say yes, but I knew that wasn't true. I wouldn't have come this far if it weren't for her. She was the one who showed me that strangers we meet along the way can become life-long friends, that acts of kindness don't work like Newton's third law of motion. I've had a lot of help and inspiration from others since the night Diana rescued me, and I wouldn't have learned to accept the help if it wasn't for that first experience with her.

Part 3. Family & the Birth of Bucket Living

“You're an interesting species. An interesting mix. You're capable of such beautiful dreams, and such horrible nightmares. You feel so lost, so cut off, so alone, only you're not. See, in all our searching, the only thing we've found that makes the emptiness bearable, is each other.”

— Carl Sagan, *Contact*

Chapter 7

I Got a Master's Degree, and My Parents Got Cancer

I have a Master of Science Degree in Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD). Literally, this is about analyzing problems that involve fluid flows (both liquids and gases). It is widely used in the aerospace industry, and is now an important part of the research and development process in lots of industries like automobile, home appliance, and construction. What kinds of things hold fluids, you ask? For starters, the atmosphere is filled with the most important fluid (a combination of 78% Nitrogen, 21% Oxygen, and various other gases). A dish washer, a car engine, the fabric softener slot of a washing machine, airplane wings, and an apartment's air flow—you know, when you try to circulate the air in the house by opening the window and door—are others, to name a few.

The reason why I got into CFD was because of my interest in air and space science. Korea wasn't the ideal place to study aerodynamics, but I wanted to study something that would bring me closer to the industry. In 2002 I started at a 4-year undergraduate program in mechanical engineering. I loved studying and school life, but the study got tough in sophomore year with the entrance level mechanical engineering courses—statics, dynamics, fluid dynamics, and thermodynamics. The last term of my sophomore year I had a B average, the lowest I've ever gotten. And in my first two years there were several C's too. It was terrible—at least by Korean standards. I

got to the point where I looked at my falling grades and how tough the studies were, and I wondered if I could do it.

So after my sophomore year, I took a year off. This is a common thing to do in Korea. That one year was really good for me. I bored myself to death, worked various jobs, went on that first overseas backpacking trip to New Zealand, and in the end I realized that I really liked learning. I loved everything about school: studying, my professors, my friends, my student council staff, the unlimited access to library books. So in October 2004, after less than a year away from books, equations, my calculator, and sleepless nights full of studying, I registered myself for my junior year and went back into full-on study mode. I missed learning new things and it seemed the right thing to do.

Do you remember (if you ever watched the Gilmore Girls) when Rory dropped out of Yale after she stole the yacht? “Yale!” I wanted to scream. “You fool! You’ll regret it big time. Go back to school, girl!” Because I’ve been there.

The second time around, I settled down and got straight to work. Because my last grades were so bad I had to take several courses again and review important subjects (especially fluid dynamics and thermodynamics). This time there was no part time job, no frolicking, still a lot of beer drinking, but I followed a strict 10 am–4 am study schedule. I survived on a lot of ramen and *gimbab*, and did tons of reading. I was a machine. Eventually the hard work paid off: I got A’s in most of the courses and scored the highest GPA I’ve ever had during my undergrad years. I was oozing with passion.

After finishing my BS degree, I took a short, month-long trip back to New Zealand. This time I got offered a job as a tour guide at an observatory, but at the time I thought continuing my studies was way more important than working at an observatory (and that decision remains one of the biggest mistakes of my life.) Sure, I always liked

traveling and doing something more creative than engineering, but I wasn't confident I could do anything else other than what I studied for four years. Also, I loved school and wasn't ready to work yet. Because of all the horror stories I'd heard from seniors who got jobs at fancy companies, I knew I didn't want to start that kind of difficult work at age 23. Just like that, I decided to buy myself some time and continue on to graduate school.

The question was, where to go? I wanted to go to the Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), but my GPA wasn't good enough. I could go to other schools in Seoul, but it would be hard to score a scholarship. I decided to go to graduate school at my University in Suwon. It would be cheaper to live there than Seoul. I was living off the savings from my previous part-time job, and a partial scholarship (that covered 30% to 40% of tuition), but I would need much bigger funds to go to graduate school. The lab I chose, CFD, also couldn't support their researchers. Money-wise, I didn't have much choice. I decided to shoot for the scholarship at my school, and not to pursue the graduate school if I didn't get the full tuition covered. What happened in the next two years was up to the interview I was about to have with the dean of the Mechanical Engineering Department.

The interview would determine who would be accepted to the course and whether I'd get partial, full, or no scholarship. It would be impossible for me pursue my studies if I couldn't get the scholarship. Twenty thousand dollars of debt would not be a good start to my adult life. It was a simple interview, with three professors and the dean, about the future and my desire to be a researcher. An English language interview was included for students who didn't have a proper TOEIC score, but thankfully I just barely got by. I had written a whole speech in English starting with, "Creativity and passion are two words that

describe me the best,” just in case. I secretly wished they’d let me make my speech, but they didn’t.

The engineering department picked five students who were eligible for the two-year full scholarship that would cover all four terms of grad school. For some reason, they picked me.

I started my first term with high hopes. They had advanced courses in everything: advanced fluid dynamics, advanced internal combustion, advanced thermodynamics, advanced courses for advanced students. I felt so superior. Studying is much more fun when the class is titled ‘advanced.’ Two years went very quickly. I moved out of the dorms and settled into my own little place near the school. My day started at 9 am, and ended after midnight. I barely had free time. Writing the thesis was extremely painful. The CFD lab life is all fuzzy to me now, but I have a diploma to prove that those two years were not a dream.

Life has a way of kicking you in the butt when you least expect it. The Universe is funny that way.

During the last term of grad school, my father was diagnosed with bladder cancer. It shocked the whole family. The Kim (my dad’s side) and Lee (my mom’s side) families are known for their big figures and good health. We have above average height, huge appetites, and no family history of disease. My father was a smoker for almost forty years, but he had recently quit for the sake of his newborn grandson (grandchildren can do wonders). The diagnosis came only a couple months after the painful detox. He felt betrayed by the world, saying he wasn’t sick for forty years but got sick right after he stopped smoking. I could see the irony. Thankfully, because it was caught at an early stage, he only needed a simple (for cancer) procedure to get rid of the affected area. I don’t think he ever had any big surgeries in his

life. Even if he had, cancer is a strong enough diagnosis to scare anyone. The surgery went well, thank the Universe. The doctor said they had to cut out more of his bladder than they thought, but the cancer hadn't spread to any other part of his body. Good news. I had to go back and forth from Suwon (where my school was) to Seoul, to be at the hospital.

I got busy finishing up my thesis, applying to jobs at every possible company I could find, and looking after my parents. I installed a new DVD player at my parents' house, and bought *The Godfather* trilogy DVD for my dad, who had to take a break from work for the first time in his life. Meanwhile, the job application process was not going very well for me. I didn't hear back from anybody until mid October. "Am I going to be unemployed my first year out of school?" I yelled at the sky.

After awhile, things settled down a bit. I went back to my ordinary school life, working until midnight, editing my thesis for the thousandth time, hitting my head on the desk out of desperation, writing job applications, and so on. On one of the typical working days at the lab, I got another big piece of news that I wasn't expecting: my mother was diagnosed with a colon cancer.

Colon cancer is particularly difficult to diagnose at an early stage, because the colon doesn't have a nerve system to tell the body something's wrong. Fortunately she discovered it during her regular check-up. But this was more serious than my father's. They found out the cancer was already spreading in the region. They needed to remove it right away. They cut parts of her colon (luckily, not much) and found out that she was in the third stage of the cancer. It hadn't spread to other parts of her body yet, but to be cautious they put her on the chemotherapy.

While taking care of my mom, I got some interviews around the country. I spent a few nights at the hospital on the day before the

interviews. She was going to stay in the hospital while I was gone. She needed a longer recovery period than my dad because of the intense surgery. Putting on my suit and makeup in the hospital room seemed quite silly and very important at the same time. My heart was falling apart to see my mom, the strongest person I knew, lying weak and sick in bed like that. I had to harden up to power through the damn interviews.

By the time I got my degree, both of my parents were out of the hospital, and I had gotten several job offers. It seemed like the craziness was finally over. One day, there was a flower basket (the first and last one I've ever gotten) from one of the companies who offered me a job. I had accepted the junior engineer position at a prestigious oil and gas company in Seoul, and started a new chapter of my life. It seemed like the Universe was finally smiling at me and saying, "You made it kid."

Chapter 8

The Story of Bucket Living

Bucket Living is what I call “How to live life fully.” No more making a bucket list, time to spill out the bucket and make life worthwhile.

On January 1, 2009, I started a new phase of my life.

I accepted a junior engineering position at that oil and gas company in Seoul. It was the first real job I’d had that required a contract, included healthcare, and involved a bunch of paperwork. The company was one of the biggest and best in the country, and owned a lot of other business besides the oil and gas plant. The office was located in a rather expensive area of the city, and most of the freshmen who started working there with me were educated at the best schools in the country. It was a high-paying job, so it made sense to have such high-profile coworkers.

The company loved holding extravagant events. They announced the 2009 freshmen employees through a big celebration, inviting all the parents of the 150 freshmen to a fancy ballroom gala. It was one of the ways to show off their money and power. We were told to wear black suits for the event. I wore my one and only pantsuit, the one I’d bought for the interview, and bright yellow leather high heels. Black and yellow—quite classy, don’t you think? It must have been a proud moment for my parents, to see me wearing a grownup suit, attending a company event. At one point, all of the 150 black-

suit-wearing company freshmen were told to line up in front of the CEO and executives on stage. We stood in a straight line across the front, and because the ratio of women was extremely low (only 15 out of 150), the women were positioned in the middle of the group. When I looked down to see if I was in the right place, one thing stood out like a sore thumb—my bright yellow high heels shining among 149 black pairs of shoes. I was also the only girl wearing a pantsuit, and the yellow high heels made me taller than anyone in the group. Great start to a new life, I'd say.

Office life was different from anything I'd done in my life so far. I had to go to work at 8 am sharp, needed to dress in my new professional wardrobe and put on makeup every morning. Even in graduate school when I had to work more than 12 hours a day, I pushed my schedule a few hours back so I didn't have to wake up at 6 am. But I couldn't do that anymore.

Dressing up was kind of fun, though. I enjoyed the sharp sound my high heels made against of the marble floor in the office. I was the very image of a career woman. Getting a paycheck was a great joy as well. It was the biggest paycheck I'd ever gotten. Even after a month of training (meaning no actual work), I still got quite a lot of money. With this kind of money, and my frugality, I could do anything I wanted. The possibilities excited me. However, the excitement was killed sooner than I expected. The very first sign came from my assigned mentor (every freshmen was assigned a mentor).

My brother was studying in the US when I started my new job. Because he had a newborn son (my first nephew), he came back home for a while to spend time with family. For that, I decided to take my very first paid day off as a career woman. I asked my mentor about the procedure. He said, "In my opinion, freshmen only take a day off when they absolutely have to, like if they break an arm or a leg. Even then, I think they have to come to work if they are not in the hospital." He

didn't force me not to take the day off, but it was a passive-aggressive way of saying that I shouldn't. It was only a month after I had been assigned to my new department, and the last thing I want to do was be the odd one out. To him, spending time with my brother who had been away for two years wasn't a good enough reason to take the day off. I guess I'd misunderstood company policy. Work before family, that was the unwritten rule. In the end, I didn't take the day off, and I didn't get to hang out with my brother's family.

Everything takes some getting used to, right? For a few months I tried to fit in, be a good employee, and be the bright person that I am. On a warm spring day, I wore my black pantsuit with a red trench coat I got when I was in graduate school. I was in a phase of getting to know myself back then. I had a passion for color and was developing my own fashion sense. The red trench coat was one of the most expensive pieces of clothing I'd ever bought (about \$100 USD on sale), and it showed off my newly discovered self-confidence. I looked sharp in black and red.

Sometime in the afternoon I got a phone call from Ms. Choi, who was a senior assistant in the mechanical engineering department. She almost whispered, "I'm afraid to inform you that you can't wear your trench coat to work anymore. Mr. Kim (the Vice President of the company) made a comment about it." I looked up. My coat was on the coat rack next to the wall. Apparently, he had seen my brightly colored coat from afar and made a comment about it. Since he is a high-ranking member of the company, everybody tried to track down who the red coat belonged to. They got the answer, and the message came down into the lower levels of the hierarchy and eventually to me. Apparently the bright color was distracting fellow engineers, something that wasn't supposed to happen. I carefully folded my coat and put it in my drawer.

There were also a few nasty comments about my appearance including that guy who'd suggested laser hair removal on my arms, and my cubicle neighbor who told me to buy a skin whitening cream because girls have to be white to look pretty. Just normal everyday conversations, right? Otherwise my life at the company went smoothly. I wasn't the happiest, but I assumed it was because I was still adjusting to the new conditions.

Because I was making a lot of money, I started to make a big list of things I wanted to do. Travel here and there, buy this and that, watch theater shows, and so on. It was an exciting time when I first started getting a big paycheck every month. I bought some new work clothes, joined a gym, gave some money to my parents, and made a savings plan. My list got longer, and I was happy trying new things from the list.

Sometime after the red coat incident, I had a conversation that pushed me over the threshold. Since I was sitting down too much everyday (sometimes 14 hours a day), I wanted to do something fun and active on the weekends. Weekends are more fun when you have more money. I did various activities, and we all shared what we did over morning coffee on Monday. When we were having coffee with a group of senior engineers, one person (let's call him Mr. Lee) proudly made a comment at the end of my weekend story.

"You must not work hard enough during the weekdays. The company gives you the weekend to rest so you can work harder on the weekdays. If you waste your energy playing outside, how can you work hard for the next five days? I slept the whole weekend because I was really tired from the late nights I spent at work last week."

He totally trashed my fun and joyful weekend story, and made himself look like a hard-working hero. Using the weekend to fulfill my personal desires was another taboo I didn't know about. Only one

thing changed after that conversation. When I did do something fun, I never shared it with anyone.

After only three months, I realized this wasn't the job for me. My coworkers and my family expected me to stick with the job for rest of my life, just like all the other people who worked at an office. When I told my father that I got a job offer at this particular company, he said, "That's a place you can work for the next 35 years. Good for you." How can you tell if you want to dedicate 35 years of your life to something even before trying it? I'd never know.

I struggled a lot from the beginning, but I didn't give up at first. This was too good of a position to give up because I didn't think it was the right fit. We Koreans are bad at being quitters, remember? So this was the start of an unhappy phase of my life. I gained weight, lost hair, and built a wall around me.

Strangely, I gained weight without eating a lot. My guess is that it was caused by the amount of stress. Then, like a chain reaction, a chunk of hair fell out of my head every morning. When I went for a haircut at 10 after work one night, my hairdresser was genuinely concerned about my scalp. He said I was losing hair because my scalp was heated from all the stress in my body. Naturally, the next step when you are getting fatter and going bald is to build an emotional wall. That's what I did. I was a fat, bald woman who had locked herself into a deep, unhappy well.

After realizing that I had some issues to deal with, I tried a lot of different things to make myself happy. I really wanted to stick with the company, which offered me a lot of money (about \$40,000 a year). To live a happier and healthier life, I joined the Jazz Dance class at a local dance studio. It turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made. If I hadn't been dedicated to dancing, I would never have made it at the company for two more years. I also went to see a lot of musicals. I was always enthusiastic about theater, but I'd never had

enough money to buy a ticket to see a large-scale show before. With my work money, I treated my mom and aunt several times to the theater. It was good to see them smiling. I also started a travel blog called Runaway Juno. No doubt, that was another excellent move.

Year after year, my workload got heavier and I became more secretive about my private life. I couldn't handle another judgment from coworkers about not being a good employee because I wanted to have my own life after working more than 12 hours a day every single day. I tried hard not to tell anyone about my Jazz Dancing lessons to avoid future problems (they would probably force me to dance in front of everyone at a company event). I tried to look for another job in a different country. But it was the Korean work culture that was the problem, more than the actual job.

I applied to engineering positions in Australia, India, the US, and the UK. I applied to be observatory staff in New Zealand, Australia, and Malaysia. And I even applied to be an English teacher in some places. I never heard back from 80% of them, and the rest of them denied me because they couldn't guarantee a work visa. Also, I needed to get a certificate for my English level. I took both the IELTS and TOFEL, spent \$400, but it became just another line on my resume.

My list of things I wanted to do kept growing these two years, but I hardly had a chance to cross any of the things out. Technically I could get a paid vacation for fifteen days, but not taking more than one day off at a time was another unwritten rule. With this limited vacation plan I couldn't travel anywhere. I made the best of it a few times, but it was never enough to fulfill my adventurous nature. After I took a vacation to Bangkok for four days (two paid holiday, and weekend), I needed to work even harder to make it up for my short holiday. I had another vacation plan over a weekend in May, and that required me to work even harder to make up for being gone. For taking two days off, I needed to work overtime for the entire month,

including weekends. Short vacations like that helped me breathe, but I felt trapped again as soon as I landed at the airport.

One day, after I got back from my May holiday, I had an epiphany. I couldn't find another job because I didn't even have time to sleep. I couldn't make myself happier because I couldn't take a vacation. I had my dancing lessons and travel blog, but it wasn't powerful enough to save me from the pit I was falling into. I went to a café and sat down. My eyes started to tear up. I was so tired, extremely unhappy, and I felt lost. All of this work for what? I am a glass half full kind of person, but I wasn't anymore. I was becoming a person I didn't want to be without realizing it. Day after day, I was busy trying to pick myself up from my fall, and I was forgetting the big picture. *I should do something*, I thought. I couldn't keep making plans and lists I would never accomplish. I had dreams, plans, and high hopes, but I couldn't continue just having them.

I should either stop dreaming, or I should make the dream come true. Which way was it going to be? I could stop dreaming and making plans and hope things would get better, but I'd done this for the last two and a half years with no change. Maybe it was time to stop struggling. But which way should I go? That was the simple but difficult question.

Optimism was a big part of my life, and dreaming helped me achieve a lot of things that I was proud of. Changing myself and dropping my life values might be a short-term solution, but it wouldn't make me happy for very long. It would be irresponsible and cowardly to try to be someone I wasn't. But a dream is a powerful thing. I would never want to give that up. After a long discussion with myself, I decided to choose the latter.

Since I could never stop dreaming, I needed to step up and start crossing things off from the damn list. I wanted to spill the bucket full of things to do. That decision involved quitting my job. I'd

never thought about doing such a thing before. No one else had ever left the office. I had only worked there for two and a half years. What if I was giving up too early? And the most important question, *Can I quit?* I'd never quit a job before. I'd never even thought about quitting a job before. Was I even *allowed?*

The most important factor to consider in making such a big decision was, what was my priority? After I announced my career change, a friction grew between me and everyone around me. I got a lot of emails asking me how I decided to make the leap.

I knew that each title you have (daughter, sister, employee, mother, friend) comes with its own duties, especially in Korean culture. But it is important to keep the balance between these identities and your personal desires, and to keep looking toward the bigger picture. Of course I didn't want to disappoint my parents by quitting the job to do something outrageous, but I couldn't work for another 30 years just to make them happy. In the end, it was my life, not anyone else's. The very simple fact I realized was that I could do whatever I wanted to do in my life. There were humps and challenges named family and society, but in the end, I was the one who was saying no to making the brave move.

I don't advise anyone to jump without thinking about it for a long time. Just like any other big decision in life, it takes time to build up courage. It could be a harder process for you especially if you are from a conservative Asian family. It was, and still is, for me.

Chapter 9

My Mother

The start of my relationship with my mother was just between mother and daughter, but it gradually changed to friendship, like well-aged wine. We daughters are like a life-long support system for our mothers. We share similar challenges, experiences, frustrations, and joy. We share daughterhood, motherhood, and womanhood. We become friends over the years. Maybe not the best of friends, but very trusty friends.

Koreans are not good at expressing emotion. Of course there are differences between individuals, but the general unwritten rule of our society is, *Don't show your emotions*. It's a sign of weakness. The same principle has been applied for thousands of years. That's why you don't hear much in the way of "I love you" or "I miss you" in a typical Korean family, and that's why people don't smile much in public. I surely didn't hear many affectionate expressions when I was growing up. My parents never told me I was smarter than other kids and never complimented my work if there were no major achievements. One time my father was very angry at me because I called myself a genius (I said I wanted to be "a genius astronomer" to be exact). I was just a kid playing, nothing serious. I wasn't overstepping and saying "I'm the only genius in the world." But he yelled at me anyway because he thought I was being ridiculous.

The balance between teaching your children how to be modest and encouraging them to be better is not balanced in Korea. To this

day it still hurts me. I'm not saying I was emotionally abused by my parents, just that we had a very different understanding of how to show affection.

As time goes by and both my parents and I get older, I can see my mom showing her feelings more openly. Lately, she mentioned a few times that she's going to miss having me at home when I leave. It surprised me to realize that we are starting to appreciate each other's company. A few months ago when I was at home between travels, my mom and I flipped through piles of old photos. My parents don't have many photos of them. It was rare to take photos when they were growing up in the 1950s and 60s. Graduations and wedding were the two biggest occasions when they might take photos. They didn't grow up with money, and neither did we, so photos were a luxury. We were a typical working class family, economically slightly below average, but happy. My parents were too busy maintaining everyday life rather than putting photos into albums. Hence, most of the photos ended up in big boxes. The piles of photos were a mixture of my parents when they were young, my grandparents, and tons of my brother and me growing up. There were photos from when we were just born, taking baths, riding bicycles, going on picnics, taking day trips and casual occasions. We could probably make several books out of those photos. I'd never looked through them before, and for the first time in my life I saw many different photos of my mom.

My mother has the heart of a young girl. There's a word in Korean, *sonyea*, which means 'a sweet girl' or 'someone really pure.' That's her. She's sixty-five but she has the innocent laugh of a seven-year-old. But I didn't always see this side of her. To me, she was always just a mother. She must have been a kid at some point, and a dazzling young woman once, but I only knew her as my mom, someone who always stayed at home and took care of us. She didn't own a lot of clothes, and she didn't go to the hair salon. Her ears

weren't pierced, and she didn't wear a single piece of jewelry. Maybe that's why seeing old photos of her dressed up felt special to me.

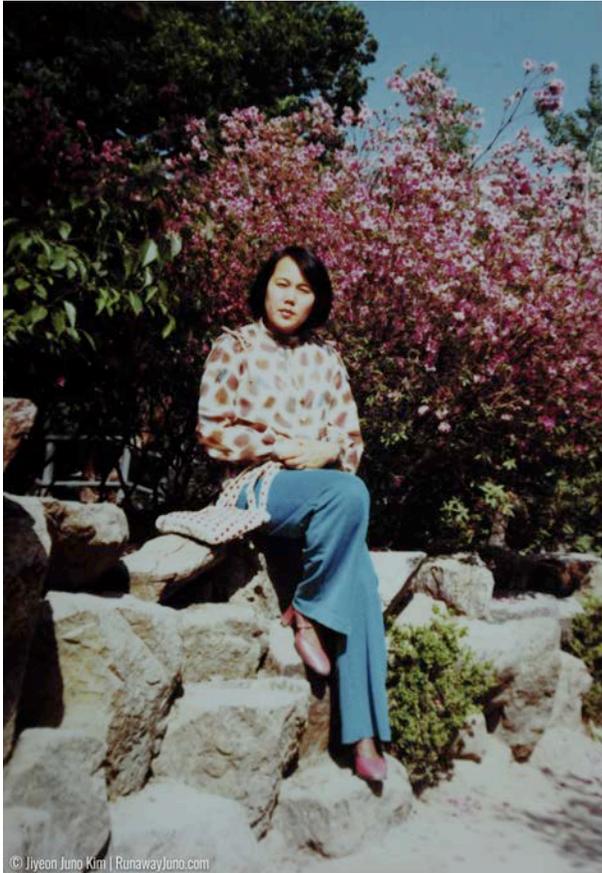


Figure 5 My mother. Isn't she beautiful?

There weren't many photos of her, but I could see how happy a person she was. It was very uncommon to take pictures with silly facial expressions back then (and even now), but I found a few of my mom being silly. The amazing thing was, her facial expressions from thirty years ago were exactly the same as mine now. I could tell, without looking at a mirror. It was totally me. It's very natural when

you think about it. She raised me for over 18 years, and we looked at each other almost every day. It's only logical that I wear my mother's expressions now. I found it strangely satisfying to realize how alike we looked. And it's not just our faces. Our height and figures are very similar, too. We used to joke that people could easily reunite us by our resemblance, even if we were separated in the Korean War.

I admired my mother's fashion sense from what I saw in the old photos. Now I tease her a lot because she wears *ajumma* (old Korean lady) style clothes that I don't really like. But they're comfortable for her, so I'm okay with it. She is a tall woman (now you know where I got that height), and I could tell she was very stylish back in the day. She liked bright colors (she still does). She would wear clothes that went well with her height: boots, a trench coat, and long hair. She saved a few of these old clothes for me: Her brown leather boots, trench coat, and shoulder bag are now in my closet. No surprise, I look pretty good in them. I'm taller and bigger than her, but I got her looks after all. My mom looked very graceful and stylish when she was my age. I'm thinking maybe she had a better sense of fashion than I do now. Sometimes I wonder why she didn't teach me how to dress better!

It was a subtle joy. To know the fact I've got a lot of my mother in me made me happy. Biologically, emotionally and spiritually, I am a lot like my mom. There were a few photos of her in the mountains and at temples when she went hiking. Photos of her with a backpack reminded me of myself, naturally. My mom always seems to glow when flowers and trees are around. She has the greenest thumb I've ever seen; she can revitalize a dying plant within a few days. When I was little, she even brought dozens of orchids to bloom, types that don't bloom that often. Now that she's older, working with plants is too physical and tiring for her, but she still has a love of plants in her soul. I always wondered where I got this adventurous nature from, and

now I know the answer. Both my mom and I love being around flowers and trees. When I was young, we would travel to the mountains. When I was about 8 or 9, we climbed *Seoraksan* (a mountain in *Gangwondo* province) all the way to the top, and I have a photo to prove the glorious moment.

While we were looking through the album, I realized one more thing: I was her little girl. She was always protective and caring of me. There were a lot of photos of me in her arms. As the youngest in the family, I always needed to be taken care of, and she was the one who did it.

My family isn't the biggest fan of my current lifestyle, but my mom has always been my secret admirer. She waited a long time for me to come around, I suppose. I wasn't the easiest kid to deal with when I was a teenager. I was a stubborn kid being raised by a strict father. Maybe because she always believed in me she would cover for me when I did something out of ordinary. Nothing bad, but something normal kids in Korea wouldn't do. I had so many interests that I wanted to experience for myself (for example, going to a Christian church or staying overnight at a stargazing gathering). Even back then, she knew there was no chance my father would understand my desires. They said no to a lot of things I wanted, but it didn't stop me, really. But my mom was the tougher parent when I was little. Koreans often describe their father as a tiger and their mother as a rabbit, but my mom was definitely a tiger. She had clear guidelines for saying yes and no to her children. Once, my brother was punished (for something he did, I was really young back then) on the staircase of our old house, only wearing underpants. But now she is the softy with endless support.

After she got diagnosed with colon cancer, her views on life changed a lot. She was a typical Korean who struggled to make a better living for her family as the post-Korean war generation. She's

tougher than any man, very intelligent and brave, but despite her desire for adventure, she always thought it wasn't in the cards for her. After she had the surgery, her attitude slowly changed. She finally realized we only live life once, and we are entitled to do what we want. Because she's a traditional Korean, the idea of 'whatever we want' doesn't stretch very far, but at least she has a better understanding of my desires.



Figure 6 My mother

No matter how much she supports my decision to travel, she has a very little understanding of what I do online. Not because she doesn't want to, it's just that she isn't familiar with computers, and anyway, all the computer lingo is in English. It would be a whole new world for her to learn. Words like 'website,' 'blog,' 'wifi,' and 'press trip' always puzzle her. But over the years she's tried hard to get to know my job

better. One day she asked me if there was any way she could see what I do (meaning, look at my websites) by calling somewhere with her cell phone. She was thinking of the logic behind phone banking. She thought if she could do all the bank business by phone, why not look at a website. This was not a smartphone by the way. Her asking this adorable question meant the world to me. My next project at home is going to be teaching her how to use a computer. It will be challenging, but I'm sure she'll do fine.



Figure 7 I was her little girl

My mom may never see my websites on her own, but she will see me standing tall and reaching my goal. Now I know for sure that she will be there, no matter when and where. She will always be my supporter. The path I'm walking on is not even. But now I know my limits are a lot higher than I thought. I often ask myself, *What would my mom do?* in small and big situations. I feel stronger, because I'm

more certain that I am the daughter of my mother, the strongest woman I know.

When I made my decision to quit my job to travel and hit that hard wall of negativity from society, including my family, it made me bitter. I temporarily forgot that I had my mom on my side. I think of myself as an easy-to-please kind of person with a glass half-full attitude, but it was very hard to power through back then. Friends who were on my side kept telling me that my family still cared about me even though I couldn't feel it at that time. Honestly I was skeptical about the future. My mom was sad that I wanted something more than an average (easy) life like everyone else had, but she understood my point of view. The relationship between my family and me is still not perfect, but we understand each other better. After all, we have known each other the longest in our lives. We've known each other for 20-some years and we still have many decades to go. Since the relationship is going smoother now, my mom is openly supporting my decisions. She's living her life through me, watching me take risks and do the things she didn't have the opportunity to do. I'm making her life more fulfilled.

One funny thing about my mom, she has a thing for pigeons. She has been feeding pigeons on our roof deck ever since I can remember. She always saved leftover rice or old grain to feed them. Sometimes she carried a bag of rice for the street pigeons. Nowadays it's frowned upon to feed pigeons since so many people hate them (their argument is that they keep coming back if you feed them. As if they harm anything?). But how can I convince my mother not to? It is her way of loving the world and animals. Now that I'm traveling she has more reason to feed the pigeons. It's become one of her little rituals. Birds, or pigeons, are the symbol of free spirits who fly and travel. She says

The World is Waiting

Jiyeon Juno Kim

she talks to the birds when she feeds them, and tells them to keep an eye on me if and when they see me. It is one of her ways of loving me.

Chapter 10

My Brother

The first twelve years of my life story wouldn't be complete without mentioning my brother. Jay K, now a furiously tall and muscly guy who is a Major in the Republic of Korea Army, was my best friend for the first twelve years of my life. Well, at least I thought he was. He might just think that I was following him around. He's not the warmest, most talkative, or softest person you'll ever meet, but he is a responsible and protective person, as an older brother should be. And it doesn't change the fact that he was a very important person in my childhood.

I was born three years after him. According to my mom, he took care of me pretty well when I was a baby. There are several photos to prove that he really did. We had one more brother-like figure when we were growing up: the cousin who lived near the chicken shop. Let's call him Lee. He's the only child of my mom's younger brother. His family and mine lived near each other. Our families went on vacation together, celebrated holidays together and we always spent time together. We three were like brothers and sister. I really liked having two big brothers. I'm not sure they liked having a baby sister around.

Jay K and Lee were born only months apart. They were equally tall and smart, with two very opposite personalities. My brother is an outgoing person with a loud voice. He's enthusiastic and eats a ton fast and loud. His laughter can be heard from miles away. On the other

hand, Lee is more restrained. He's quiet and shy. Believe it or not I was more like Lee growing up. Because of our glasses and personality, people thought he and I were brother and sister, not my own brother and me.

The three of us shared a lot of hobbies. One of our favorites was going to the bookstore. It wasn't just any typical bookstore; it was the *Kyobo* and *Youngpoong*. These weren't like the typical bookstores we knew. Here, we could sit and read as much as we wanted right in the store. It was a groundbreaking discovery for book nerds like us. I don't remember exactly how many trips we made every week, but we were there pretty often. It took us about half an hour by bus to get there. Sometimes we walked all the way, but it was pretty far for kids. When we went, I settled down in the children's section (I was seven or eight years old). I liked reading novels, biographies, and history books. I knew all about Admiral Lee, Helen Keller, Thomas Edison, and many other famous people. We sometimes competed with each other to see who read more books. Since I was only reading children's books and I was (and am) a fast reader, I could read seven books in one sitting. I don't remember who won, but I'm pretty sure I did. On rare occasions, we bought books with the gift certificates we got for our birthdays. I never wanted anything more than those gift certificates. I'm starting to think we were pretty good kids.

If you grew up in Korea in the 90's, you probably know the quiz show that ran every afternoon: *Quiz Adventure Mysterious World* 퀴즈탐험 신비의세계. It was a quiz show about animals somewhere awesome like Africa. There were four celebrities who answered quizzes about animals and nature. The quizzes usually came with amazing footage from the wild. Watching the show was another of our favorite activities. It was always on on weekdays, accompanied by a charismatic original score (more dramatic than *The Lion King* theme

song). We were glued to the TV during the program. Later on, they published a series of books containing the quizzes from the show. Even though we watched that show every day, we still bought the books and quizzed each other in our free time.

Like all kids, we loved to play games. Growing up with two older brothers affected me, maybe. I still like games (explains my short but strong obsession with online role playing games). My mom got us a video game device named *Jamix* that looked like a red plastic speedo, no kidding. We got a 32-game pack from Yongsan Electronic Center, where you can find all kinds of electronics. My brother was good at arcade games, but I was more of a role-playing game kind of gal. There was a game about a guy with a gun who entered apartment buildings by a long wire hung down from the rooftop. He went door to door by the elevator. I thought he was the good guy and the people at the apartment were the bad ones, but now that I think of it, he was just a thief killing civilians. The graphics were basic, just green and black lines and shapes. It was the 90's after all. I loved it.

We also played board games like Blue Marble. It was our absolute favorite. This was basically the same as Monopoly but on a global scale. You could actually buy whole cities. There were four different sets of colored cities: yellow, green, blue, and pink. Yellow was the cheapest (Manila and Cairo) and pink was the most expensive (Seoul and Jeju—after all the game was made in Korea). There was a deserted island that you had to be stranded on for at least three turns or until you rolled doubles. Space travel could take you to any land you wanted, and there was a deck of mission cards. It was such a simple game, but we loved it. For several hours, we bought, sold, argued, manipulated, and all other activities on just a little board with fake money.

Until he started high school, my brother and I were inseparable. High school is the most intense level of education in Korea. Because he was a good student with a great attitude and high GPA, he got into an advanced studies program that lasted until 10 or 11 at night. I was in middle school at the time. I don't even remember seeing him during those three years. After all that hard study, he got into one of the top schools in the country: The Korean Army Academy. It was a high honor for the family. The acceptance meant the person was qualified both intellectually and physically. Four weeks before admission, they allowed students to reevaluate their decision to join them. I've heard those four weeks are the hardest time in the entire four years of training. My brother successfully passed the four weeks and became a proud student at the Army Academy (and lost 8 kg).

With Jay K living in the dormitory at the school, and me starting high school, we barely saw each other for another four years. Time passed. He successfully graduated from the Academy, and I got into the engineering school in Ajou University (early admission, yay me). I went on my backpacking trip to New Zealand in my third year of University, and he got married soon after.

We never spent much time together again until after we both graduated and were living our adult lives. I went down to see his family on the east coast of Korea after I had that big argument with my father. My brother wasn't a fan of my decision either. He is a conservative army man after all. We talked over beer and fried chicken, about the big and small unpleasant incidents I experienced at work, and the big question, *Why can't I be happy?* He heard what I had to say, and surprisingly agreed with my philosophy. Soon after, I found out that he talked to my parents without me, trying to understand them. It was a good feeling to have him half on my side. We communicated through emails while I was on the road soon after the big argument with my parents, after I quit my job. Sometimes we

talked about big life decisions, and the paths we were on. I found out later that he admired my lifestyle and the freedom of my choice. I was living like a rebel, but he was glad I was looking for what I truly wanted in life.



Figure 8 Our favorite photo of three of us

My brother had never taken a break, ever since he started that advanced class in high school. Then he got into The Korean Military Academy (KMA), one of the toughest schools to graduate from. I'm sure that wasn't anything like the university life I had (not that I did anything crazy, but at least I could wear whatever I wanted). He got married soon after graduation, and now he is a father of two energetic sons who look exactly like him. All these decisions were made by him one way or another, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have any regrets. In life we make choices without knowing what's going to

happen, and just try our best to make it better. He is certainly trying hard to this day.

I remember that he reached a breaking point during his sophomore year at KMA. We were talking about it at a book rental store (I told you we read a lot) while picking out books. He was serious about quitting the KMA and applied to another University. This small crisis of his clashed with my parents. They were so worried that he wouldn't get into another university because he already spent two years at KMA. Two years is such a brief moment in our lives, but it was critical for them I presume. They were also concerned that he might look like a quitter if he dropped out from such an honored school. If he had studied in a different country with more open social conventions, he would have turned his life around and become a successful somebody with all his people skills. But instead, he went back to school. My breaking point must have reminded him about his moment ten years ago.



Figure 9 We were always big on seafood

We were a good pair. He was a teaser, and I was the stubborn one. We fought, mostly with me ending up crying, so many times a day. He called me fat more than enough times (I think he still does), made me carry home the big stacks of comic books we would rent, and gave me a bruise from time to time. He was not always nice to me, but I'm really glad I had him to share my childhood with. I can't imagine little Jiyeon without Jay K. From the moment I was too young to remember, he was always on my side. After all, we will have a longer friendship with each other than with any of our other friends.

Now both of us are grown ups, living completely different lifestyles. He is a father of two sons while serving our country, and I, the rebel, am not living in Korea and trying to make my way out in the wild world. But it's good to know he is on my side, quietly rooting for my success.

Chapter 11

My Very First Fan: My Grandmother

My (maternal) grandmother, Jang Maedan, was the very first person to influence me and believed in who I really was. I have very fond memories of her.

She was very tall. She liked her pink-flowery shirts and brown pants. She had a big appetite, was a great cook, was a Catholic, and she loved me very much. She had five grandchildren from her three children: two boys from the oldest son, one boy and a girl (me) from her only daughter, and one boy from her youngest son. Among the five, I was her favorite. Everyone knew it. Maybe because I was the only girl, or maybe because I was the youngest.

Whenever she visited us she stayed in my room with me. My room was the biggest in the house, and maybe it was the only appropriate room for her to stay in, but we liked our nights together. Sadly, I don't remember any intimate conversations we shared because I was too young to remember.

She could make any kind of cuisine and side dishes. Her *ganjang gyejang* (marinated raw crabs) are the best I've ever had. Our fridge was always full when she visited us. She cooked up marinated sesame leaves (my favorite side dish), half-open cockles with mixed vegetable, lotus flower root, and so many more great dishes. I got my love of cooking from my grandmother. Maybe I was just mimicking her, but it stuck with me to this day. Now my mom is continuing the

tradition of making great dishes, but we both miss my grandmother's cooking from time to time.



Figure 10 My grandmother and me, and my cousins

My grandmother gave me many interesting assignments when I was a kid. I used to pluck her gray hairs for 100 won per piece. She had permed hair, just like all the other Korean grandmothers, and one or two gray hairs were quite noticeable among her beautiful thick black hair. We always hung out at my uncle's house, two blocks away from ours. I remember we used to sit in their living room on hot summer days while I went through her hair like she was a baby monkey.

One of our biggest projects was killing cockroaches! It was common to see cockroaches in the houses fifteen years ago, even though we did everything we could to catch them. One day, my grandmother decided to kill them all by hunting down their home turf. All the cockroach-killing chemicals weren't good enough. Did I

mention? She was a strong and fearless woman. We were at my uncle's house. We started from the kitchen since that was the darkest and most likely place for the cockroaches to have a home. We moved the stove and cabinets to the side and smashed a lot of them using shoes and newspapers. The day was so memorable I wrote about it in my drawing journal in my first grade class. It was so disgusting and horrifying but I enjoyed it nonetheless because it was a project between me and my grandmother. I still vividly remember her pink floral shirts and perm-hair that day. I don't think I could kill so many cockroaches like that now, but I was pretty good at it back then.

There was a field day at my elementary school once a year in May, the most beautiful month in Korea. There were a lot of activities for the kids: sprints, long distance running, relay races, traditional games, and a parade. I wasn't really good at any of them but my two brothers were. Also there were a few activities we had to do with our parents. My grandmother was very active so she often participated the games. All of the families watched the games they ate their picnics. My family and my uncle's family made a big picnic on the field day because three of us, my brother, my cousin and I all attended the same school. My grandmother often joined us. The field day was a lot of fun and food was a big part of it. We always had the biggest food basket. With three children with huge appetites from families with big appetites we could do a lot of damage.

My grandmother didn't always live with us. She stayed with her oldest son on the other side of town. It was always a sad day when she left us after a few days' visit. One time, when my mom had called a taxi for my grandmother, I jumped and got in it first like I was going with her. "This is not for us, this is for your grandmother. She's leaving," my mother said. Those words sounded so sad. They had to drag me out of

the cab. I remember I cried my eyes out in broad daylight in front of the neighborhood bakery. That scene repeated itself quite a few times. Growing up in a male-centered society (where just the boys got all the attention), being a favorite child to someone was a very special feeling for me. I never felt that after she was gone.

My grandmother was raised Catholic. She didn't go to church every weekend, but she always attended big religious events. She was the one who introduced me to the Catholic Church. There was one big Catholic Church in my neighborhood that I never went to without her. My father's side of family is Buddhist, but my mother used to be Catholic growing up as well. My grandmother took me to church on Easter Sunday and I had my first Easter egg (just a boiled egg but coated with colors). I always wanted to eat the potato chip-looking food they handed out from the altar after mass, but apparently that was only for the real Catholics (and it was the holy communion host, not a potato chip anyway). My grandmother always wore a veil on her head at church. It was a size of a handkerchief. I liked how she looked with her veil, so peaceful.

The last ten years of her life were tough. Kidney disease destroyed her bit by bit. It must have broken my mom's heart to see her own mother fight so hard for life. After a long battle with kidney disease, she left us on Lunar New Year's Eve in 2009, before seeing the new year.

Celebrating her strength and positive influence on my life is my way of missing her and saying sorry. I wasn't the best granddaughter during the last years of her life. Because I was so caught up in my own life with study and job hunting, I neglected a lot of people in my life, and she was one of the unfortunate casualties. After facing my parents' cancers, I was not good at dealing with funerals and sick people anymore. When she was sick, I went to see her several times in her room at my uncle's house (she lived there for

a while and they didn't treat her well) and it nearly broke my heart. I couldn't stand to see my beloved grandmother, who I hadn't been able to spend much time with for the last ten years, under the dark shadow of death.

We sprinkled her ashes under a tree we planted for her up on the small hill my uncle bought. It was a sad day, but everyone was relieved that she could finally rest. I think we all felt a bit of peace after the ceremony.



Figure 11 I always set next to my grandmother

I often thought about her when I went through difficult times with my parents over the career change. She would have been the biggest support and on my side if she was still with us. Maybe she couldn't have understood what I wanted with my life, my blog, and the industry I wanted to work in, but I knew she would have supported me no matter what just because that was what I wanted. She always took my side when my older brothers teased me. She stood up for me even

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when I did something wrong. Not that I needed validation for my adult decision, but it would've been great to know that at least one family member trusted me and wished me success. She would've been so happy to get my postcards from all around the world, bragging about me to her friends at Ahyeon market, and maybe we could've gone on a trip together.

I hope I'm making her proud.

Chapter 12

Stephen

Throughout the book, I've continuously mentioned there being someone with me, but never really extended any explanation. That's because I thought that the word 'boyfriend' was childish and there was no other word to describe him. I also didn't want to go on and on about someone, only to have it not work out. It would've been a cruel reminder sitting on my digital bookshelf. But now I'm happy to say that he will be my lawfully wedded husband soon. So I guess it's safe to expand on some stories about us at this point.

His name is Stephen and we met on Valentine's Day four years ago. I know, typical. Met on Valentine's Day, and blah blah blah... happily ever after. But give me a chance, it's a great story!

As with any good romance, it happened when we least expected it. It wasn't the best period of my life — I was unhappy with my high-pressured job as a mechanical engineer in Seoul. Do you remember the time when my co-worker told me to have laser hair-removal on my arms? Good times. Writing for my travel blog, Runaway Juno, was my only escape from daily life. From the stories I've heard, Stephen wasn't having the best time of his life either.

That Valentine's Day afternoon, my travel blogging friend, L, in NYC, tweeted me that I should meet her friend who was in town. I didn't know much about him but I was always up for meeting someone

interesting. He was writing for Bohemian Traveler and Gomad Nomad Travel Mag online. But I couldn't find any photos of him on his social media channels or his blog. There was only a blurry photo of him at night standing under a streetlight. The only information I got from that photo was that he was a human man. What a mysterious man, I thought. I sent him a few tweets where to meet and how to recognize me.

I arrived at Anguk Station on time. I saw a few foreign faces walking by, but I had no clue how to recognize him. I guessed he was late. I started reading my book: *The Game of Thrones*. It was hot in town. After a while, I saw a shadow on my book, and a man said hello. We shook hands, and went out for dinner.

We had *bibimbab*, his favorite Korean dish. We were on Insadong Street, so we had plenty of options for good food. I liked that he was passionate about Korean cuisine. I've met so many foreigners who complain about the lack of good pizza and burgers in Korea (duh?!). Then we walked along the Chunggyecheon River, and went to a coffee shop to grab a hot cup of tea. It was cold and icy, and I was wearing high heels and a suit. I found Stephen quite interesting and unusual — I'd never met someone who had traveled as much as him, and couldn't help but notice that he was quite cute. We had another dinner and tea the next day, and then he returned back home to the US.

Sad, I know. But our story didn't end there.

Physical proximity isn't necessary for a relationship anymore. We are living in the times of the World Wide Web! We took advantage of technology and continued our relationship via Skype, Twitter, email, and every other mode of long-distance communication we could think of. The amount of conversation we had was just astonishing. We talked a lot despite the big time difference.

A few months later, I finally took that leap of faith and left my job for world travel. You know, the Bucket Living. I handed my resignation over and ended that chapter of my life. In June 2011, I exited my office building for the last time, and boarded a plane to the US one week after. Stephen and I have been traveling together ever since.



Figure 12 Conquering Salkantay Trek in Peru

We spent the most beautiful summer on the east coast of the US. We camped, hiked, drank micro-brewed beers, went to beaches,

ate a lot of classic American food (for me, mostly), and Stephen introduced me to his friends and family. Everyone was so nice to me, and I liked the American culture. Stephen's family have welcomed me with open arms since day one. When I was having a rough time with my own parents, they comforted and supported me like one of their own. I couldn't have got through the transition time without their support. But all good things come to an end — I had to return to Korea before my 90-day tourist visa ran out.

After that it wasn't easy to find a time and place for us to be together, as we have two different nationalities (not to mention that the US has very strict visa rules). But since we were both working location-independently, we could go and live anywhere we wanted. With that in mind, we embarked on another big trip in December of that year, starting in Hong Kong.

Traveling full-time was all new to me. Stephen had been traveling for much of the last decade, and had visited about fifty countries at that point (he's up to seventy-something now). Although I was a seasoned backpacker for Korean standards, I was still a baby traveler in the wild world.

Without realizing, we became something called digital nomads. Travel and work were synonymous. We traveled full-time, while managing our online businesses. Working location-independently means that we have to spend as much time on our laptops as we do traveling, but at least it give us opportunities to visit some of the most incredible places on earth. Creating memories with someone special is important. We ate the finest gelato in Italy, stayed at a private eco-lodge in the French Pyrenees, survived a 3rd class Indian train, accidentally ate lots of animal intestines in China, and saw the Northern Lights in Iceland. What memories! We have so many insider jokes and references, that sometimes I wonder what I would do without him, because life would be so dull.

As much as we spent time with Stephen's family in the US, we visited my parents back in Seoul. It seemed like the right thing to do since it was quite clear that he wasn't going to be a short fling. I was a bit worried about bringing him home because my relationship with my family still wasn't so smooth. Also there's the whole non-Korean thing — what if my parents wouldn't accept him because he's not Korean? I had never had any personal experience of it, but there are so many stories like that from TV! You know what Mrs. Kim said to Lane (a little Gilmore Girls reference for ya). And Stephen can't speak Korean.

The fact that a daughter brought a man home was a big deal in the first place, and he was even a foreigner — so it was a huge deal, believe me. But I guess that cordiality goes a long way without words. Stephen is a very nice man, and my parents could see that. They got along pretty well. I was worried that they might treat Stephen poorly because they were not happy with me, but actually they were very hospitable. Stephen might tell you a different story, but at least I felt that way.

He also earned huge points from the female members of my family with his domestic skills. You know how traditional men are in Korea. If you don't, just know that the kitchen is not an area they touch. The main reason why I have a love-hate relationship with the Korean holidays is because there's so much work to do for me and my mom. But here Stephen was, doing all the things that typical Korean men don't: setting the table, doing the dishes, cleaning the house, and so on. And he even likes to cook! Point scored for Stephen.

Our life story might sound like a fairytale, but it hasn't always been easy to maintain a relationship. We're not in the same category as a normal couple and we have very real, very different challenges. We've had to spend months apart after traveling together intimately for

much of a year. The void after that was hard to fill. On the other hand, traveling together means spending every waking moment together. So we had to learn to respect one another's space. It was not the easiest thing I've done. We hit a few rough moments along the way, but have made adjustments as we've grown together over the last four years.

I can't picture my life without Stephen. I'm glad I don't have to. He was, and still is, an always steady influence on me. We've traveled to 30 countries together since we met. During that time, we've both gone through a lot of different periods. He's seen me in my most vulnerable moments, and he also knows my weaknesses and strengths. He believes in me, and supports me as much as he can. He was standing beside me during the whole AWE conference that I organized (more on that later).



Figure 13 Exploring Bhutan together

I've learned so much about travel and the world from him. I would never have had any interest to learn about such things as Art Deco or

Art Nouveau if it weren't for him. I'm not really advanced in the whole art department. And he's freakishly good at planning trips. It's like magic looking at him scheduling our Europe trip day-by-day. But it's also been my joy introducing him to the world of Carl Sagan, Stephen Hawking, Richard Feynman, and a lot of my other odd and interesting pleasures.

We are two very different individuals, but we are always developing a way to work well together.

Our story finishes with a happy ending. We got married on March 29 in Seoul, where we first met. We wore traditional clothes for the traditional Korean ceremony.



Figure 14 Our wedding photo

A lot has happened during the last five years (next Valentine's Day will be our 5th anniversary!). Relationships aren't easy; they're like a fine art. You have to keep developing yourself, and trust your sense of vision. I've shed a good amount of tears (to be fair, I cry a lot),

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but I wouldn't exchange anything for the joy that I've shared with Stephen.

Part 4. Bucket Living

“Nobody ever figures out what life is all about,
and it doesn't matter.
Explore the world.
Nearly everything is really interesting
if you go into it deeply enough.”

— Richard P. Feynman

Chapter 13

“What Makes you Travel?”

People often ask me why I travel.

Because... it's cool? I want to get more stamps on my passport? Meet new people? See different landscapes? Find inspiration?

What makes me travel? What makes me want to constantly move?

That was one of the questions I got from my family who didn't really understand the reason behind all the traveling I wanted to do. My answer was, “Because I learn.” And I got the sarcastic feedback, “What could you possibly learn?” and “Why does it matter?” Well, good questions.

Trying new foods, seeing new places, meeting different kinds of people, and all the other ‘new’ experiences—all of that excites me. I used to think the excitement and the desire for the new was the motivation behind my travels. It was, and still is, but that's not everything.

After three years of constant moving, I realized what really kept me going. It was finding the similarities and differences among all of us. No matter where you are, you eat, you sleep, you get dressed, you cook, you laugh, and you love. We fight, we argue, we criticize, and we compete, but all of us humans are just trying to live in this

world. We are all same. There are only the subtle differences in *how* we do it.

As a Korean from an isolated peninsula with its own culture, food and language, I always thought my country was really different and unique from any other place in the world. Foreigners couldn't possibly like our food, understand our culture, or know about our history. How could they? And why would they? It felt so obvious that foreigners wouldn't be able to use chopsticks or other things in Korea. But I was wrong. Plenty of our 'unique' cultural aspects were from many other foreign countries. It was quite shocking to me when I first realized such facts. For example, the sauna (*jjimjilbang*) we adore so much is actually from Finland, not originated in Korea. It seems like such an Asian thing, but hey, Finland is cold. It makes sense. I also found out that Latvians cherish buying foods from their local markets, rather than supermarkets. Fresh meat, seafood, and poultry are easy to find in their open-air market, just like in Korea. I felt at home when I saw a basket full of fish eggs and dried fish.



Figure 15 Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan, China

In New Zealand, I met an English guy in Franz Josef. We wrote down each other's contact information in our journals (yes, it was the time before smartphone and frequent use of email), and he drew a hibiscus tree next to his name. He said he had hibiscus tree in his backyard and remembered that I said it was Korea's national flower. I didn't even know hibiscus grew outside of Korea. I mean, it made sense, but it was such a new concept for me back then. We Koreans, we're not so 'unique' after all. We're all the same around the globe, trying our best to survive one way or another. That's what I learned.

The shock allowed me to look at the world with a fresh perspective. Since then I've realized that discovery is an exciting thing. By learning about other cultures and digging deeper, I learn more about my own culture and customs. Comparing and contrasting, I guess that's the key to any kind of good education. If you don't look at a lot of great photography, you won't know what makes it good. To be a better photographer, you have to have a big knowledge database. To understand better about who you are and where you come from, you have to learn other cultures as well.

It was easy to see the connection between Korea and other East Asian countries like China and Japan. Our ancestors always considered China our big brother. However, it's not easy to connect the dots with other countries like Finland or Latvia, far, far away across oceans and continents. The subtle differences and similarities I see between how we think and do the same things, that makes me very excited.

For a long time, the whole time while I was growing up, I dreamt about the 'different' world I lived in. In some way, I always thought we were a unique minority, and it was quite true to be honest. However, we're not so unique anymore, now that I've seen people around the world doing the same things we do at home. Homes in

rural areas in many countries look a lot like what I'd seen in Korea. Thatched roofs, firewood stoves, chickens and ducks in the yard.



Figure 16 One of my favorite places in the world, Alaska

In Finland I joined the tall blond people sitting in the sauna. It was a new scene but it felt like home. I wondered if seeing a dark-haired Asian girl sitting in the hot sauna like nobody's business was strange for the old Finnish men too. How Italians feel strongly about their food culture is just like us. Polish sauerkraut is just different version of *kimchi* and they can't live without it either. Bhutanese mothers carry their babies on their backs, just like my mom did. Dumplings, one of the most popular foods around the world that Koreans call *mandoo*, can be found in different forms in a lot of countries like Mongolia, Russia, Turkey, Poland, China, and others.

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Now I know there are plenty of foreigners who love Korean cuisine, enjoy the floor-based lifestyle (sitting and eating on the floor), and understand my language. And I'm no different. I enjoy other cultural aspects of different countries, just like them.

We are all the same and different. That makes the world interesting.

Chapter 14

English Sucks but I Love It Dearly

“Why are you writing in English?” is one of the most frequent questions I get. The short answer is I want to share my experience with more people. It takes a lot of effort to write the stories, so why not share them with a wider audience than if I just wrote in Korean?

Here’s the long answer

My first encounter with English was back in 2004 when I went to New Zealand. (I told you traveling to New Zealand changed my life in many ways). Here I had my very first extended conversations with real native English speakers. I could communicate about everyday topics, ask how they were, what they did, what they thought about the weather, and where they were from—stuff like that. But I wasn’t good enough yet to have an in-depth conversation, like about my school, my plans, and my life. So I kept trying and learning. All the endless effort finally paid off since I’m delivering this message to you in English! Not only did I get fluent in body language during that time, but I also got to learn a few things about this complex language. Now after years of practice I have a bone to pick.

Why are there no rules in English? In other words, why there are so many *different* rules in English? Why does the past tense of a word sometimes end in *-ed*, and sometimes the entire word changes?

Why is the past tense of *eat ate*, not *eated*? Why does *go* change to *went*, not *goed*? Does anyone have the answer?

Why is /a/ sometimes spelled with *a* and sometimes with *e* or *ai*? Why is the *k* in knife silent? Why is Kansas pronounced *Kansas* and Arkansas pronounced *Arkansau*? Actually I solved this question with the help of one of my readers from Facebook, who is from Arkansas. Kansas is an English name but Arkansas is from the French pronunciation of a Native American language, so the *s* is silent.

All issues aside, using English improved my life in a lot of different ways. It gave me the freedom to express myself directly. My mother tongue, Korean, is an implicit language. Passive-aggressive, even. Korean society used to be divided into social levels when the country was ruled by a royal family. The more educated people—called *yangban* in Korean—were usually scholars, land owners, and politicians, and were expected to act serious at all times. Walk slow, talk slow (in low tones), eat slow, hold their hands behind their backs when they walk (to indicate they didn't have to carry anything), and have a serious face all the time. Show no emotion, act cool. They even danced super slow. Frolicking and laughing were the behaviors of common people—*sangnom* in Korean, a word that holds a negative meaning. *Sangnom* were those who usually couldn't read and were farmers or servants at a *yangban's* house. That tradition continued for many centuries. There's technically no ranking system anymore, but now everyone is expected to behave like *yangbans* from the old days. Expressing myself in English means I can get away from having to act like a *yangban*.

English gave me the freedom of speech to express my thoughts and feelings. If you are fluent in a language other than your own, you'll understand what I'm talking about. Don't get me wrong; I'm proud of speaking *hanguel* (the Korean language), and I recognize that this is one of the most beautiful and unique languages in the world.

We have more than 50 words to describe the color red. But it isn't the best language for being explicit. Not because of how the language is, but because of how we use it. I love that it's so easy to express feelings in English. It feels natural to smile, laugh, respond, and be affectionate in my English speaking and writing. In Korean? Not so much. Photos of me through the years show the change in my facial expressions. I was smiling so cute in early childhood, looked serious with glasses and a rigid face through my teenage years, until university, and then I finally found myself, me right now. I was walking on the path toward becoming a *yangban*, but then I realized how boring it was, and how wasted my life would be if I couldn't express my feelings. I wanted to smile, laugh, talk loud, and just have fun. What was wrong with that?

When I'm using English, I feel more alive and creative. Maybe I just feel freer speaking another language. But my English is far from perfect. Actually, it's quite humorous what I do with it sometimes. I use odd expressions like "well-educated dog" (to describe a well-behaved dog), corn-beard (corn-husks), snoozing (napping), baby cats, and baby frogs (tadpoles). Because this is not my native language, I don't have a natural feel for what's right and wrong. Many native English speakers couldn't explain why certain grammar (or expressions) were wrong when I asked. They could just feel it. If you asked me technical questions about Korean I'd answer the same way. Maybe because of the lack of grammar lessons, I feel freer to create odd sentences and expressions.

My first writing gig in English was back in 2009, when I got the offer to contribute about Seoul on the Traveldudes.org website, I was happy but also worried. Besides a short abstract on my Master's Thesis and a few emails, I'd never written an article in English. But I was in full travel writer mode when I got the offer. There was no money involved, but I wanted to get into the community by contributing

about a lesser-known destination. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be, and it got harder.

Writing in a second language has been something that I struggle with to this day. It's something that I wasn't trained in properly. It feels more natural now, several years after I first started, but I still can't write exactly what I feel sometimes. Some people said I should write in my native language first and translate it to English. But it never worked for me. Korean and English are too different to flip like that. Writing for other publications needs special attention from both me and my editor. Yes, I have an editor who helps me not make stupid grammar mistakes and gives me professional advice on writing. Even though I have this beautiful image of the place or experience, I need to make sure to express it in the right words. But this challenge is what I accept gladly. I did this to myself in fact!

English led me to meet a lot of inspiring people out in the world. My life would literally have gone in a different direction if I hadn't learned English. If I hadn't decided to try something new, I wouldn't have met any of you who are reading this book right now. English opened up a whole new world to me: the world of traveling, writing, blogging, and so many more possibilities. I owe it to all the English tweeting and blogging, and to the people who tolerate the constant mistakes in my writing.

Chapter 15

Three-Day Rule, Three-Year Rule, and Two-Week Rule

Three-Day Rule

On my first backpacking trip to New Zealand, as you might remember, I almost booked my flight back to Korea on the third day. It was a month-long trip, but I remembered what my dad said, “You can always change your ticket if you want to come home early.” On the third day, I was laying on my hostel bed in New Zealand, cold, lonely, sick, and scared. I was an oddball who didn’t speak English and was staying at a hostel for the first time. I never even tried out the common area because, believe it or not, I’m a shy person by nature.

It seemed wasteful to go back on a 12-hour flight after only three days. I quickly came to my senses and went out exploring the great city of Auckland.

When I talked about this to people in the online travel community, someone said there was a three-day rule in the travel world. The toughest time for a solo/ first-time traveler is the third day, apparently. On the first day, you are too new to recognize anything, the second day you are busy seeing new and exciting things, and on the third day, you realize you are in a new land alone. Exactly how I

felt. Thankfully I got over my third-day fear and became the person who I am now.

Three-Year Rule

When I started working at the engineering firm, some of my superiors said I'd need to change things in my third year, such as get a new certificate, transfer to another department. The same daily, weekly, yearly routine can be boring they said (no wonder). They were not known for changes, but I witnessed some changes from time to time. As predicted, I made my change in the third year. I planned to leave, quietly, and made my move in the middle of the year. Typical isn't a word in my dictionary, and my move was way more extreme than others'.

Now, I Have a Two-week Rule

I'm back in Korea at the moment, preparing for my long-term stay in Borneo. Just taking care of stuff that I could only do here. I've been having a great time. Stephen is in Europe on a project, but I'll see him soon enough. I've been working out everyday, eating a lot of home-cooked meals, having productive meetings, preparing for AWE '14, visiting family and friends. No complaints. But three days ago, something melancholy hit me all of a sudden. I didn't feel like doing anything, felt tired and bored, had no energy, missed my partner more than usual, and got frustrated easily. Then it hit me again, "It's been two weeks."

For me, two weeks is enough time to do something out of the ordinary. For me, staying in Seoul for this long is enough. A long-distance relationship isn't new to me, but two weeks has always been the mark for this feeling. Two weeks of intensive travel makes me

want to take a break for a while. Two weeks of quiet time in one little town during my long-term travel makes me want to move again. See the pattern?

My Bucket Living plan started in July 2011, which means I've been constantly moving for three years. Sometimes I stay in one place for a month or two, such as when I visit my family, but I've never truly unpacked for the last two and a half years. I finally admitted that I wasn't a born nomad. I'm very much a homebody who likes to create a comfort zone. As much as the title 'digital nomad' is the coolest, I have to face the truth. I need my books, a proper desk, morning rituals, teapot, and a regular work schedule. It doesn't mean that I won't travel ever again once I settle down—it means I want to have a home base to go back to.

Chapter 16

Asian-Asian Racism?

The trip started at the border crossing between Macau and China, traveling through Guilin, Yunnan, and Sichuan Provinces. I'd been to Beijing before the 2008 Olympics, but Beijing was always too big and touristy to feel like the real China. This time I intended to experience the real thing. But the real China was both magnificent and cruel to me.

Here's the first thing that went wrong. Most of my conversations with Chinese locals went this way: They would say something in Chinese, I would give them a confused look and try to write down Chinese characters to describe what I wanted (in Korea we learn Chinese characters in school). They would say something in Chinese louder, and it always ended with a hateful look from them. Always. If they were randomly talking to me when I wasn't looking, I couldn't tell because I didn't understand the dialect, and they thought I was ignoring them. Those three months in southern China was the first time I experienced Asian-Asian racism first hand.

Asians, at least East Asians, are not generous at recognizing individuality. They aren't used to seeing a solo Asian female traveler in China. They are used to a homogenous culture: one nation, one race, one culture. To them, the Chinese people, it was not acceptable that I looked like one of them but couldn't (or wouldn't) speak their language. Instead, I spoke English and hung out with foreigners. To them I was a show off, or as one of my Chinese readers commented,

“whitewashed”. Asian-Asian racism happens not only in China, but throughout the continent.

It’s an oxymoron that I get criticized for being whitewashed, but at the same time Asians have this mindset that everything is better overseas, or better yet, from Western countries. For example, a Korean-American who was born and raised in the US has a hard time getting a job as an English teacher in Asia just because of their race, even if they’re more qualified than a Western-looking teacher. It is a sad problem I encountered every day, one way or another.

Everything came down to the fact that I spoke English. Since I looked Chinese, didn’t speak Chinese, and spoke English instead it was a bit of a scandal. English is such a funny thing in Asia. That’s why this is the prime time for native English speakers to easily get jobs as English teachers in Asia. But it isn’t all unicorns and rainbows for the people who are dealing with this dilemma everyday. As you all know by now, I’d never spoken English until I went to New Zealand when I was in University. Before that, I always watched movies with subtitles, never read English books (except engineering books, which are usually filled with equations), and didn’t have foreigner friends. And that was common for an ordinary Korean. But now all the kids are pressured to learn English even before they can speak their native language, all the schools have several native English language teachers. People who are my age or older who didn’t learn English in school have to get good grades on English tests to survive in their career. They spend tons of money and time to achieve the goal, and not to mention the stress they get from this pressure.

Back to my trip to China and that time with the Chinese taxi driver. The one who very clearly showed me what she thought of me by throwing a rock at me. There is context but still, it was low of her. So here’s what happened. Stephen and I took a cab from the Nanning city

center to move to another hostel. We had a Chinese map and brochure to show the driver. She, the taxi driver, looked at the map and started driving. That's the universal taxi driver's sign for "I know where I'm going." Ten or so minutes later, she started circling the neighborhood, stopped to ask around, went in and out of different apartment complexes, kept U-turning from where we were. And that was universal taxi driver's language for "I don't know where I'm going". We kept showing her the map but apparently she didn't know exactly where we were. Meanwhile, the meter was running fast.

Judging by the address and where we were, it shouldn't have been too far. We told her to stop. We decided to get off and walk instead of watching the meter going with this nonsense. The meter was showing 33 CNY (equivalent of 5 USD), but we decided to just pay 30 CNY, and she would know why. If she didn't know how to get us there, she shouldn't have taken the customer. We figured that only a 3 CNY discount was quite generous.

But as soon as we handed her the money she jumped right out of the car like she had expected this to happen. She started yelling something at us, but of course we couldn't understand. She probably wanted more money than the meter because she did the extra work for us to try to find the place. But that's not how taxis work, at least I don't think so. We tried to explain the best we could, but she had already gone into the anger zone. I got really scared and walked really fast to the nearest apartment complex. She followed us, waving that money we gave her, still yelling. I could only pick out a few words I'd learned after three months in China, and those were "Chinese," "foreigner (white people)," and some bad words that I won't repeat here.

I couldn't move fast enough with my heavy backpack. She caught up and yelled some more. She pulled my backpack aggressively. I almost fell. I've never been in a physical fight and it

really scared the crap out of me. She was big, too. At the moment when she was about to hit me, Stephen stepped between me and her and told me to go first. I thought I was the target because I would be an easier target than a male. But I was wrong. Clearly, she was aiming for me. She passed Stephen and started chasing me to the apartment complex. The security guard came out to resolve the situation. He understood right away what went wrong. He talked to the taxi driver and told us we didn't do anything wrong. She was still angry. We walked fast to the hostel while the security guard talked to her.

Ouch!

I looked down at my ankle. It was bleeding. A chunk of cement had hit me right on my ankle. She got her revenge. Three days later I said goodbye to China.

So yes, China was tough on me.

I could feel that Chinese people don't differentiate between China, Japan, Korea, and other Asian countries (probably because they used to rule them all), but if you are from across the other ocean, their attitude changes. The years of mixed and complex history made them (and most of Asians) idealize English, blonde hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and sharp nose. To this day, people are jealous of westerners. My friends who are working as ESL teacher often post an Asian children's portrait of themselves; with blonde hair and blue eyes. They might find this amusing but to me, that's sad.

If you are not Asian, people will be wowing at you while walking down the street with your backpack, kids will follow you to just say 'hi' and runaway. On the contrary, when I'm walking down the street with my backpack, I'm stared by locals who think I'm just weird. To them I'm

neither one of them nor a foreigner. I hear all the crazy stories about how people were rude and taking pictures of them without asking, how all the locals were staring at them in a small village, how kids wanted to talk to them and how people proposed to them because they are so beautiful, but I have nothing to share but awkward encounters with locals.

Of course, all my ranting here is extremely generalized, based on my own experiences and I've simplified the world. It's a limbo area, not being recognized for who I am. They think I'm a guide or translator, and there's no way I'm a traveler who travels with a Caucasian male. I know there's a much wider world and crazier stories out there. Just sometimes, it is frustrating not being treated different anywhere I go. As a traveler, I don't want to be treated different; want to experience what local people do. But at the same time, it is good to be recognized with the fact that I'm trying to fit in, learning their language, and exploring an unknown land. In China, using my skills to write and read Chinese character only brought more complicated situations. It wasn't appreciated.

It's hard when my effort isn't recognized and instead people are offended by it.

It's not easy to feel like I don't belong anywhere because I don't fit into a clear category.

#I wrote about the same subject on my blog RunawayJuno.com a few years ago, and the post is still receiving many different opinions from Asians, and others from around the world. It showed that I wasn't the only one experiencing this Asian-Asian racism and various other types of racism on a daily basis. Here are a few of the comments.

A: I lived in China for a few years on and off, but my Chinese isn't perfect, and I'd always get the same old question: If you're American, why do you look like us? If your parents are Chinese, why can't you speak Chinese properly? I got so tired of repeating the same spiel to every taxi driver or man on the street that I'd become rude whenever anyone asked me about it, which only made them rude back. It was a vicious cycle. And when I taught English as a sub, I would get some pretty dirty looks from the parents who wondered why their kids were being taught by someone who looks just like them.

B: I've had similar experiences in Asia, but because I'm black. I know what you mean when you ask if people truly dislike the positive attention they get from being "exotic" in such places. I've had some honest travelers admit to me that they do enjoy that attention. It depends on the person and the place they're in. But I think in many cases, underneath, travelers really do like when locals place a high value on them simply for possessing Euro-centric features.

C: I was born in Korea but adopted as a baby – so I only know English, my family is white, as well as my fiancé. In China, I was yelled at and given looks. I even learned how to say "I only speak English, sorry" but that wouldn't stop people from continuing to yell at me in Chinese. I remember this one time I was at Beijing West and an older woman sat down next to me and started talking. I tried to be respectful & indicate that I didn't know what she was saying. She spent the next 20 minutes slapping my arm trying to get my attention while screaming at me in Chinese – as if she thought I was lying when I said I didn't know the language.

D: My wife is Korean-American and she has encountered pretty much everything you describe and has done so on a daily basis for the past four years, in both Korea and China (although I hate to lump them together; they're very different countries). It's tough for her and I get to see it up close. People come up to me all the time and tell me they love me because I'm white. It's weird and awkward and I used to hate it, but now it's just something that happens. But she is all but invisible. Except when we get in a taxi or shop, when the attention turns to her because they expect her to speak the language, which she doesn't. Ironically, I speak Korean and Chinese, and she doesn't, and so people look at her and think she can speak without moving her lips.

F: I'm Chinese-Filipino and living in China for a couple of years now, I know exactly how you feel. People in the bus have shouted me and a woman here almost slapped me since she didn't believe I could only speak English. My friend had a glass thrown at him in a bar by a Chinese because he did not believe my friend was Navajo Indian.

G: I once met a Russian guy on an overnight train to Beijing. He was from a border town with China so looked very Chinese. The next morning when we ordered breakfast the waitress asked him something and he couldn't reply in Chinese obviously and because the Chinese talk really loudly, everyone was watching and wondering why this "Chinese" man wasn't speaking Chinese. It was a bit sad to be honest.

H: I am a Singaporean Chinese and just landed myself in Beijing 2 weeks ago, with my Caucasian husband who is here to work. I have never felt so down traveling in my entire life! I have travelled to other parts of China but never felt this way. Perhaps, I weren't travelling with a Caucasian then?

Chinese overseas dislike Mainland Chinese. They taint the image of us, Chinese in general, everywhere. There are really nice Mainland Chinese around and I love befriending them but I am also sorry to say that I have also learnt to be very cautious towards every Chinese here in China.

I: You know what's worse? The idea of having a non-Asian husband. Ignoring the ring, everyone thinks you are either 1. a hooker 2. mail order bride.

J: In America, when a Hmong person can't speak Hmong and hang out with non-Hmong/Asian people, especially Caucasian, he or she is not just a "show-off" but considered "white-washed".

Chapter 17

New Zealand Passport Stamp

“How did you get into this business?”

This is one of the most common questions I get whenever I meet new people. Given my job and my lifestyle, I’m not someone they typically encounter on a day to day basis. I don’t have a permanent residence (although I’m trying to change this), and even though Korea is my home country, I’ve stuck to a rigorous travel schedule for last two years. And this is my job.

Being home these last few weeks has given me a good opportunity to look back and think about why I got into this whole work-and-travel business. While I was tidying up my old boxes, for example, I found my previous passports. (I’m currently on passport number 3). My very first passport was issued in 2004, right before my first trip to New Zealand. It almost looks new, so very thin and clean. It was made before Korea started using the Electronic Passport. Thumbing through the pages, I came across my first ‘Visitor’s Permit’ stamp at the Auckland Airport, New Zealand. And that’s when It hit me, ‘This is where everything began.’

In my interviews with various publications, I’ve often mentioned my trip to New Zealand. If I hadn’t gone on that trip, I wouldn’t have become who I am today, with the global perspective that I am thankful to have now. Who knows, if I hadn’t taken that trip, maybe I’d still be

happily working at an office. But I'm not. And that's because of this stamp with a little fern on it.

Recently I had a chance to think about what I've been doing for the last two years, and where I should go. Sometimes I blamed myself for constantly wanting something more and better. Why can't I just be happy with what I have? Why do I have to be special? What's so wrong about living a 'normal' life like everyone else? Whenever I have felt like my whole world was crumbling down, it always seems so easy to live with the flow, to take the easier path, the path I know so many people back home are happy to take. I sometimes feel like I'm struggling to create a utopia that I can never reach. But then, when I get out of these mini life-crisis funks, I always think to myself, 'Hey, feeling pained but colorful is better than living in gray'. Finding my own purpose and walking on that harder-to-follow path is what makes me feel colorful.

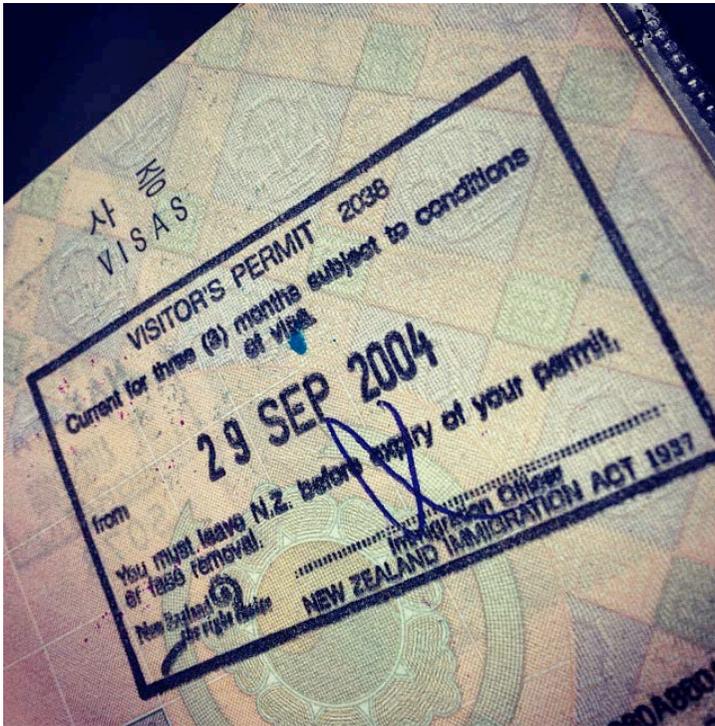


Figure 17 New Zealand's Visitor's Permit stamp

I changed rapidly right after the trip to New Zealand in September 2004. I was extremely captivated by the new and exotic world outside of my homogeneous country. Even with my tight school schedule, I planned one trip at a time, to see a bit more of the world. Back then, I felt so proud of my passport with a few foreign stamps, and even handwritten approval from the Malaysian train conductor/ border patrol. The photo of my passport page was my desktop image for a long time.

Compared to myself seven years ago, I feel like I've become a bit of travel snob. Traveling still excites me, but sometimes I forget to appreciate what's around me. And this apathetic attitude is a sure sign that something's got to change. Life combined with work and non-

stop traveling, has made me physically and emotionally tired for quite a while. Seeing my old passport stamp was a great reminder of why I jumped into this life from the beginning. The opportunities, excitement, and diverse world outside of my country; that's what got me. While I'm struggling to find my own path, I still have a lot of opportunities on my hands that I never thought I could get, and it's up to me to make something out of them. I've decided to change my work patterns and styles, and I found a new purpose to my lifestyle that I'm excited to share with everyone soon. It's a good thing.

When you meet a big obstacle in your path, it's good to think about where everything began. Go out, walk around the block, get some fresh air, and think about why you started this in the first place. I gained a little bit of patience. I have come a long way since nine years ago, and even though I have further to go, I'm excited for what's up ahead.

Chapter 18

Stop Victimizing Yourself

As I'm learning more about human behavior while examining my own, I found an interesting fact that would apply to most people in the world. We all want an easy way out. It starts with a little thing. When we are late for an appointment, we say "Traffic was horrible today!", "My mom was sick", "I had a really bad headache", or something similar. What's well known as a lame excuse. In fact, this lame excuse is much better than the cold, hard fact: "I was just being lazy". If A is late for work because the subway wasn't working due to the terrible weather, A can call the office and say "The train is not working, I have to wait" without any shame. Because A is stuck in an unsolvable situation that A didn't create. If A slept through their alarm, probably A would have prepared a few excuses on the way to work.

People would rather be a victim

Starting from the small things, the same mindset applies to the bigger life decisions, too. Something has to force them to take action. I thought this passive attitude was a big problem in Korean society. Everyone makes excuses for everything. It looked like 'I can't' was the answer for everything. I think it is a pretty big problem, but I have found out that a lot of people act like this no matter where they are from.

When I went to my cousin's wedding two years ago, one of my aunts came up to me and said;

“You have to get married soon, so I can dress up. When can I wear this again?”

Maybe you'd think she was making a conversation and being friendly, and she was, but I realized again, this was how people usually think. They were forced to dress up because this was a special occasion. Even if they enjoy it, they would rather be seen as a victim of this wonderful day.

When I mentioned I wanted to travel the world, people used to say I couldn't. The people who are living outside the country are only doing so because their work made them move, it's not by their choice. Even if they aimed to get a position overseas, that's not the story they tell the world. They were victims of the beloved company.

Have you ever wished that some terrible thing would happen when you get a phone call from someone you don't really want to meet? It would be easier to say 'my dog is sick' than 'I don't want to meet you', don't you think?

The people other than you shouldn't make important life decisions for you. We don't owe anyone anything. But why would you just victimize yourself instead of taking control of your life?

Why can't you dress up nicely when you feel like it, apply for a job overseas because you like the lifestyle outside of your country, say no to people you don't want to meet, and travel the world because you've dreamt about it for ten years?

Stop making excuses

There are a lot of inspirational articles about world travel, saying stop making excuses. And that's true. Because I don't have money, because my job doesn't want me to leave, because I just can't; these are all excuses. Sometimes there are reasons that stop us leaving, but most of the time it's just an excuse. Not everyone traveling the world has a big fortune. They made a decision based on the priorities in their life. Examine your answer. What's more important to you? What's on your priority list?

'Stop making excuses' applies to other subjects in life, not only to traveling. It's the same logic. When you are standing at a crossroad, would you rather find an excuse not to take one direction, because that would be an easy way out, or step into the one you believe in?

Take control over your life

Let's take control over life. Stop the victimization. When you need to make a decision, be responsible. Think hard, step forward and make a promise to yourself that you can take any outcome from this decision. Everything is on you. Don't expect anyone to make a decision for you. Stop seeking excuses and someone to blame. Being responsible is a part of the package of being a grown-up.

Buying a house isn't the only thing that makes you grown-up; taking responsibility for your life's decisions is too. Maybe more.

Part 5. Cyber Relationships

“I would rather walk with a friend in the dark,
than alone in the light.”

— Helen Keller

Chapter 19

Twitter and the Start of the Cyber Sisterhood

This new phase of my life was hugely affected by Twitter. You may laugh and think what a nerdy thing to say if you are not familiar with social networking, but more than a few good things (like you reading this book) might not have happened without cyberspace. I got to know what Twitter was from Late Night with Conan O'Brien. Making fun of celebrity Twitter feeds was a running joke on the show, things like complaining about a long line at Starbucks, someone else's ugly dress, and their love life. Twitter's boom in social media overlapped with the needs of my new career, and it helped me find the community I was looking for. It actually got me a new career.



Figure 18 My Twitter @RunawayJuno

It had been three months since I started working at the office as a mechanical engineer, and I was starting to realize that office life wasn't my cup of tea. Most of the time at work I thought about what I could do to launch a new career. I didn't have any specific direction I wanted this career to go in, but I knew one thing for sure, travel would be a big part of it. Maybe it reflected how I wanted to escape from where I was.

First, I dreamed big. I looked into career options at the one and only Lonely Planet. I always wanted to live overseas, and I thought I would have more than enough travel opportunities if I worked with the most prestigious travel-related company in the world. There wasn't a position I could start right away, but the research led me to Lonely Planet's Twitter account. I was exhilarated to peek at their Twitter feed that was filled with all kinds of travel news. When I became their follower, it felt like I'd become friends with a celebrity. I realized later that basically anyone could see tweets from anyone else. I mentioned in a tweet that I wanted to work for Lonely Planet, and they kindly redirected me to the career page on their website, which I already knew about. But Melvin, the famous owner of TravelDudes.org, saw my tweet to Lonely Planet and scouted me to be one of the contributors to his website. That was the start of everything.

For the last five years, I've developed my relationship online with other travel bloggers, travelers, and friends. I got deeply involved in the travel blogging community, even more so after I launched my own travel website, RunawayJuno.com. I gathered my own readers from around the world, and they became an important support in my life.

It's strange to think how people who I've never even met in person can comfort me on a deep level. Ever since the invention of the World Wide Web, the meaning of the word 'friend' has been rapidly

changing. When I invited myself into the travel community on social media, I made friends from all over the world: Malaysia, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, America, and many more. Many of them became huge supporters and fans of the stories I share on RunawayJuno.com. We started and ended the day with Twitter conversations. I was always one of the first people to be online, since Korea is in an earlier time zone. To friends in the US, I was always ‘living in tomorrow’. We were a tight-knit community sharing daily events and travel stories. There were always new people to greet every day and I got to learn about time zones and daily routines in Europe and America. It was a fun time for me.

Twitter was also the place where I met my future sisterhood. Do you remember the movie *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*? For some reason I’m really fond of that movie (it’s a book, too). Four high school friends spend their summer apart in different countries—Mexico, the US, and Greece—connected by a pair of pants that magically fits everyone. I don’t share traveling pants with any of my traveling sisters, but I do share a love of travel with a few great women around the world.

Here is a good time to talk about Giulia, one of my first cybersisters, and the other half of what I like to call the ‘Buddha Belly Sisters’. Giulia, who I haven’t met in real life yet, is from Genoa, Italy, and is the extraordinary photographer at TravelReportage.com. We met through Twitter, obviously. When she appeared on the travel blogosphere, I was already actively involved in the community. She’s jokingly mentioned that I used to not respond too well with her tweets. I just hope I wasn’t too bad. She has a huge passion for Egypt, so she based herself in Cairo for nine months. What a decision! That was the first impression I got from her.

I stayed tuned on her blog, and quickly found our connection among the many people in the group. We got close because we both are madly

in love with the night sky, science, and photography. And of course, traveling. She reminded me of my childhood dream: to study ancient people and history, to be an archeologist—to use the grownup word. It was *Ramses*, the novel about the Pharaohs and life in Egypt, that made me start dreaming about doing field study in the Egyptian desert. And I got to know that a lot of features in ancient pyramids resembled constellations and the northern star; it made me want to be near them even more. But because career choices for Korean kids were extremely narrow, and didn't involve non-money-making-professions, such as archeology, it was never a real choice for me. By getting to know Giulia, I was able to be closer to the ancient kingdom through her experiences.

I didn't like her just because of the connection to my childhood dream. She's like the sister I never had. She's a great person to talk to because we both believe in the power of serendipity. Serendipity is my favorite English word. I'm not the most spiritual person, but I believe there's a higher power that works over us, no matter if it's God or the universe. I'm a science person, but I always thought the world is bigger than proofs and equations. And she thinks the same way.

She is as soft-hearted as I am, and has similar doubts about the world. When we met, we were both a couple of late twenty-something girls, trying to figure life out. She had just studied and traveled all over the world, and was wondering about her next steps. *Where do I go from here? Am I doing what I'm meant to do?* These doubts and questions aren't so pleasant, but they're easier to deal with if you have great company. Giulia has been, ever since we met, my good companion as we sailed through the tough questions of the world. We talked a lot about the meaning of life and what we could do to make the experience better. *Why do we have to struggle so much with jobs we don't want? we would ask. What can we do better? What's the right direction to go in?*

We asked a lot of questions, but never were able to answer any of them clearly. But because we were both optimistic, we always ended up saying *We'll figure it out*. We are still figuring it out, not struggling but making progress, slowly.

I should explain why I call her the other half of the 'Buddha Belly Girls'. Giulia is beautiful inside and out. You'll see from a photo of her. She has gorgeous curly hair, and her eyes are strong, like shooting rays. Some people would say similar things about me (maybe). But neither of us is skinny. Giulia actually wrote a story about how the meaning of beauty is different in many countries. According to her research, I would be the number one daughter-in-law in African countries because of my broad hips and big bones. In my own country, as I've mentioned, I'm too big and tall (those adjectives do not fall in the category of 'pretty' in Korea). But in America, I'm average. I've never been skinny in my whole life, but now I accept this as just who I am. Giulia said she's the same way too. We joke about how we are like Ganesh, carrying our knowledge and wisdom in our belly, and how it is womanly to have curves. We called our round bellies our 'Buddha Belly'. So what if we have Buddha Bellies. They don't make us any less attractive

To keep our friendship going, we communicated through any kind of technology we have. We used whatsapp, IM+, Google talk, Twitter DM, and email, to name a few. Even though we had eight hours (give or take) of time difference between us, we talked all the time. She was there when I was on my way to the jazz dance studio to dance away my depressing job, she was there to talk when I was heartbroken after a breakup, and she was there when I made the biggest decision of my life. Our conversations happened in the cab in Cairo or on a bumpy bus ride in Seoul. She was and is like my imaginary friend who I talk to all the time, but it's better because she's real (and proves that I'm not crazy).

Just in case if you are wondering, we communicate in English, and for both of us that is our second language. Funny enough, we understand each other better because of that. We understand how difficult it is to describe something in English when you have many images of that word in your head in your native language.

Our lives have changed a lot since we first met. I'm not working at the horrific office job in Seoul, she's now working in Cairo. I don't go to dance studio anymore, she decided to live as a fulltime photographer and blogger. I'm sitting at a beach resort in the Philippines, and she's probably sitting by the Red Sea at the moment. I truly think that we both helped each other to push through hard times. I'm not done with my life's journey, and neither is she. Yesterday, I talked to Giulia about the book I'm writing (yes, this book) and she was quite excited about it. She really liked the chapter I wrote already. Now I feel more confident about finishing this book. And that's why you are reading this, so you can all thank her for that.

Chapter 20

Cyber Sisterhood Continues: Story of AWE

"You need to know how to be dependent to be independent," I opened at the very first Asian Women's Empowerment Conference in 2013.

It's a simple, but complex statement. Independence is overrated, in my opinion. Or rather, people are often mistaken as to what it means. When you think about it, you can't have an independent life if you're not surrounded by people. If you are alone in a field and being 'independent', it's just – well, being alone. The true meaning of independence comes from understanding the relationships around you.

I, also, was someone who mistakenly understood the word 'independent'. I'm an independent woman. I've never doubted that. But that definition for me has changed over time. I thought I was independent because I didn't really care what other people said, about my career or me. I thought I had to fight alone in all my battles against social norms without any help: "I'm an independent woman, how can I ask for help? I can't show that I'm weak," went my rationale. But now I've come to realize that I was able to fight my battles because I had people who believed in me. I could travel because I had a place to go back to. There were always friends who would say, "It's okay".

It's lucky to have a group of people who you can turn to in

every corner. When you doubt yourself, when you think of a crazy project idea, when you are sad, and mostly when you are happy; it's good to share. During my difficult transition time to life as a digital nomad, I used to question why it was that I didn't have more friends who were like me, who understood me better. It was true, partially, but mostly I was still wrong. But I only realized it recently.

When I decided to pull off something called the Asian Women's Empowerment Organization, an annual conference to inspire and empower Asian women to follow their dreams and thrive in an independent lifestyle, I clashed with a lot of negativity. Firstly from me, and then many others joined the parade. I faced challenges like, "It's too ambitious", "How can you host a conference not in your home country (the first one was Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)", "The tickets are too expensive"... the list goes on.

Oh believe me, it was challenging enough. I almost felt myself become an old and hairless grandma during the preparation process. Getting sponsors, speakers, collecting funds, selling tickets, begging people to feature the event in their media, flying back and forth from KL to wherever I was, the pressure... I swore to myself that I would never do it again.

The first run of the AWE Conference passed the bar. I think the bar was quite low, since it was the first event. People were generous. Although I swore at the time that I wouldn't do it again, I recognized that it was truly the start of something special. Of course, I was happy to host a global event without any major hitches, but most of all, it was a magical moment seeing the positive energy soar through the roof.

Personally though, the most special part of the conference was to see 'my' people, who I'd met across different times in my life, altogether in one room, as I gave my opening speech.



Figure 19 Memories from AWE

Meaghan

Do you have a friend that no matter how long it has been since you last saw one another, you can just sit down and talk about everything like it was yesterday? Meaghan and I are like that. We met in the basement of a small hostel in Taipei, Taiwan. I was on a three-day holiday during Chinese New Year but unfortunately was caught in heavy rain. I was hanging out with a great group of people at the hostel and watching old movies when Meaghan and her three friends walked in. That's how I met Meaghan.

The four girls were Hong Kong expats. They were about to start a grand tour of Taiwan, and I only had one more day left in Taipei before flying back to Seoul. They were a group of theater people – actresses and an art director. My fascination with the theater was enough to spark a conversation and I quickly figured out that Hong Kong wasn't just another concrete jungle. We all exchanged contacts, promising to meet in Hong Kong someday, but I thought it was going to be one of those connections you have on the road: the type where you have fun, and move on. You become Facebook friends and probably check out their updates once in a while. The girls were gone by the time I woke up the next morning.

I didn't do much in Taipei, but I felt obligated to see the famous Taipei 101 skyscraper before leaving. I had to do something,

didn't I? So I went out with my pretty pink umbrella to see the building. On the crossroads right in front of Taipei 101, I saw a small group of people across the street.

"Juno?"

I looked around, and there they were, the four girls from Hong Kong.

"I thought you guys left for the train?"

"Turns out our train is not until later today. So we came here to see Taipei 101!"

Well, it was fate.

We hung out for a few hours and had lunch together. On the way to the restaurant we spotted a curious looking green peanut sold at the street stalls. It seemed to be very popular with the locals. Green peanut on some kind of leaf, wrapped with dark brown residue. As food enthusiasts, Meaghan and I had to try it. It rang my brain as soon as it touched my tongue. Hands down, it was one of the most awful things I've ever put in my mouth. Turns out it was the infamous betel nut. A big bowl of beef noodle soup woke my taste buds back up. Phew.



Figure 20 Meeting Meaghan again in Seoul

So yes, it's true. If you share a betel nut, your friendship lasts forever.

Jenny

On Chinese New Year's Eve 2004/05, I was out in the streets of Chinatown in Singapore with hundreds of people. The festival was marked with a big New Year countdown, fireworks, and lotus lanterns. That was the day I first met Jenny.

We bumped into one another in a female dorm of a hostel. I came back to the room in the afternoon after my big outing to the Science Center, where they had the original Star Wars exhibition. When I got to the hostel I was still high with the joy of seeing the real Darth Vader, Chewbacca, Princess Leia, R2D2 and light sabers. But everyone in my room couldn't care less. Jenny had just arrived in Singapore to start her Southeast Asia trip. She had been living in Korea for almost a year teaching English. We got close while talking about amazing Korean cuisine – food is the glue for us all!

Jenny was my very first travel inspiration and has affected me right until today. When I met her, I was a newbie traveler and the only country I'd ever visited, other than Singapore, was New Zealand (which she had travelled to as well), but Jenny had been everywhere, lived in lots of places, and she even had a solid plan for her trip for the next few months.

Long-term travel was a new concept for me at that time. I had about 2.5 weeks for my trip, and I planned to stay in Singapore most of the time, with a rough plan to visit some places in Malaysia including Sabah, but it was rainy season for East Malaysia. As a newbie, the idea of visiting Malaysia was a bit scary. Silly, I know. It was a different time then.

Jenny was going to continue to Malaysia and then cross the border to Thailand. Melaka was her next stop. I made a bold, and maybe inappropriate decision, to follow her. It seemed quite brilliant at that time, and it truly was. She left for Melaka the day before me and we arranged to meet at one of the guesthouses in the guidebook (it was the time before smartphones). I had one last kaya toast in my neighborhood, and got on the long-distance bus to Melaka the next day. Crossing the international border by myself – what an experience!



Figure 21 Me and Jenny, on a rickshaw in Melaka

I traveled, or more like tagged along with Jenny for about a week, until I came back to Singapore for my flight. We shared a room in Melaka, got bit by bed bugs (my first time) in our KL hostel, got drunk, had hangover fries, and she introduced me to the amazing root beer float.

Jenny has continued her journey for the last 9 years. Her passion has taken her to many places in the world, and I've always admired that about her. We finally met again in Hanoi, Vietnam when she was working at a university there. We cooked Jenny's favorite Korean food, dakgalbi (stirred fried spicy chicken), at home, and she took us to her favorite street food stalls.

If I hadn't met Jenny, I may not have ended up as the traveler as I am now.

Inny

There're not many people in my life who have seen almost everything about me. The good, the bad, the ugly, the strange, and the struggle. Yoon Inyoung, or simply, Inny as she goes by, is one of them.

We were rebels in high school. Nothing bad – we were just young and passionate about justice and protecting our fellow students. We met at a union of social clubs in our high school, where I was selected as the president, and Inny was named as the chief of staff. I was in the Astronomy club; she the Hip-Hop club. She was quite a character who played the violin professionally, and loved Hip-Hop music.

There were two other friends who came from the dance club, and the four of us always hung out together, and spent lots of time talking about our issues and the problems of our school. For two years, the four of us were inseparable. We fought with the school authorities together and wrote petitions, but also did typical high school stuff: chatting away for hours, or going on trips. Every break between classes, we met in the middle of the hallway to catch up. They had to visit me a lot because my teacher wanted us to study during the break – sometimes I snuck out anyway. Don't get me wrong, Inny and I both were excellent students – we got good grades amongst all the craziness that was going on.

The funny thing is, we weren't the closest in high school. We hung out as a group a lot, but we hardly hung out that much alone. She was busy with her violin lessons, and I was on my way to that academic career I've talked about earlier. But throughout two periods of our lives, we got real close.

She became a musicologist while I studied to be a mechanical engineer. We both have Master's Degrees, we both love books and our

studies. The passion for learning brought us closer. After I'd left my engineering career, she decided not to pursue her PhD. Now both of us are in this gray area where we have to spend five minutes explaining what we do to other people. And that has really brought us close.

It's not easy to meet someone in Korea who makes creativity come alive in daily life. I've only met a few people like that, and my high school best friend is one of them.



Figure 22 Inny at AWE '14 Kota Kinabalu

I've met so many amazing people throughout the years at different times: when I was young and juvenile, fresh and raw, miserable, confused, and confident. Throughout it all, I've kept in touch with these few people, no matter where we each are in the world.

Seeing all of them in the same room, talking to each other at the AWE conference: it was a special feeling. It was almost like I was in a living time machine.

Jenny, who I met when I was a very new backpacker, is now a friend with Meaghan, who I ran into in Taipei. Inny, who is known as the ‘magnet friend’ to all of my friends, sent her sister Won to attend the conference. Now Won is known as the magnet friend’s sister. My new friends from Malaysia and Indonesia all know Meaghan and her colorful personality, and Jenny remains the travel expert for all of us. The old and new were mixing, and I loved it. I was blessed.

It’s really important to know how to be dependent to be independent. I’ve met a lot of people who scream “I’m independent” from their very bones, but simply don’t know how to get along with others. As I mentioned, that is just being alone, not being independent. Everything goes both ways. I’m proud to be independent, but I’m even more grateful to have all these wonderful people in my life who I can lean on when in need. I feel more powerful because I have people on my side. I can make bold decisions because I have people telling me “It’s going to be okay”. I can reach for unrealistic dreams, because I know someone will be there for me if I fail.

Part 6. Inspiration Works in Mysterious Ways

“Upon reflection, I decided I had three main weaknesses:
I was confused (evidenced by a lack of facts, an inability to coordinate
my thoughts, and an inability to verbalize my ideas);
I had a lack of confidence, which cause me to back down from
forcefully stated positions; and I was overly emotional at the expense
of careful, 'scientific' though.
I was thirty-seven years old and still discovering who I was.”

— Julia Child, *My Life in France*

Chapter 21

The Brief History of My Career Dreams

As many of you know if you are a long time reader at Runaway Juno and may have spotted throughout this book, I'm an astronomy enthusiast. Throughout the years I've spent a good amount of time looking at and taking pictures of the night sky. I once almost died from cold weather conditions on the top of Mount Jirisan, the second tallest mountain in Korea, but it didn't put out the fire of my passion. Surprisingly, I wasn't always interested in stars and the universe. What I wanted to be when I grew up went through many changes. Here are some of the highlights.

Writer

My elementary school had a tradition of making a year book. When we graduated 6th grade my teacher asked us to submit one photo of us as a baby, and to draw a picture of ourselves in the profession we wanted, so we could see our past, present and future at the same time. I choose to submit a not-so-pretty photo of me in the delivery room wearing an 'I'm a girl!' bracelet. I wanted to show the very origin of who I was. As for the profession, I drew myself as a writer. I don't know why I thought being a writer was the profession for me. I didn't particularly have a huge interest in writing but I did like storytelling. I guess I fulfilled my dream since I'm writing this book. Good job little Jiyeon!

Artist

In middle school, I discovered my passion toward art. Making an environmental awareness poster was a yearly project at school, and I was really good at it. I even got a regional award for one of my posters. Water colors, sketching, drawing, I tried everything but I liked design the best. I had no clue what professional artists did, but I knew I was passionate about drawing. The only way I knew to become an artist was by going to an art academy for high school (we call it *hagwon*). High tuition was the first obstacle. And as much as I was good at art and really liked it, I couldn't convince my parents to let me go. I remember my father mentioning something about '*there are no jobs for artists in this society*'. Oh well. Instead of going to an art high school I begged my mom to register me at a local afterschool art program. I had a lot of fun.

My artistic side is still alive through my photography. I use it every day to capture, edit, and publish my emotions and thoughts. One way or another, I am an artist.

Archeologist

The next brief dream came when I started reading those *Ramses* books that I loved as much as Giulia, a series by the author Christian Jacq. Those five books made me completely obsessed with the history of Egypt. The Pyramid, Sphinx, Pharaohs, Queens and the politics, everything fascinated me. I wanted to be an archeologist, before I even knew the word existed. But archeologist wasn't on the list of 'approved professions in Korea', so the dream vanished pretty quickly. I still keep track of new discoveries through news and magazines.

Astronomer

I hit a rough patch in the second year of middle school. I didn't have a 'dream' anymore. I'd never gotten such low grades in my entire school career. Then one of my friends introduced me to the book that

changed my life, *The Friendly Guide to the Universe: A Down-to-Earth Tour of Space, Time and the Wonders of the Cosmos* by Nancy Hathaway. It guided me in a whole new direction, into the world of astronomy. Ever since reading the book, learning about the history of the universe became a priority.

My attention span has pretty much leaned toward natural science and astronomy ever since. I looked for every possible seminar and function. For two summers in a row I went to the science camp at Seoul National University, the nation's best school, and I learned a lot. Some of the most brilliant high school students in the country came to the event. They asked ridiculously brilliant questions. I was so envious of their intellect.

My girls-only high school spent just a week on their science program, since apparently only a small portion of the students were interested in math and science. It's an example of gender stereotypes at work and school. Out of the 10 classes we had to take in each grade, only two were in the science department. We had many clubs but science wasn't one of them. But I wasn't about to let that stop me. I organized an astronomy club with a few other friends to pursue our passion. I was elected to be a junior reporter at the only astronomy magazine in the country, *Star and Universe*, took part in organizing a nation-wide astronomy club for high schoolers, and participated in several out-of-school astronomy clubs for stargazing and photography. It seemed like the right path for me.

Kyunghee University, located in Suwon, hosted Star Camp every year back then. They had quite a unique department, called astronomical science. I attended the camp for two years in a row, and I was determined to apply for that department in Kyunghee University. But the decision wasn't totally mine. In conservative Korean society the

parents have a big say in their children's life decisions. They consider it their job to ensure the success of their children's. Because of this traditional thinking, my father decided which university I would apply to. The battle remains one of my biggest regrets in life. He said, *'Tell me if there's any famous people who are graduated from that department. What kind of job are you going to get? Is this something where you can contribute to society?'* If this conversation were to happen right now, I could give all the right answers, but the seventeen-year-old me wasn't mature enough to win the argument. He made me drop my application. To this day, that decision breaks my heart.

Although I couldn't enroll in that particular University program, nothing could stop me from appreciating the universe. I traveled many places to see the exquisite night skies, like Lake Tekapo of New Zealand, the Very Large Array (VLA) of New Mexico, and the McDonald Observatory in Texas. Of course the northern lights has led me to Arctic destinations such as Iceland and Alaska. Astronomy is still my biggest inspiration among my many life passions.

Jazz dance instructor

As you know, to make my miserable office life better, I signed up for dance classes. I took Jazz Dance, Jazz Funk, and classical ballet. Regular workouts were always bored me, so I choose to do something fun. It became more than a workout pretty quickly. That and blogging were the only things that helped me survive at the office. I wasn't exceptionally good, but I was good enough to amuse myself. And if I trained hard for about a year, I could be an instructor. Of course it would be agonizing to train everyday, but at least this was something I was passionate about. I was desperately looking for something to light the fire in my heart again.

I never pursued the dream since I changed my career to be a travel writer instead. If I settle down somewhere, I will look for a Jazz Dance studio again.

When I was little, if I was good at something, I thought it had to be my future job. That's what we were told. If you like studying, be a professor or teacher. If you like art, be an artist. If you are good at soccer, be a professional soccer player. It was important to have that '-er' or '-ist' in your title. I briefly walked the path of engineer (another '-er' title), but it wasn't my cup of tea. Now I'm creating my own career that has a new title, storyteller and chief entrepreneur. I also learned that things I learn don't have to become a career, because in one way or another they are they still make me who I am. I write, and create art through photography, I study this universe constantly, read news about archeology and astronomy. I might not have a dance studio but the passion is still vividly alive. A job isn't what defines who we are.

Chapter 22

Tea and I, We're Close

Again, the trip to New Zealand changed my life in several ways. I can't say otherwise because that one month of time introduced me so many different aspects of life that I'm still keeping (like flossing). If I hadn't gone to New Zealand, there'd be no tea-drinking Juno (or clean teeth) today.

Diana was a tea drinker. Actually, everyone in and out of her house was. There was a big jar of fresh tea bags (PG Tips), and one jar for the used ones. I never got to know what that was for. As soon as anyone walked into the house they boiled the water, made the tea, and drank it with a dash of milk like they were in their own house. In one single move.

I was never a tea drinker. I was an amateur coffee drinker, every day, several times a day. I got into a habit of drinking coffee when I worked at the sandwich shop right before the trip to New Zealand. I made really good cappuccino, and that's how it became my favorite, still is to this day. Tea in Korea is different, even though we drink a lot of it: Barley tea is used as normal drinking water, and green tea was common because there are tea plantations in Korea. The only black tea I've had was Lipton, which was a pretty fancy tea with not a cheap price, and it was not very good.

You can imagine how much I was surprised to taste the high-quality black tea in New Zealand. Quickly, I got into the habit of drinking tea like the New Zealanders around me. Every morning I boiled the water, made tea, and drank it with a dash of milk – in one fell swoop. The tea

tasted very good with good tea and the New Zealand quality milk. It became my daily ritual to this day.

But when I got back to Korea after a month of tea drinking, I couldn't make or recreate the same taste with any other tea I had. Lipton wasn't very good (and I still don't drink Lipton), and there was no other affordable black tea available in Korea. I had to settle for green tea, and coffee.



Figure 23 Getting upclose with Pu-er tea in China

I want to explain the big difference in names of tea in Korea. Black tea is called red tea in Chinese. Because Korean language was affected by Chinese, we call it the same (hong cha = red tea). Chinese people started calling it red tea because the color of the tea was red. Makes sense, when you think about it. I'm not sure why it is called black tea in English, maybe because the tealeaves look black. Red tea in English typically indicates rooibos tea.

When Diana visited me in Korea in 2005, she brought me a huge gift: a box of PG Tips. I cherished those teabags for such a long time. Of course, I brought another box back when I visited New Zealand again in 2006. It didn't last very long. But I was reunited with PG Tips when I went to the US for the first time in 2011.

That was just the start of my love of tea and my daily ritual. Because there was no high quality black tea in Korea, I started ordering it from overseas. I know, I went too far. I joined an online community through Naver.com, and purchased tea from England with several other people to share the shipping fee. I was in graduate school back then. I made not much money, but buying tea was a priority. The joy of drinking flavorful tea certainly helped me get through hard times in the grad school.

Tea brought me to so many places during my travels. In 2012 on that fateful trip to China, tea was the reason why I could last so long. I finally had a proper taste of Pu'er tea in Yunnan Province. It is the pressed block of tea that was part of the trading between China and Tibet. There is a town called Pu'er in the province, but most of the high quality tea leaves are from Xishuangbanna region, in the very south of Yunnan province. Stephen (who was my partner in crime in purchasing ridiculous amounts of tea) and I went to several tea tastings, and bought what amounted to \$100 worth of tea. Considering we had 6 CND (\$1 USD) noodles for breakfast, \$100 USD was a lot of money. We sent most of it home, but we drank half of the Pu'er tea disk during our Asia tour for another several months. We even bought some more to age it ourselves at home. Pu'er tea is well known for its aging ability, like fine wine or cheese. No regrets.

Tea can do wonders. One of the most memorable cups of tea I've ever had was at the top of the Cameron Highlands in Malaysia. I got to know Boh (Best of Highlands) tea during my first visit to Malaysia in 2006, and the passionate love of tea made me go up to the highlands

during my second Malaysia trip last year. The Sungai Palas tea plantation field was one of the most beautiful landscapes. I drank a cup of tea on the balcony of the tea plantation looking down at the view of the rolling green hills of tea trees. The photo of myself overlooking the tea plantation remains one of my favorite photos of me. I look so peaceful. Stephen and I bought a great amount of tea from both Cameron Valley and Boh Sungai Palas, as we were drinking our way around Asia.

We did a similar tea-themed trip in Sri Lanka same year. Tea from the highlands of Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, is one of the world's leading exporter of tea. Sri Lankan guest houses still practice the English style tea. I very much enjoyed the fine quality tea served in a white tea pot with simple tea cups, with a small jar of milk of course. When I was working on the balcony of the guesthouse in Ella, the fresh pot of tea became the best companion.

I drink a cup of tea every morning. As a long-term traveler, having a daily ritual is important to keep my days in order. It may sound funny, but a daily ritual is indeed quite important. Working on the road, or working from home is extremely difficult if you are not good at discipline. It's easy to push today's list to tomorrow's, sleep late and eat unhealthy food. Sometimes I wonder 'What did I do today? What's the point of all this work I do? What's the meaning of life?' after discovering the time of the day. Self-employment is not an easy thing. I'm exaggerating a little, but I do ask myself these questions from time to time.

I admire long-term travelers who regularly work out in any form. I like jogging, and I enjoy yoga, but I'm not so in love with them to do them every day. The jazz dancing I used to do daily, for fun and a work out. It gave me a great deal of happiness. I'd do it again if I settle down somewhere.

The World is Waiting

Jiyeon Juno Kim

But there is a ten minute daily ritual I do keep to this day: making tea. Drinking tea in the morning gives me a sense of discipline, and helps me to begin my day. The caffeine helps of course, but it is more than that. Pouring the water into the kettle, waiting for it to be boiled, waiting three minutes for the tea leaves to steep, all give me a sense of order. And the smell! Is there anything better than the scent of freshly brewed tealeaves? After a cup of tea (ideally with a dash of milk), I'm ready. There's even a special pocket in my big backpack only for tea. I told you I'm serious.

Tea can do wonders. I truly believe so.

Chapter 23

When Things Make Me Happy (I'm Not Perfect)

In the era of long-term travel and anti-consumerism, owning or wanting things is considered to be super lame. People romanticize the ability of putting everything in one bag and travelling the world for years. Because they know it's hard. Also buying new gadgets can be realistically impossible for freelancers, if you are living by bipolar style paychecks like me. I've been telling myself 'You don't need this', whenever something broke down. The cheaper alternatives came in handy from time to time, but at the end, I went back to where I started.

I picked up a beautiful pair of sunglasses at duty-free on my way to Cambodia back in 2010. Only after a year, I realized that the legs were scratching the lens. (I mean, come on Guess!). It gave me the illusion of seeing something fuzzy every time I wore them. When I visited the Sierra Trading Post warehouse in Cheyenne, WY, my scratched shades were replaced by a \$15 hip-looking pair. I loved them. But the relationships between my shades and I are not so great; I tragically drowned the new sunglasses in the Saint Marcos River in Texas while floating down the river on the tube. I blame the small waterfall, but I knew I shouldn't have brought them on the water (duh!) Up until recently, when I left them at a Malaysian hostel last month, my eyes were (barely) protected by \$5 black shades I picked up in Brooklyn.

When my traveling sandals became unusable in Vietnam, I knew it would cost me a lot of money. As my mum always says, there's a reason to buy a good quality shoes. If your feet are tired, you are tired. However, it wasn't easy to spend \$100+ for shoes, especially when I was in Vietnam. To utilize where I was, I decided to buy a knock-off Chaco on the street of Hanoi. Less than \$10, I was the proud owner of Chaco sandals. They broke out of the blue, in Stuttgart, Germany a few months later.

My phone was a 3½ year-old iPhone 3GS. As my very first smartphone, it was attached to me 24/7 from the moment I picked it up from the store. Yes, I'm one of those people who always have a phone nearby (you know how much I tweet, and stuff). It's my lifeline. But because I overused its abilities, and it wasn't designed for several years of severe abuse, it started to break down slowly. Facebook was too heavy for its motherboard, email went out like a snail in a dry day, typing often jammed inside, and so many more little and big problems, but I kept telling myself 'You don't need a new phone, and you can't afford it'. It's true, but also it was just a sort of mantra to calm me down.

For less than US\$10, I bought a stylish carry-on backpack that could replace my old one. It happened in Hanoi. It actually traveled well for a month through Vietnam. Two hours before I had to leave for the airport to Iceland, the very same backpack gave up its life by showing its gut from the bottom. The damage was unfixable. A flowery school backpack from a nearby Good Will saved the day. I had to travel with a bag looking like it belonged to a fifteen-year-old girl for the last decade, because I was too cheap to buy anything nice.

There are so many similar stories like these, for many of the different things I own. In between the fine line of expensive name brands and the actual good quality products, we always somewhat convinced that everything is a sleazy scam that tricks us to spend money. After the

same trial and error for many years, I'm learning once more, there are reasons why things cost. I've been telling myself that I don't need a new phone, or good shoes are not necessary, but you know what? That's a lie. I was thinking one day, it's such a shallow thing to say, but high-quality electronics make me really happy (no, not because I'm from Korea and everyone here is obsessed with electronics!).

Uncertainties have been taking over my life for quite a while now. There are many ordinary questions in small talk I cannot answer. I'm not too happy about it. Some wise man once said, the person who can be comfortable at uncertainties is the true mastermind. Clearly, I'm not there yet. Being tired of not controlling my own life, I decided to resolve unnecessary stress by replacing broken things with ones which actually work. In the era of anti-consumerism, it's easy to judge ourselves when we have the urge to buy something new and shiny. But if the simple act can solve problems and release pressure, why not? What's so wrong about that? (Of course, within the boundaries of sane and necessary purchases).

On my way back to Korea from India in August 2013, I went into a sunglasses shop in duty-free, and picked up a pair of Ralph Lauren sunglasses (believe me, they were one of the cheapest ones in the store). They're sturdy, pretty (purple!), and good-looking. For the first time in three years I now have good quality sunglasses that make me feel good. When my traveling sandals (those knock-off Chacos) broke down, Keen (the real ones) came to the rescue. A pair of red sandals that have traveled with me ever since, that punctured my wallet, but are still going strong. The Good Will backpack was replaced with a slick Salomon bag I bought in Stuttgart, Germany, and my roughly aged iPhone 3GS can now rest in peace.

I've spent a lot of money recently. But you know what? It feels great. Do you know the joy of using things that work? Shoes that perfectly fit (like Cinderella!), fabrics actually water and wind-proof,

glasses which can stay on my face without adjusting them a thousand times a day, a smartphone that can send email when I finish without freezing for a minute, stuff like that. I'm not saying you should solve your problems by buying new things. I'm saying, don't make yourself unnecessarily miserable by drawing limits. Well, if your life goal is to be the person who owns the least amount at home, then you should think differently, but that's certainly not my goal. Think of it this way; it's like you eat a whole pizza sometimes. It's not a daily diet, and we all know that's probably not the healthiest meal on the planet, but it is okay to do it once in a while. It somewhat makes us feel better (at least that's true for me).

When life is throwing a curve ball with uncertainties, try to look for the problems you can solve with a simple action. Sometimes, we just have to let ourselves go, and not be the perfect person we want to be. And it's okay.

Chapter 24

Lessons I Learned from Tina Fey (and Why Comedy Rocks)

I'm a huge fan of comedy. Or I should say American comedy (not slapstick). I started watching it a few years back, when my English was finally good enough to understand sarcastic TV shows without subtitles (it's really not possible to translate sassy American jokes into Korean subtitles). My life with comedy started with watching *Saturday Night Live*, and *Late Night with Conan O'Brian* (the same who inspired my Twitter life). I haven't been the same person ever since.

I think highly of comedians, except the obnoxious ones. They are the funniest (obviously) and the smartest people in my standard. True intelligence comes from passion, not by waving arms and yelling 'I'm the smart one, I'm the smart one!' They can make ordinary things into something super funny, because it is such an ordinary thing that you wouldn't think twice, ever. Those, 'aha!' moment I love. At the same time, comedy always brings (subtle) valuable lessons and information. I admit, I got most of my American politics update every Sunday (because I was in Korea), watching *SNL*. It was as good as watching the news. I can make a full list of reasons why I love comedy, but I won't bore you with that.

Recently I re-read *Bossypants* by Tina Fey. If you haven't, please check it out. The best few hours of your life, I guarantee. I wanted inspiration, and who can be a better person to do so than a sarcastic comedy writer who can make fun of herself in the classiest and the

most brilliant way and send out a message to the world at the same time? Tina Fey worked in the improvisation comedy group called The Second City in Chicago before she was hired as a writer at *SNL*. She mentioned that the rules of improvisation appealed to her not only as a way of creating comedy, but as a worldview. It was so brilliant, I had to share it all with you. Especially if you are questioning your life about four thousand times a day, this is for you.

The first rule of improvisation is 'AGREE': always agree and SAY YES

Do you remember the movie *Yes Man*? And do you remember seeing some inspirational quote on the Internet on an awesome photo (probably sunset, sunrise, or the sea), saying say yes and take the leap, something like that? That is very true. Not because it's from the Internet (because the Internet is always right), but because it is the very fundamental attitude toward life.

We, common people, don't have a gift of telling what's going to happen in the future. If there are three choices in front of you, and two of them will lead you to the absolutely slippery trail full of mosquitoes and worms (because I can't stand them), but there's no way of knowing it. Life is giving you choices, presenting you with different options, and what are you going to do about it?

The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND

You opened the door, saw what was on the other side of the door, and now what? You can't stand by the door forever. One way or another, you have to make a decision. What's your next move?

The next rule is MAKE STATEMENTS: don't ask questions all the time, be part of the solution

There are so many questions in life that I can't answer right now (and I bet you are the same way, since you didn't quit this book). "What am I going to do with my life? Who am I? What do I really want? What's my future going to be? What if I'm going to be broke? How can I get an American visa? Where is my home? What if I fail?" All very logical and sensible questions, I know. Tina says, 'Don't just sit around raising questions and pointing out obstacles. Be part of the solution', and she's absolutely right. I have so many questions, but who am I asking? Who's going to answer them? I'm bouncing questions with questions, what a classy way to have a conversation with myself.

It's okay to have doubts and questions. But be part of the solution. Be the one cramming your brain full with thinking of answers. Instead of saying "What am I going to do with my life?", make a statement like "I don't know what I'm doing with my life but I'm out in the world, deal with it, world!"

THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, only opportunities

Think about it; if you are a writer, who's literally making the scene of a movie, how can there be a mistake? If you want to write about a haunted nail polish that was hidden in the back of your bookshelf, there you go, there's your subject. Same rule applies to life. How can there be mistakes, if you are the one creating the story? Every hump is an opportunity. Every choice you have to make, every person you meet, every place you go; those are the important parts of the plot. Unfortunately, life is not as same as writing a movie. We cannot command + a and delete when we don't like the outcome. In life, we have only one chance. That's why we are so stressed at making decisions. But you know what? **AGREE** with the opportunities you get,

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say YES, AND make the best out of your choice, be part of the solution if things aren't going well, because this is your chance to write a fabulous story called Your Life.

Comedy is more than just laughter. I love comedy. It's inspirational. Thanks Tina. I still haven't solved every secret of life, but at least I can write about it pretending that I already have.

Chapter 25

Lessons I Learned From The Gilmore Girls

The Gilmore Girls is one of my favorite TV shows of all time. As a pop-culture and comedy lover, I watch almost every comedy show and keep up with TV trends. But among them all, *The Gilmore Girls* has been one of my top programs, no doubt. It's a drama, comedy, literature, and music all together. It's one of the only shows that tell us it's okay to be a book nerd, music nerd, or just a nerd in general. Before *The Big Bang Theory*, Rory was our Sheldon.

I felt like I grew up with the show. Rory was right about my age, and she was entering Yale when I started my university. I was happy when she made good choices, and upset when she started dating Logan and stole the yacht. I watched the episode called "Will you just stand still?" over and over and over (I know you did too). I mean, Luke can see her face, and he said yes to her proposal without hesitating not even one second. I secretly looked for a pink winter coat, and searched the books Rory mentioned in every show.

The importance of community

Some time before and after *The Gilmore Girls*, I started picturing my own 'home.' TV and movies are great place to get your imagination going, and Star's Hollow has been always my dream place to live. It's a fictional place based on Washington, Connecticut. I like New

England's small town vibe, and Star's Hollow with its adorable town center and cute gazebo was no exception. But most of all, I fell in love the community of people there.

I grew up in a community as close-knit as Star's Hollow. Our family's small unit in an apartment building was one of six units in total. We could almost touch the next building through our window. We could talk to our neighbors between rooftops. It was a city that never slept by a very different definition. But when I was growing up in our little town, I never felt unsafe. I knew all the ladies and all the businesses on our block. When my mom was out, we hung out with a lady downstairs. We could drop our keys off at our neighbor's, and we shared holidays together. We camped out together on the rooftop on hot summer days. We very much belonged to the local community.

We lost that sense of community when we moved to the next town. I guess I was missing that feeling and regained it a bit by watching *The Gilmore Girls*.

Do you remember the scene in the last episode of the last season? The whole town threw a bon voyage party for Rory. And Richard said, "They did it for you, Lorelei." I wanted to live in a town where they cared enough for me and my family to throw a surprise goodbye party.

The importance of passion

Whenever I watch *The Gilmore Girls* (all the many, many times over and over again), Rory's passion for journalism always inspires me. I consider passion to be one of the cores of life. Her passion inspires me and also makes me a bit jealous that she's making such a great career and she's so talented. I cried but applauded when she chose her career over Logan. Oh Rory, you made me laugh and cry.

The importance of knowing who you are

As Lain Kim discovered her love of music and kept her true identity in secret for 15 years, as Lorelei encouraged Rory to be whoever she wanted to be, it's important to know who you are and be comfortable with it. I loved how Lorelei wore unique clothes, taught Rory to make a face on the graduation podium, drank coffee the way an elephant drinks water, and drove a funky old jeep; she knew exactly who she was and she was happy with it. And that's the message we all should learn from her.

The importance of family

At one point, I was almost cut off from my family. I really thought I could live my life without their support. I was cocky, and wrong. Similarly, Lorelei had a traumatic childhood in the Gilmore house. She was the ugly duckling. Nonetheless, she came around, and Emily and Richard came around. Even Mrs. Kim changed. Years ago when I had a big fight with my family, my friends told me 'They will understand someday.' and honestly I didn't believe them. I thought my relationship with my family was done for, that it would only be obligatory from then on. But just like Emily and Richard, my parents slowly started to understand me.

What I do cannot be done without family. I can't imagine not having a place to call home in Korea. Family is important, no matter what.

Mothers are human, too

Whenever I watched *The Gilmore Girls*, I always connected myself with Rory. We were going through the same things in life at the same time,

after all. But through the years I noticed that my focus shifted to Lorelei. These days I relate more to her struggle of balancing career and home life, parenting and having fun, and managing good relationships with other mothers. She sometimes gives up her own dreams to make a better life for her daughter. Rory doesn't always understand that her mother is human, and she can make mistakes.

As I get older, I see different sides of my own mother. She was a daughter, is a mother and a grandmother. I don't remember a time when she was her own self without being someone's mother, wife, or daughter. Just like Rory was always learning new things about Lorelei, I'm learning new things about my mom, starting to see her as a person, not just a mother. We weren't the best of friends like the Gilmore girls, but I'm fortunate to have such a supportive mother despite all the difficult circumstances.

Now, I need to watch some Gilmore Girls tonight. Oy with the poodles already!

Chapter 26

Wicked

This is how my Master's thesis starts:

Everyone deserves the chance to fly.
And if I'm flying solo, at least I'm flying free.

Yes, as I told you at the start of this book, I put the lyrics of *Defying Gravity* from the musical *Wicked* on my Master's thesis, the first page.

It was common to put something personal on the first or last page, because you deserved some sense of reward after all that soul-sucking thesis writing. But I'm pretty sure no one else in the engineering department included lyrics from an American musical.

This song deserved to be there because it helped me through graduate school. The attitude I learned from the song helped me deal with doubt and uncertainty during the two and a half years at my office job, when I didn't get along with the people I had to see for 12 hours a day. From the first moment, the sound track of *Wicked* was there to comfort me.

Back then, I'd only watched *Wicked* through YouTube and read the book. People love it because it touches on the experience of being a minority, an outcast or the odd one out. If you didn't grow up being the most popular kid in school, or if you felt flawed in any way, it's really hard not to love *Wicked*. I related so much for this reason to Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West. She is me, and is everyone. In the back-then popular TV show *Ugly Betty*, Betty was madly in love

with *Wicked* and said “*Elphaba is me! I’m not that girl!*” –‘that girl’ being anyone who’s popular, pretty, and ‘normal’—and a lot of us agreed with her. *Wicked* is the story of the other side of the Wizard of Oz, told through the Wicked Witch of the West, Elphaba’s, perspective. It explains how she saved Oz against the Wizard of Oz, who was actually discriminating against the Animals (Animals, capital A: the ones who could talk). Elphaba was a victim of the war, and Fiero the Scarecrow and Glinda the White Witch were the only ones who knew the truth. Others, like the Wizard and Elphaba’s sister, Nassa, framed Elphaba for their crimes because she was an easy target. It’s based on a novel written by Gregory McGuire and became a Broadway musical starring Kristin Chenoweth and Idina Menzel, that is still running on Broadway as one of the most popular musicals to this day.

Defying Gravity comes at the musical’s climax. It’s the moment where Elphaba is fighting against of the soldiers of Oz and becoming the Wicked Witch of the West.

Something has changed within me
Something is not the same
I’m through with playing by the rules of someone else’s game
Too late for second-guessing
Too late to go back to sleep
It’s time to trust my instincts.
Close my eyes and leap!

It’s time to try
Defying gravity
I think I’ll try
Defying gravity

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And you won't bring me down

I'm through accepting limits
'Cause someone says they're so
Some things I cannot change
But till I try, I'll never know!
Too long I've been afraid of
Losing love I guess I've lost
Well, if that's love
It comes at much too high a cost!

...

As someone told me lately
"Everyone deserves the chance to fly!"

...

And if I'm flying solo at least I'm flying free.

When I first heard the entire soundtrack, I knew I'd love this musical for a long time. Among all the great songs, *Defying Gravity* felt like the theme song of my life. The lyrics gave me a great deal of strength to go through what I was going through. I was indeed Elphaba, and I would gladly fly solo if I had to. I wrote my favorite lines from the lyrics on post-it notes and stuck them on top of my desk where I could see them every moment of the day.

Writing about *Wicked* on RunawayJuno.com helped me connect with women from around the world. Readers strongly agreed with what I had to say about the musical. There were a lot of other people out there who felt like they were Elphaba too.

Kristin Chenoweth and Idina Menzel are still two of my favorite musical performers. I've never seen them perform on stage in person, but it led me to read Kristin Chenoweth's autobiography,

watch the original *Rent* that Idina Menzel got a Tony nomination for for her role as Mimi.

In May 2012 I made my second trip to the east coast of the US. I was determined to visit Broadway this time (I was so upset with myself for not seeing *Wicked* on my first visit). Stephen and I arrived in Virginia in May to take a road trip, then to attend TBEX in Denver that July. After the conference we stayed with John and Kara, who are Stephen's friends from childhood. Kara has a great voice and surprise, surprise, is a huge fan of *Wicked*. We sang the entire soundtrack on our way up to Cheyenne, Wyoming one day. I could only imagine how we tired John and Stephen's ears.

Michael, Stephen's older brother, is a huge theater fan and was helping me get tickets to the show that summer for June 24th, my anniversary of bucket living. Then I got a handwritten note from Stephen. He said he wanted to take me to the show to celebrate my first anniversary—it was so thoughtful of him!

On June 24, 2012, we entered the Gershwin Theater in New York City. I was dressed up in a pretty navy, white, and beige dress I got tailor-made in Hoi An, Vietnam, and I wore party shoes with golden tassels on them. After we sat down in our seats and I took in the view, I couldn't believe that I was looking at that beautiful stage I'd only dreamt of seeing. Everything was exactly as I'd hoped. The mysterious green lights, nicely dressed audience, and our great seats—we were pretty close to the stage. I felt like a balloon, I was so filled with emotions.

Finally the lights went off, the crowd quietened down, and Glinda appeared on stage, just like I'd seen on YouTube. She was wearing a beautiful white dress, flying. This was billions and billions of times better than watching it on a tiny computer screen. I tried really hard not to sing along with all the songs—I wasn't listening on my iPod after all. I cried with joy and sadness, thinking about everything I'd

been through to get to this very seat. All the people I met just because I liked this musical, the articles I wrote about this song, the post-it notes in university. I'd never dreamt of visiting Broadway and this beautiful Gershwin Theater. How could I have? Years ago, travel never even seemed like a possibility.

When the show finished two and a half an hours later I was speechless. I didn't want to talk, I didn't want to evaluate. I wanted to just sit and think back on those amazing two hours. The stage had been smaller than in my imagination. Perhaps I'd made it bigger in my head. And the costumes. Wow. There were a hundred shades of green on stage. The costumes were beyond amazing. I would go to the Emerald City to just wear some of those outfits.



Figure 24 Stephen and I at the Wicked!

The miserable person I was four years ago, writing my thesis in my lab cubicle, would not believe what had just happened. Like Megan Hilty, who was Glinda after Kristen, sang on Smash, ‘*Thank God even the crazy dreams come true*’. Once again I realized that I didn’t make a mistake putting the lyrics in my Master’s thesis. I didn’t really understand the metaphor ‘defying gravity’ at first, but I guess in the end it’s exactly what I ended up doing: defying the social norms for women in Korea.

“I know who I am today because I knew you. Because I knew you I have been changed for good” –*For Good, Wicked*

Chapter 21

Epilogue

I always knew I was different, but couldn't tell exactly how or why. Appearance was the first difference I noticed. I was twice as big as other girls, and as tall as (or taller than) the boys at school. Aside from my appearance I considered myself a normal kid who was a bit shy and a good student. In middle school I started to stand out in other ways. I had gone through my own vortex of emotions about my future earlier than my friends. I knew what I wanted to be, but I hit the harsh reality that I couldn't always get what I wanted. At that period of time, books, art, and science became my main interest in life.

I am a person of many talents. But the thing is, while I was good at most of the things, I was never the best at anything. I was a good student but not first in school, was good at math and science but never got a perfect score, good at sports but never an athlete, was a people person but not the most popular among friends. I felt like a minority in everything, like I was misplaced in this world.

For the most part of my life, I felt like I didn't belong to whatever group I was around. Home wasn't an exception. I knew I wasn't a normal kid by many standards, but those unusual sides of me were considered to be a phase that would pass. After all, everyone has to walk the same path when they finally grow up. When those differences that people thought were a phase stuck with me, that was when the denial began. They couldn't imagine being someone who stands out. Everyone pretends to be the same person with the same standards in life, and that's why they were angry at me when I blew up their cover.

When I announced my decision to leave my engineering job to travel, a few of my good friends said 'I knew it', but most people said 'How could you?'

I developed self-pride, and tried continuing my passionate personality throughout many different life endeavors. But I wondered when I would feel fulfilled and satisfied at my life choices. I tried so hard to fit in. For most of my adulthood life, I tried and achieved becoming the successful person by everyone's normal standard. But it didn't make me happy.

I may never stop seeking answers, and questioning myself, but I've finally found my calling. I wasn't cut out to be living in a box, figuratively. I need physical freedom, and more importantly, freedom of the mind. Creativity and inspiration are my two most significant motivations, and I let life blind me.

I'm practicing a lifestyle called bucket living. I've been making a bucket list about everything ever since I remember (I'm a list person), and I finally got sick and tired of the list that never got shorter. What's the point of making the list, if it just ends as a wish? I spilled my bucket, and decided to live in it instead.

For the last three and a half years I've been traveling around the world, to the new places I haven't been. Working as a location-independent travel writer and photographer has made it possible. The job may seem like a fake one to the majority of people, but it has its own challenges just like any other real job, believe it or not. But I did it. If I fail to continue this lifestyle at some point, at least I can say I tried it. That's what youth is for.

Traveling the world has helped me seize on who I really am. When a person is surrounded by people, she or he has to be alert all the time and it would be quite easy to lose focus. The appropriate dress code, the polite gestures, acceptable colors, normal portions of food, holiday plans just like others, and so on. Even though I did, and still do have a

strong personality, I was busy focusing on what other people would think about me, rather than listening to my soul. It's astonishing the amount of information I've learned about myself through the last eleven years of on-and-off traveling. I've realized that you can't really tell who you really are without being truly alone. Traveling gave me the opportunity.

I'm writing the epilogue while sitting at a balcony overlooking the amazing Ella gap in Ella, Sri Lanka. I have been writing this book non-stop for several years, and I'm happy to finally see the end of it. There are many more stories I want to share with you. But there will be another chance to meet, I'm sure.

To the readers who've been made to think they're not so special: Don't let anyone get in your head. Everyone is special in her own way. If you don't know why you are special, it's just a matter of time before you discover your passion. Of course it's important not to overvalue yourself, but it is also equally important not to underestimate yourself. Try to keep a balance and don't let anyone make your life decisions for you.

To the readers who are afraid to take a big leap in life: It's your decision which path you'll follow, either a mainstream lifestyle or another. The important thing is you have to be true to yourself. It will be one of the biggest decisions of your adult life, and it shouldn't be impulsive, or done on a dare. Whatever comes at the end, it needs to be planned and thought through. And most importantly, have faith in your decision.

To the readers who think they can't do certain things in life because they weren't given them: Yes, it is a disadvantage that the starting line isn't same. But the question is, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to give up just because you weren't born in a country, which encourages you to be an entrepreneur, or a traveler? Every single person has his or her own challenge, and this is yours

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now. The starting point has already been given, but the finish line is all up to you.

I'm listening, the world is waiting, and your future is yours. You can change your life to be how you want, just like I did. Now, go get your happiness!

Afterword

From beginning to the end, it took me a lot of courage to write and finish this book. My journey of happiness was, and is complicated, just like yours. I always thought I had such a late start, compare to other people I met along the way. I blamed the situation I was born into. But you know what? We all have to start somewhere, and it can't be all the same. Frankly, the starting point doesn't matter. I know that now.

It took me a while to realize the wonderful things I was given; my wonderful *sijang* (market) that taught me the appreciation for good ingredients, my country that formed me the value of tradition and family, my brother who beat me up at times but has always been a rock, and my parents who shaped me into a person who I am. I used to think that they pulled me back from my dreams. Silly me. I didn't know how to build a bridge between our differences. Most of the times, I just didn't realize that I could shape my life as I wanted. It's not their fault but mine. I'm nothing but grateful for what they did for me. My world would feel empty without them.

My pursuit of happiness is still in progress. I'm still learning about myself, and figuring out how to live a happier life. The essential part of the journey is people. I have to thank my 'sisters' (and 'brothers' too, but it just sounds a bit weird) who have been impacted my life one way or another. I'm a better traveler because of you, I'm more knowledgeable because of you, and I'm a better person because of you. Thanks for all the inspirations you've given me.

Thank you, my talented editors and proofreaders, Katie Tibbetts, Colleen Khachatourians, and Hannah Pearson, who generously helped me through this difficult process. Sorry for the made up grammar and fictional words. Hope you will answer my email when I'm ready to draft my next book.

To my AWE family, thank you for believing in the vision, and be part of such an AWE-some community.

My loving husband, Stephen Bugno, thank you for encouraging me to find my happiness and being there with me every step of the way. To quote Julia Child, you are 'ghee' to my egg, and kimchi to my life.

The best parents-in-laws one could ask for, Paulette and Robert Bugno, I'll be eternally grateful for your kindness, unconditional love, and support you've give me over the years.

Thank you, my readers who are sparing their time to read my stories. I hope my stories inspire you to look back at your life, and chase the happiness you deserve. You are beautiful, unique, and special. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise.

About the Author



Juno Kim is an award-winning storyteller, writer, and photographer at Runaway Juno Media.

Originally hailing from Seoul, South Korea, Juno set off for the wider world to pursue her passion for international travel and storytelling. Since leaving her engineering job, she has been living out of a backpack, writing, and photographing her way through more than 45 countries for last four years.

She believes there are always stories to tell, in any corner of the world. She's been participating in numerous global-wide new media campaigns as a digital influencer. She also opened several photography exhibitions.

Juno initiated the Asian Women's Empowerment Organization and hosted its first annual conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to empower Asian women to pursue their passions and a more independent lifestyle. She and her team successfully hosted AWE '14

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in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia in 2014 and AWE '15 in Jogja, Indonesia in 2015. Now they are preparing for more AWE-some conference in 2016.

She publishes her work on Runaway Juno (<http://RunawayJuno.com>), and also she can be found in various social media channels.

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**A Journey to Find Happiness,
Inspiration and courage**
And You can do it too!

I dramatically changed my life when I left my job as a mechanical engineer to travel the world. Breaking out of the social norm in Korea was the hardest thing I've ever done. I developed self-pride, and tried continuing my passionate personality throughout many different life endeavors.

For most of my adulthood life, I tried and achieved becoming the successful person by everyone's normal standard. But it didn't make me happy. I may never stop seeking answers, and questioning myself, but I've finally found my calling. I'm Bucket Living!



Jiyeon Juno Kim is the founder of multi-media storytelling company, Runaway Juno Media. Originally hailing from Seoul, South Korea, Juno set off for the wider world to pursue her passion for international travel and storytelling. Since leaving her engineering job, she has been living out of a backpack, writing and photographing her way through more than 45 countries for last four years.

She initiated Asian Women's Empowerment Conference to bring together like-minded women who shared a similar vision. She and her team are preparing more AWE-some events.



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