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HOME & GARDEN

Forced From Home Yet Never Free of It

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Domestic Lives

By SUKI KIM

WITH each year, my childhood house grows bigger in my mind, each nook and corridor casting a longer shadow. The stone steps, about a hundred in total, appear elongated, as if they might reach the sky rather than the front gate. The pomegranate trees and forsythia that had once filled the garden have overgrown into a tropic wilderness, a meteorological miracle for South Korea. The pond, where I looked for the koi with their multiple colors, has turned into a reservoir as deep as the one in Central Park. Rising beyond it all are the peacocks from my father's menagerie, and I wait, as I have always, for the magical fanning of their tails.

I was 12 years old when we fled our home in the dead of night. The moments when my past comes rushing at me and converges with my immediate surroundings should grow fewer as I get older. But even now, decades later, standing in my kitchen on the Upper West Side, I inevitably pause before throwing out leftover salad and think, "Oh, but I must save it for the peacocks."

Over the years, I never considered any apartment more than temporary. Each one remained spare, with bare walls and no personal touches — as

though I might need to grab everything in a few seconds and run. When I moved into my boyfriend's apartment a few years ago, I came with one small box and some bags of clothes. He asked where the rest of my stuff was. People often ask me where my things are. The question always brings me back there, to South Korea; in my mind I deposit my suitcase at the bottom of those implausibly long steps and look up at the house, towering above.

I believe I had missed my home even when I was living there — the way one might prematurely mourn one's beloved in anticipation of his imminent departure. I recall crying every summer when, as a child, I was sent away to my grandparents' house. My young mother, who had once modeled for a Japanese photographer, always dressed up for the occasion. I remember her standing by the columns at the front door in a tweed dress with matching knee-high boots in dove gray leather. With her long brown hair in a loose bun and a pair of oversize sunglasses, she looked like a movie star as she kissed me once before waving me off into a chauffeured car. But it was the beginning of summer, and her outfit suggested cooler weather, which makes me wonder if I am mixing up moments.

I have easily forgotten the summers at my grandparents' house because they preferred my sister, for reasons never explained, and my brother, the son and an heir to our clan of Kim. But I recall with great clarity the flutter in my heart when, at summer's end, the car finally pulled back up to our gate.

The house was my father's obsession and was undergoing perennial renovation. Upon returning from our grandparents', we would find the gate positioned at a completely different angle, or the garden lit up like Christmas, with brilliant lanterns hanging from the trees. The orchard appeared as if by magic, with shiny apples that were not there at the start of summer. One year a well was dug, and my father declared, in his usual romantic way, that from now on his children would drink only fresh spring water. Years later, I believe I fell in love with my boyfriend when he bought me a bottle of Evian on our first date.

Then there were the animals, which thrilled me. (This surprises me now, since I have grown into an adult with no hankering for pets. For a long time, I was one of the few single women I knew in New York without a cat.) Our house and grounds were filled with pheasants and rock pigeons, turkeys and deer, and, of course, the peacocks. Once, I returned from school to find a spiky ball in the foyer. I had seen porcupines only in mangas and was eager to examine it closely, but my mother was not so amused by this new addition. This was South Korea in the 1970s, and we were not country folks. Soon, my classmates visited the house on school trips, which made me feel special and yet oddly uneasy.

On Sundays, the governess would wake us at dawn for the “Tiger Hunt,” my father’s name for our weekly expedition. The maid would dress us in our “hunting outfits” —corduroy pants and flowery hats much like the ones that Melissa Gilbert wore in “Little House on the Prairie.” We would form a line and circle the small hill behind our house as my father made a big show of a shotgun and a fishing rod. If we had no luck with a tiger sighting, he told us grimly, he might stick some bubble gum on the end of the fishing rod and fling it at the trees to see what else might be up there. My sister and I found this funny and played along, but my little brother was always on the lookout for tigers and was crushed when we inevitably returned home with only cicadas in our bags.

Soon my father had no time for such Sundays. The early ’80s in South Korea was a time of political unrest and economic upheaval, and his businesses — from the shipping company and mining ventures to the hotels — collapsed rapidly. The end happened without warning. In the middle of the night, my sister and I were awakened with hushed whispers. I had just started junior high school, and the building was on the same block as the house of a boy I had long harbored a crush on. I always looked for him while waiting for the chauffeur to pick me up after school. On that final night, as I rushed to gather my things before being whisked into a car, it dawned on me that I

would never see him again.

I may have hesitated before my extensive doll collection, unable to decide which one to bring along, but I am uncertain if that really happened or if such a concrete memory was contrived and imposed later. What I am certain of, however, is that from an end so abrupt and unrequited is born the mantra of what-ifs, which carried me through the darkly vague years that followed.

My sister and I were left with my grandparents, while my parents took my brother because he was too young to be separated from them and went into hiding; bankruptcy in South Korea was punishable by a hefty jail term, and the police were after them. When we were finally reunited with our parents at Kennedy Airport a few months after I turned 13, everything had changed.

They had borrowed money to find their way to America and were working around the clock to pay it back. My mother looked thinner and noticeably aged from a series of manual jobs, and my father was no longer wearing a suit. My brother seemed not so little anymore. The first house my parents rented was a shabby one-bedroom apartment in Queens that, no matter how I try, I cannot recall clearly. Those years are also marked by silence. My mother tongue was gone suddenly and replaced by an unfamiliar sound called the English language, with which, despite my relentless struggle, I have never felt quite at home.

Years later, during a visit to South Korea, I did attempt to return to my home. I had reached the age my mother must have been when she stood at that front door looking picture perfect, as though she belonged there and nowhere else. The bus and taxi rides felt interminable. When the car finally pulled onto a narrow street between concrete apartment blocks, I paused in my seat, unable to move. A couple of old women peered in to ask if I was lost. When I rolled down the window a little and told them my old address, they said I was parked right near it.

Through the window, I glanced toward the empty space at which they

were pointing. There might have been a house, or the remnants of a house perhaps. A temple in ruins, one of the women might have said, although I cannot be sure because I never did get out of the car. I sat in that strange corner of the world, which held no glimmer of recognition, before finally telling the driver to take me back to where I came from.

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