

Look Back

Tanya Ko

I. Oma, how did you come to America?

My 10th grade daughter asked.
The textbook answer or the truth?
For better education, better opportunities and better life.

Oma, it's so boring. All Asians in my class have the same answers.

Yes, we want to run away from that truth.
we want to not remember.
We want to protect— not to cause problems.
We learn to pretend—

I didn't want to look back.
But, I have to write this story for me.
Why now?

I travel to the back of my mind,
all the way to Korea.
all the way to where I was born and raised,

...how I came to America

II. Paper Divorce

When the Korean President,
Park Chung Hee got shot
war was a rumor.

Mother wanted us to go
to America,
the strongest, happiest and richest place.

Paradise of the world.

But how to get us there?
No relative married to an American.
No tickets.

Paper divorce was my parents' decision.

Of course,
they didn't ask
our permission.
Best shot for their children:
new paper mom in the States.

It happened secretly—
Of course
it was illegal,
but to survive, I had learned to pretend not to know.

III. Interview with an Immigration Officer

Only the children, four of us had to be interviewed.
My father worried like always
that we wouldn't pass.

I learned how to lie with innocent face—
how to let my tears fall
as I gazed at his hands.

My sister and brothers sat in silence
while I lied to protect my family
It was always my duty to perform.

Where is your mother?

(My mother made breakfast this morning, but it is not on the script.
I put on a sad face...)

*We didn't see our mom about two years. We lost contact with her.
We hope to see her before we go to America.*

Where are you going to live?

We will go to Hawaii and will live with our father and a new mother.
(Is this how I learned to live in illusion?
He is writing on a yellow pad.)

What about your youngest sister?

(Do I have a younger sister? Oh, my father's love child.)

Why isn't she going with you guys?

(I hate her at that moment; she is always a stumbling block.)

She is too young to go—she doesn't want to go.

My real mother will take care of her.

(Another lie.)

What do you want to do in America?

We will study hard and become a good person—

He stamped the paper.

Have a great life in America.

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