



*Ajumma:*  
*True stories of*  
*Korean women*

An English language textbook  
By David Miretti

# WARNING:

**This book addresses adult themes and topics. It is meant for intermediate to advanced English students who are mature adults. If you are not a mature adult, please do not continue reading.**

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## Ajumma

In Korean, the term “Ajumma” describes married women who have children. Some say that the history of this word literally means a baby carrier. Traditionally, Korean women, like many others, have been seen as little more than baby carriers. Korean women have been continually defined in others' terms, rather than for who they are as individuals. Traditionally, Korean women are first their fathers' daughters, then their husbands' wives, and finally their children's mothers. In spite of rapid modernization since the early Seventies, women are still often treated as inferior in the Korean society, much as they are in various places around the world. More than an attempt to change Korea, this e-book was conceived as a way to simply give a voice to the lives many Korean women usually live in silence. These stories are unique, and yet normal and average at the same time. This is not a representative sample of all Korean women, nor is it meant to be taken that way. Some may criticize the fact that all of these women speak English and are hence a different lot of women than “normal” Korean women. That mindset misses the point that each person is unique and has a unique story to tell—his or her own.

Some of these women are indeed mothers and wives but in this book, the reader will find stories from single women, divorced women, young women, old women, and many others as well. These stories will surely encourage and inspire readers, both male and female, from any country, as the details, joys, and heartaches are the common stories of people everywhere.

This book has taken shape since 2003 when I first started teaching English in Korea. One of my first experiences with culture shock occurred when my female colleagues were discouraged from befriending their male colleagues for fear it might give the wrong impression or imply that they were of low moral character. That was in a modern city with a population of more than one million. Women were not allowed to smoke in front of the school, but male teachers were always there, smoking like chimneys. My foreign friends dated some Korean women who kept everything secret and couldn't even hold hands when they were near their homes. Another Korean woman told me of how she overcame her struggles after her mother passed away, and others told me of heartbreak and sobering limitations on them simply because they were women. The stories that embodied the true strength of Korean women fascinated me and reminded me of my own mother's quiet power and solidness in ever-changing times. When I started teaching at a university, I had the opportunity to have an adult continuing education class. The class started with more than thirty women and two male students, but both men stopped coming after two classes with all the ladies. Being the only male in a class of women created a wonderful dynamic where I learned more than I could hope to teach in my entire lifetime. The women opened their hearts and lives to each other and me, creating an exciting and unparalleled circle of trust.

We talked about the serious stuff that usually stays hidden or ignored in Korean society and societies in the more than fifty countries I've had the honor of visiting—the taboos, the abortions, husbands cheating, babies out of wedlock, wives cheating,

husbands cheating, deaths, fears, mothers-in-law, and a thousand other topics. After the class, the project expanded. Women from all over Korea started sharing their stories with me individually in interviews, which all took place in English. Each interview started with the simple statement, “tell me about when you were a child.” Names and some identifying details have been changed to protect the women's privacy. The stories are theirs; the errors and weaknesses are mine alone.

### **WHY FREE?**

In the beginning, I wanted to sell this book and retire on a nice beach somewhere in paradise, being ever overconfident in my ability as a writer. After starting to interview and write the different women's stories, it didn't feel right trying to profit from their lives and pain. At the same time, I noted with disgust how so many EFL students have wasted their hard-earned money for the newest educational gimmick or textbook that promises to be the cure for all their language learning desires, but in fact just sit on a shelf somewhere gathering dust because those books are not student-focused. There are many open-source projects which seek to open education and technology to everyone. As I prepared to leave Korea, I realized that this could be my token of gratitude for the many years of friendship and love Koreans have given to me.

Finally, this project would be incomplete without my eternal gratitude to the women who shared their stories with me, the women who pushed me to finish,

and the women I grew up with as family. This book would never have taken shape without their love and encouragement. Thank you and *kamsahamnida*.

### **NOTES TO TEACHERS:**

These stories are meant to spark discussion. Some of the topics might be very sensitive to some people, so it is best to build a solid foundation of trust among the group from the earliest stages.

The following tips might help you create the necessary atmosphere of trust and sharing:

1. Set ground rules. At the bare minimum, students and teachers must pledge strict confidentiality. What is said in the classroom stays in the classroom. When people are asked to be vulnerable and open about their lives, it is absolutely crucial that they can know it will not find its way back to someone else involved. You should come up with other ground rules as a class.
2. Also, it is important that students and teachers make a true effort not to judge other people. In this sort of classroom, people may often bring out stories that conflict with our own personal values. What is important to remember is that our own stories might have a similar effect on others. Suspend judgment whenever possible.
3. Listen empathetically. This means trying to put oneself in the speaker's position. Although difficult, listening with total focus on the speaker is a great habit to practice and encourage in these classes.
4. If a student feels uncomfortable discussing a specific topic, don't force him or her. Continue the discussion with other students if

possible. If not, discuss why that particular topic is taboo in the students' culture. This can often open many areas to explore, and leads to personal awareness.

I have found that discussion classes are most effective in a cooperative learning environment. Rather than adopting a "teacher-is-perfect" model, classes need to be student-centered in order to get the students to open up. One of the greatest results from taking the time to create this sort of classroom is that telling stories is intrinsically motivating.

People want to connect with others, to share their weaknesses and strengths, their sorrows and joys, and their failures and successes. These types of classes gain a momentum of their own, and the best thing is for the teacher to step back and let the class go. From the conversations and stories, the teacher can note linguistic weaknesses in lexicon and grammar, and then address them either at the end of class or at the beginning of the next class. This book is based on the premise that language acquisition happens most readily during the *use* of the language.

The following icebreakers and team building exercises might be useful in the beginning of your class:

1. Pass out some sort of candies such as M&Ms. Tell them to take as many as they want, but not to eat them. After each person has a small pile of candy, tell them that they have to share one thing about themselves for each piece of candy they took. Afterwards, they can enjoy the candy.

2. Have each student write four true things about him/herself. He/she should write one false thing. Students should share and the other students should guess which one is untrue.
3. Have one student wear a blindfold. The sighted students should lead him/her around the room avoiding various obstacles. Finish by debriefing students about how it felt to rely completely on others.
4. Create your own team building tasks and have students find their own. A good place to start is by reading management and leadership resources. You can also find a few good ideas at [http://www2.krellinst.org/AiS/textbook/manual/lplans/unit3/lp\\_teamdev3.3.html](http://www2.krellinst.org/AiS/textbook/manual/lplans/unit3/lp_teamdev3.3.html)

Enjoy these women's stories and the best stories which are yet untold by students yet unknown. If you have questions, suggestions, or comments, email me at [dmiretti@gmail.com](mailto:dmiretti@gmail.com).

## **MIN-JI**

*“Please respect me. I’m a human, not just a woman.”*

Min-ji is deceptively youthful and one would guess her to be in her late forties not twenty years older. Her sixty-four years of life have forged her into a fiery woman with a definite opinion and not much hesitation to voice it. Perhaps some of this fire is due to her position as the youngest of twelve in her family. Perhaps it’s due to her survivor mentality. Perhaps it’s her high education, or the combination of so many different things including all of these. Whatever the source, Min-ji has the fire of a jalapeño pepper that cuts through the blandness of routine living.

Although she is in her silver years, her life is still filled with book clubs, social engagements, and continued academic pursuits. An avid reader, Min-ji was especially impressed with Fyodor Dostoevsky, the Russian writer whose writing captured so much of the human suffering she knows all-too well herself. Fifty-five years ago, she would have never been able to imagine her life would be so fulfilled, or even that she would be able to survive this long.

Min-ji grew up in Seoul and was there when the Korean War broke out. The South Korean government had promised to defend Seoul, but instead bombed the bridge, cutting off the only escape out of the city for thousands. Her father was captured; her sister was killed. No further news was heard of her father, and she assumes he too was murdered by the North Korean forces during the war. Eventually she and her brothers and sisters ended up in a P.O.W (Prisoners Of War) camp on Goje Island in the south of the peninsula. While there,

she celebrated her ninth birthday as she helplessly watched five of her eleven siblings die from disease, starvation, and other causes. Three of her brothers kept her safe, but no one could ever protect her heart from the searing pain of what she witnessed. After the war, like for so many other refugees, it was a struggle for Min-ji to survive. There was never enough to eat and the ensuing famine left scars that time will never heal. In this environment she grew to be a young woman.

From an early age she was active both politically and intellectually. The Korean War had barely ended when the domestic struggle for democracy began in Korea. The ongoing struggle deeply affected the lady Min-ji would become. In particular, the April 19th Student Revolution seared deeply into her mind.

People all over the peninsula had been protesting corruption in elections that resulted in a bed-ridden man being elected as vice president with nearly 100 percent of the vote. Riots started when the body of a high school student, Ju-yul Kim, was found floating in the Masan Harbor, near Goje. His head had been split open with a tear gas canister. The city was blacked out, and the domestic minister ordered shots fired. More than 140 unarmed students were injured and killed, and the incident led to the resignation of President Syngman Rhee, and death of the vice-president Ki-boong Lee and his family either through suicide or murder. She was only twelve, but she wanted to help.

Unfortunately, she was crushed when the volunteers at the blood drive for the victims turned her away because she was too skinny and unhealthy.

Those health problems would continue to plague her over the next few years. Her dreams of being an artist, a writer, or a professional musician had to be

given up because so many diseases and problems racked her body. That was one of the few times that Min-ji ever gave up on anything, but now she has started pursuing those dreams again, writing letters and taking various classes in her free time even though she is now in her mid-sixties. She embraces life completely, and is surrounded by success after success. However, this too was not always the case.

Twice she failed the all-important university exams. She felt weak and depressed, searching for some way to escape the sadness, often not even having enough energy to even leave her house. Ridicule and abuse were her family's answer; abuse that lessened only after she couldn't get out of bed for three days. As the saying goes, "the third time's a charm," and her third attempt at the examinations after studying much harder was a charm. She passed the exams, and eventually even went on to get her Master's degree.

Although her husband is a high-ranking executive for a multinational company, she refuses to be defined in terms of him, and pity the person who might dare make that mistake!

As she related,

Korea is under the *paterfamilias* system. First women must obey and subjugate themselves to their fathers. After that, the father is traded for a husband, and later in life, perhaps the oldest son will take the role. Many of the older generation advise new Korean wives to follow the 3-3-3 system. For the first three years, the wives have to close their eyes to their husband's faults. The next three years, the wives must be deaf to their husband's nagging. Perhaps the wife will know something by the next

three years of marriage. The wife should be mute for those three years and say nothing. I can't disagree more!

She was never blind or deaf to her husband's faults. In fact, her marriage story began in a different way. The problems began when the newlyweds had to live together with her family-in-law. Compromise was in order, but compromise was never in her vocabulary before, and it was especially difficult because she could barely respect her father-in-law due to his many extramarital affairs and multiple wives. The traditional recipe for harmony in the Korean home was for the man and woman to take on prescribed roles. The husband was to be the sky and sun, and the wife was to be the subservient earth. Min-ji saw this for the inhumane outdated system it was, and never succumbed. It was a continual struggle between the pepper and those who preferred the status quo.

Never could she grasp why she should be second-class because of gender. Never could she accept belittlement because of gender. Never could she bend to the desires of those who wished to ignore her merely because she had been born with breasts instead of balls.

Her wise investments and frugal management allowed her family to become quite wealthy over the years. During the booming economy of the Park Chong-hee era, she and her husband were able to buy a second house of their own, but the memories of her past never left her. Even in the new times of affluence Min-ji often reminded her only son, "Never complain about food. It's a gift from God," because she could never forget the times that forged her. Family is vital to Min-ji, and she related with a chuckle stories of her first visits to her brothers in London. "I was so surprised and impressed, but I

was afraid to speak English because of my accent,” she recalled. Now she has no fear, especially after traveling to more than thirty other countries. Her nieces and nephews still live in England. “They are bananas,” she said about their adaptation to England. “They may look yellow on the outside, but they are completely white on the inside.”

As Min-ji gets older, she continues to strive to make a positive difference around her. Rather than retiring, she believes this is the time where she can begin to have the biggest impact on her society. Full of vigor and energy, she continues to remember her past while keeping her eyes firmly fixed on a better future that is definitely possible.

From her life, it is clear that Min-ji believes a pepper is of no use resting on the vine. The only way to release the pepper's full power is to grind it up and use it. Min-ji definitely has the potency of a pepper that has gone through the grinder of life and has come out ready to flavor all she touches around her.

### **Vocabulary**

Frugal-(adj) careful and thoughtful use of money that usually leads to savings.

Searing- (adj) burning with a hot, intense heat; severely intense

Prescribed –(adj) following a set of rules and directions

Ridicule –(n) language that mocks or makes fun of someone; language that causes contempt and derision

Peninsula –(n) a body of land that is surrounded by water but still connected to a larger landmass; Spain and Portugal together, and Korea are peninsulas.

### **Journal and discussion questions.**

1. Do you know any people who are “bananas” where they look one way on the outside, but their mentalities are completely different inside due to living in a different culture?
2. Why do you think Min-ji survived so many tragedies while most of her family did not?
3. What do you think would have happened if Min-ji had quit after one or two failures?
4. Have you ever failed something? What did you do? Were you happy with the outcome?
5. Who are some people you *respect* or *disrespect*? Why?
6. Should women be defined in terms of their husbands or children? Why or why not?
7. Is a woman who wishes to have her own success selfish? Why or why not?
8. Should men be defined in terms of their families, jobs, or how much money they have?
9. What is the worst scenario you could imagine surviving or have already survived?
10. Is democracy worth fighting for?

### **Optional activities (30-50 minutes)**

1. Research a mass protest or civil war in your own country. Who were the participants? What happened? Is there any disagreement between the sources you found? If yes, what do you think is the explanation for this discrepancy?

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2. Imagine you are a reporter on the scene of one of the events that happened in Min-ji's life or in the incident you researched above. What sort of questions would you ask? Who would you want to interview? What difficulties might arise as you ask these questions? If time permits, act out the scenario with a classmate.

## **HYE-JIN**

South Korea is a mountainous country, with over seventy percent of the peninsula covered in mountains. It is also surrounded by many islands, including the large islands of Jeju in the south, and Uleung in the east. It is a perfect place to explore on a motorcycle, and the scenery going through the mountains is breathtaking! I had ridden my motorcycle up the east coast of Korea to the city of Pohang, a city known for its seafood and steel. While waiting for a ferry to Uleung Island, I met Hye-jin.

She is a twenty-three-year-old engineering student at Postech, one of the best universities in South Korea and was quite excited to talk to a foreigner and use the English she had studied. She grew up in the countryside near Pohang, where her father's side was very poor but her mother's family was quite rich. That created a lot of tension while she was growing up. None of her extended family liked her because she wasn't a boy. While growing up, she hated her great-grandma because of this, but regretted it in hindsight.

Hye-jin had a very unhappy childhood. Her mother was too tired to give her time, and she couldn't see her father often. Her parents were gone, so her aunt raised her. At least she stayed with her aunt. The love a young child thrives on was never present. When she was only two years old, her aunt tried to kill her by dropping her in a river, but luckily someone saved her. Hye-jin was always alone and never had good food. When she was five, her family moved to Pohang so she could have more educational opportunities. The dirtiness of the big city made a lasting impression on her. For the first time, she could see other people also living poorly, but she was happy to be back with her family.

It was the first time Hye-jin saw taxis and cars, and she thought she could fly if only she could touch one of them passing by. She grabbed her younger sister's hand and reached out to grab one as it passed. Her younger sister Mi-ran caught her leg under the car. Mi-ran's leg was mangled horribly. Inexperienced country doctors without adequate training made it far worse, and Mi-ran would never recover full use of her left leg. Her grandma blamed her mom, and in turn, her mom blamed Hye-jin. Regardless of who was to blame,

nothing could be done and Hye-jin's little sister grew up crippled. Mi-ran accepted it as her destiny and their close bond as sisters would only grow stronger over the years. To reassure Hye-jin, Mi-ran would often say sweet things like, "I don't like running anyway." Hye-jin was there ready to beat up anyone who dared make fun of her precious sister and grew tougher and more resilient because of the tragedy.

Hye-jin recalled how coarse her father's friends were and how they often made inappropriate sexual jokes even though she was only nine or ten. Instead of getting angry at his friends, her father's only response was only to say "go outside and play." She often hated her parents and decided that getting a good education was the best way to avoid becoming like them. Sometimes she slept less than three hours a night because she was studying so hard. Whatever it took, Hye-jin was determined that she would not end up like her parents.

When she was thirteen, Hye-jin accidentally overheard her mother's phone conversation and found out that her father had been cheating on her mother. Her father was an alcoholic who often broke things in violent rages, but somehow found the power to control himself from beating them. Stress from his job continually exacerbated the situation. One day he didn't come home and rumors started to fly about the possibility that he had moved to another city to be with one of his lovers who only wanted his money. Her mother wanted to divorce, but remained in the marriage because she thought it would be better for the children.

When Hye-jin was sixteen, her mother suddenly became completely understanding of her father working late and mysteriously started accepting almost anything he did. Her mother's style changed. She started wearing heavy makeup and coming home early in the morning smelling of alcohol and cigarette smoke. One day they went to the sauna and a man followed them. He asked for her mother at the sauna, and another woman said he was such a bad man. When they left the sauna, the same man followed them to their home. Hye-jin listened to their phone conversation and was shocked when he said, "I love you. I can make you happy. Let's leave together." Her mom replied, "I could never do that. Don't call here again." He started bothering their neighbors and soon

everyone knew that her mother had become a *norae-bang* girl, one of the ladies who were paid for entertainment and sex at the singing rooms popular in Korea.

He was the first of many men to profess their love for her mother, and Hye-jin's anger and embarrassment mounted to the point where she didn't want to leave the house. Her mother tried to buy her love with snacks and pocket money, but nothing was enough to cover the shame she felt knowing her mother was a prostitute.

One day, another man came to their home professing his love for her mother. Hye-jin really wanted to kill him and picked up a knife, but he just laughed it off. Her mother apologized for Hye-jin's behavior without realizing her Mir-an was watching everything. Mi-ran cried for two days straight, and Hye-jin had a hard time respecting her mother for many years after that incident.

That continued for almost two years, but her father never found out. Her mother eventually stopped that line of work because she saw the effects it was having on her daughters. It was too late for Hye-jin. She had already stopped studying and started hanging out with a bad crowd. She stole money from her parents and started drinking.

When she was seventeen, her mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. A hysterectomy was needed to save her mother's life, and Hye-jin got drunk instead of going to visit her at the hospital. She passed out next to her recovering mother's hospital bed, ashamed of her life and unable to do much to change. Drinking turned into darker expressions of the pain inside. Hye-jin started cutting her arms with small knives for about six months and made up absurd lies about falling and paper cuts that those around her were too ready to believe.

Her father started his own business and one day she went to visit him at his office and he had a "*tabang*" girl (young women who deliver coffee and sexual favors to clients in South Korea) on his knee that was about the same age as her. Hye-jin went into a rage and wanted to kill them both right there. Instead, she went home and broke everything she

could put her hands on, then got drunk on the Korean alcohol soju. Her father came home and apologized and everything got sorted out a few weeks later. Her mother and father regretted their actions and started repairing their broken marriage and family.

As she said, "my father broke my heart so many times, but he never stopped believing in me. He always told me how special I was and how much he loved me. We took a lot of trips together and he taught me so much about respect for nature and survival. I always wanted to forgive him and my mother, but I didn't know how. In a way, I felt like I was responsible for my father working so hard and my mother being unable to divorce when she wanted to. Now I feel happy to have my family back together." In Hye-jin's case, it seems that time does heal all wounds, and her family life has started improving since Hye-jin brought home a puppy that somehow brought all the family together again. Her father and mother started talking again and things have been improving steadily at home.

With her family growing closer every day, success, money, and having a happy family of her own drive Hye-jin now. She wants to be a millionaire because of the freedom she thinks it will give her. Hye-jin has already planned the course she will take and is investing in spite of her young age. She knows that as a woman there is a real glass ceiling, especially in the field of engineering. Most people around her tell her that she can't do certain things because she is a woman. She sees that other women around her are expected to quit their jobs and careers if they have children. "Other women I see don't have their own lives. Their lives belong to their families and have no say in their destiny. My success and life is so important that if I marry someone who doesn't support me, I'll divorce him and move to another country."

As someone who has already traveled to more than ten countries, she knows other opportunities exist and she doesn't feel she has to settle for anything less than the best partner. Her first boyfriend was a horrible man who always left her guessing whether he really loved her or not. At the age of nineteen, they consummated their relationship and then traveled to Europe together. That trip remains a secret even

from her closest friends. This is the duality for a Korean woman who chooses to live in a rebellious way. It must remain a secret. She thought having sex would convince him to marry her but he never thought about it. He was a complete mooch and she paid for everything. He was also angry and abusive. Once they were driving together and a taxi driver swore at him. He rammed the taxi even though she was in the passenger seat.

As many do, she stayed with him for a long time because she felt she had to marry him because they had had sex. He treated her as a play toy, and then suddenly broke up with her.

A couple years later, a man started courting her. He sent her a new bouquet of roses every day for almost a week. Finally, she said, "If you send me any more roses, I'll kill you," and they went on their first date. It was a lot of fun, and they hit it off immediately. The next day, he grabbed her hand and they went to another city to take pictures. They've been together ever since making their own happily ever after. She was his first lover, and she regrets that she didn't save herself for him. Now she feels free and does many things that are taboo for Korean women. For example, she often skateboards and doesn't hesitate to travel alone even though she has encountered problems while traveling. Once she was going through the Heathrow customs and the officer asked her how she was going to get to Germany. She replied that she was going to take the Eurostar, which only connects England and France, because she didn't understand his English. Over the next few hours, he interrogated her and made her feel like a criminal. "After that, I realized how important English is to my life. Instead of being something that I had to study, it became a pleasurable experience that I could see had a real benefit for my life," she related.

On being a Korean woman:

"In Korea, being a woman means being a mother. It means preparing perfect meals, not having your own life, and only caring for others in the family. The end of life is motherhood. I

see this and I want to change the Korean culture. Even now, my family is segregated by gender at holiday meals. My mother doesn't even eat at the table. She has to hurry and eat her meals in the corner. Women can't perform the chaysa (the ceremonial bows for ancestors). I can't agree with this aspect of my culture. Divorce is not a crime. Traditionally men are seen as on high, and women are the ground, but I want more. Communication and love are the keys. Hiding and lying are never good for anyone."

## **Vocabulary**

To be crippled-(adj) The inability to move body parts such as legs or arms.

Coarse-(adj) Being rude; not having good manners; impolite; obscene.

Consummate (something)-(v) To have sex with someone for the first time.

Exacerbate (something)-(v) To make something worse.

Mooch-(v/n) To survive by taking money from others

Interrogate-(v) To ask questions many times because someone thinks the answers are lies.

Glass ceiling-(n) The unspoken limit of how high someone can go in a company or society due to their gender, race, or some other factor.

Resilient-(adj), Resiliency-(n) The ability to recover

from something bad.

### **Journal and discussion questions.**

Answer these questions in a journal, in small groups, or both.

1. How did Hye-jin's parents affect her and her sister growing up?
2. Would Hye-jin's life have been different if her parents had divorced? Would it have been better or worse for her parents to divorce rather than staying together?
3. What are some healthier ways Hye-jin could have dealt with the pain and anger from her parents rather than cutting herself and drinking too much?
4. Reflect on your own life now. In what ways are you similar or different from Hye-jin?
5. Write about any similar experiences of difficulties in your own life or your friends' lives. How did the people involved survive?
6. What would you say to a friend who is having problems in his or her marriage and wants to cheat on his or her spouse?
7. Will Hye-jin succeed in her life? Why or why not?
8. What do you imagine her married life will be like? Will she be able to have a happy marriage? Why or why not?

9. What advice would you give Hye-jin about love, marriage, and children?
10. Can you think of any instances where hiding and lying are actually good for a relationship?
11. Tell about an instance from your own life where you lied to someone you love in order to protect him or her. What happened after the lie? How did it affect your relationship?

### **Optional classroom activities**

#### 1. Debate (30 minutes)

Separate into two groups. Have one person flip a coin. Whichever side is "heads" will brainstorm any positive aspects of prostitution. The "tails" group will brainstorm negative aspects of prostitution. The goal of the brainstorming session is to think of as many ideas as possible, not to judge whether any particular idea is good or bad. After discussion in small groups for five to ten minutes, come together as an entire class. Each team should report what they were able to think of, regardless of whether they believe it personally. Finally, open the class to continued discussion. Respect others' opinions and disagree respectfully.

#### 2. Discussion

Discuss the following questions in pairs or small groups. You may change these questions if you feel uncomfortable with any of them.

1. Are sex and love connected? Can people ever truly enjoy sex with no emotional attachment?

2. Are men more likely to cheat than women? Why or why not?
3. Which is better for children: going through the pain of a divorce or growing up in a family where the parents continually fight and lead their own separate lives?
4. What would you do if you found out your spouse was having an affair?
5. Can women be successful in their careers and be good mothers at the same time?
6. Can men be successful in their careers and be good fathers at the same time?

## **MI-KYOUNG**

Mi-Kyoung grew up shy, introverted, and lonely. As the loner in her class, she was often bullied. Her cruel classmates would try to undress her if she wore a beautiful dress, make fun of her, or worse, just ignore her. At times she pretended to be strong, but deep inside she always knew it was a lie.

Mi-Kyoung's mother and father had only finished elementary school because their parents could not afford more education. Although Mi-Kyoung was very creative and artistic, her own family's financial situation meant she was discouraged from following any of those dreams. Growing up in a conservative family, she felt that her parents' only hope was that she would marry and have a son. She often helped at their small Chinese restaurant. Working at the restaurant meant that everyone around the area knew who she was, but it seemed that no one really knew who she was as a person. Her classmates were studying while she was busy helping her parents at the restaurant. In eighth grade, her teacher beat her and told her she was the smartest student but was wasting her natural talents because she was lazy.

There was violence at school and more violence at home. Mi-kyoung's parents fought incessantly while she was growing up. Her father had been raised by a mean step-mother and consequently didn't know how to show love to others. He beat Mi-Kyoung's family badly whenever he was drunk. Mi-Kyoung even recalls a sobering experience when he hit her mother with a rock. Violence and domestic abuse were a large part of every-day life for Mi-kyoung. There was nothing else to compare her experience to so she accepted it all as normal. She often saw other members of her family subjected to the same violence, such as when her uncle tried to stab her aunt with a long knife.

She thought that the violence around her had toughened her and made her ready for anything. She was wrong. When she was the tender age of sixteen, her world crashed around her. Mi-kyoung's younger brother was diagnosed with Leukemia. Her parents tried to hide his illness from her, but one day she accidentally found out from a friend who meant well and was trying to comfort her. It was difficult for her to accept the reality, and she continually waited for her brother to come back from the hospital.

Barely sixteen and only a freshman in high school, she was suddenly expected to take care of her father and sister while

her mother stayed at the hospital with her dying son. There were no breaks.

A year later, her brother passed away when he was only fifteen years old. Mi-Kyoung's life was completely shattered, and she continually asked, "why me?" The only answer was silence and an aching loneliness. It was the first time she saw her stoic father cry. She continued waiting for her brother to open the door and prove that it was all a nightmare, but the door remained shut. He was gone.

As her test scores dropped lower and lower, Mi-Kyoung became an invisible student. While her scores were dropping, she paused to take stock of where she was in life and for what sort of future she was heading. She saw her parents' lives and realized she needed to get a college education. After hitting the books for one month, her scores skyrocketed from the bottom to the top. She got a scholarship and was happy because of how proud her parents were. It was one of the first times in her life she felt she had ever made them proud. During the same time, her cousin got a girl pregnant and came to live with her family to escape the responsibility. He flirted with everyone, but her parents turned a blind eye to that because he was *family*. They even let him sleep in the same room as her. One night, she awoke to find him touching her and trying to kiss her. She tried to tell her mother indirectly the next day by telling her about a "bad dream" she had the night before. Although her mother realized what Mi-Kyoung was saying, she did nothing and Mi-Kyoung hated her for that. Mi-Kyoung graduated without any healthy romantic relationships with boys and went to Canada for a year. Due to cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication, she left her home-stay family and rented an apartment alone. A Korean man who was also having problems with his exchange family moved in to her living room. Once he moved in, he assumed the invitation to be roommates included more, and would often bang on her door and try to force her to have sex with him. She got scared and told him to leave. After her first traumatic experience of living alone, she decided to try another home-stay. At that time, she met her first boyfriend who was four years younger than she was. Dating a younger man was a taboo in Korea but she felt free from all restrictions since she was so far from Korea. Mistaking his jealousy for love, she accepted his engagement proposal. His mother forbade the wedding because Mi-Kyoung was an older girl from the countryside. He left, never to return.

Heartbroken, she decided to take a trip across Canada to escape her emotions. A Korean immigrant running a travel agency offered her a job and she started working with him when she returned from her trip. There was a mandatory staff-party one night and her drunken boss asked her to go help him get something. Once back at their office, he tried to rape her. Luckily she was able to run out of the building with nothing more than a button missing from her blouse. Out on the street he had the audacity to try and sooth her by telling her to think of him as a friend rather than a boss.

Shocked and crying, she called a taxi. Mi-Kyoung couldn't stop crying on the way home and spilled everything to the taxi driver. He kindly bought her a cup of coffee and later refused to accept the fare. He warned her that she should never trust anyone and said goodbye. It seemed that the taxi-driver was just a Good Samaritan, but in fact, as she was to find out later, he was no better than many of the men she had encountered in her life.

Mi-Kyoung's host brother, Jimmy, suggested she should press sexual assault charges against her boss, but she just wanted to be free from the whole ordeal. Jimmy went to the travel agent and threatened him to never contact Mi-Kyoung again. The threats worked and she never heard from her former boss again.

However, once back in Korea, she did hear from the taxi driver who had been so kind to her that night. It was three in the morning when the ringing of the telephone pierced her dreams. The whimpering taxi driver said he really missed her and offered to buy her a ticket back to Canada. Although she said no, he kept calling her and begging her to return to Canada. He would call in the middle of the night, waking up Mi-Kyoung and her family, pleading with her to come see him. "I miss you. I need you. I can't live without you," he would wail into the receiver, until she finally just stopped answering his calls.

One night, she got another mysterious call early in the morning from a woman whom she had never met. She introduced herself as Anna, the wife of the taxi driver. Anna had found Mi-Kyoung's number in her husband's phone and believed Mi-Kyoung was yet another of his mistresses. They chatted and cried together until the sun rose in Korea. Anna finally believed Mi-Kyoung when she said nothing had happened between Mi-Kyoung and her husband. Then Anna shared how her husband had a terrible history of continual cheating. When Mi-

Kyoung asked her why she never divorced him, Anna told her in tears that she just could not do it because of how much she loved him. Mi-Kyoung was shocked and dumbfounded. Were any men worthy of trust? Was love only painful? Were all men such scoundrels?

That crisis passed and she started to settle back into life in Korea. She felt that Canada had completely opened her mind. No longer was she stuck in her parents' opinions and limited ways of thinking. Although her parents had excessively high expectations for her to earn a lot of money after returning from Canada, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis meant that she was unable to earn much at all. She couldn't earn money to repay her parents for the expensive trip to Canada, and she started to once again feel like a complete loser at home.

At the same time, she wanted to study more and was accepted into various graduate programs in the United States. Then, her visa application was rejected because she did not have enough money in the bank.

She was single, broke, and alone. Her friends had already gotten married and anyone who was unmarried became the subject of nasty small-town gossip. After dating a man for three years, their relationship cooled when his job took him to a city six hours away. They continued to meet, but the passion was no longer there. She suspected he had been cheating on her and eventually they broke off the relationship because he clearly had no plans to marry her.

After some time had passed, she fell in love with a man who was quite different. As she described it, before meeting Jang-ho, she was always asking questions like "what is love? Why are we always looking for love, even though it's so bitter and painful?" He cared for her and never tried to trick her. For the first time in her life, she didn't have to worry about him leaving her or hurting her. Jang-ho could truly understand her, and could share her happiness and sadness. She got pregnant before their marriage and everyone around her felt so excited and happy for her. She was surprised and overwhelmed, but nine months later she gave birth to a beautiful son. Mi-kyoung named her new son after the spring even though he was born in the winter because he represented a new chapter full of love and hope in her life.

Her baby son was born healthy, and she almost succeeded in a natural birth. However, after almost twenty hours of grueling labor, the doctors decided she needed a C-section. They went ahead with the surgery, and for the first few days, no one could recognize her because of the massive swelling. Her mother-in-law cried when she first saw Mi-Kyoung's hideous face. Baby and mother spent several weeks in seclusion in a special place for new mothers and their children, and when she left, her entire life was changed.

She related how hard it is, saying, "I never have any time for myself now. We are staying at my parents' house, and I don't even sleep with my husband any more. One of my students watched my baby for a short time, and we were able to go out to watch a movie, but that has been about it since he was born. My baby has become my entire life."

Mi-Kyoung has her hands full with her new son, but she imagines that in a few years she will return to her career. Her story thus far is best concluded with her own words of advice. "Do and see as much as possible. Once you see another world, you will recognize yourself clearly rather than who others think you are. If you are brave enough to leave and not stay in one place, then you will meet and feel different. In fact, for a short time, you will become a total stranger to yourself. Then and only then can you see a side you never imagined before--The real you.

What is love? Why are we always looking for love, even though it's so bitter and painful?

I think we always try to find true love. We are always knocking at different doors and asking whether this one is MY LOVE. Sometimes you make your own illusion and fantasies, believing what you have is true love. It's hard to get out of it, so we convince ourselves that we must overcome these problems, leading us to make bad decisions. As for me, I think I have found my true love. True love doesn't fool me. He always cares about me. I don't have a hard time being with him in spite of problems that might come along the way. Regardless of what comes my way, I never worry whether he loves me or not. I feel secure. Find someone who really understands you and feels happy and sad for you. Then you will know you have found 'THE ONE.'"

## **Vocabulary**

Good Samaritan-(n) Someone who does good deeds without asking for any repayment or recognition of any sort.

Scoundrel-(n) A bad and dishonest person.

C-section-(n) Abbreviation for Cesarean Section, where the baby is delivered through a cut in the abdomen and uterus. It is named after the belief that Julius Caesar was born this way.

Hitting the books-(idiom) To study very hard with a lot of focus.

To spill everything-(idiom) To tell the whole story, to share all the details of a secret story.

## **Journal and discussion questions.**

Answer these questions in a journal, in small groups, or both.

1. Do people ever do something without wanting *anything* in return?
2. What were some of the events that affected Mi-Kyoung's life? Did you have any similar experiences?
3. How would your family and friends react if you or your girlfriend/fiancé got pregnant before getting married?
4. If your spouse was unfaithful, what would you do?
5. People often do not talk about the difficult events in their lives such as deaths of loved ones, rapes, failed attempts at love, and their parents' low education. Why do you think this is so? Would society be better or worse if people discussed these topics freely?
6. What advice would you give to a friend who confided in you that her boss had tried to rape her?
7. Discuss this statement: "All men are cheaters. They need sex and will have sex with anyone who is available." How would your opinion change if the same statement was said about all women?
8. Does true love exist? Why is this such an important goal that so many people search incessantly for it?
9. Many families have "skeletons in the closet." This idiom means there are some dark secrets that everyone tries to ignore, but everyone knows are there. Do you think there are some things that should always be kept secret?

10. How have you overcome various failures in your life?

## **JI-SOOK**

The Boryeong Mud Festival is an annual event that brings millions of visitors from all over the world. People of all races and creeds come together to enjoy the therapeutic benefits of the special mud. The young and old paint their faces and bodies with the mud, enjoy mud wrestling, and then wash off in the ocean. The grand finale is an enormous fireworks show from a big barge in the ocean combined with a concert. It was not easy to get to the festival because of all the transfers, but it was well worth it. A stranger walked up to me and asked me to take a picture of her covered in mud. She introduced herself as Ji-sook, and we became great friends as she showed me around her hometown. A few months later, and a lot cleaner, we began our interview as the leaves began to change colors and the weather started to get colder. Ji-sook's father, Jeong-bin, grew up in a rich family. His father died soon after the war, and they lost almost everything. Because Jeong-bin was the first son, his family made a lot of sacrifices to help him go to college. However, after he graduated, he started a low-paying job that disappointed all of his family.

As if failing to get a great job was not enough to shame him in the eyes of his family, he married Ji-sook's mother, who came from a very poor family. Jeong-bin's family also disapproved of the fact that Ji-sook's mother only finished elementary school. They were enraged and cut off all emotional and financial support to his new struggling family. Although times were tough, Ji-sook's parents sacrificed immensely to ensure that she grew up with every opportunity. Because of their desire for

her to succeed, she spent most of her time studying ballet, art, and violin in hakwons, the after-school institutes popular in Korea. Those who see her confident and successful image today imagine she was a princess who grew up with a silver spoon in her mouth. The reality of her life is distant from easy luxury but rather one that is closely intimate with pain and suffering that is hard to guess from her warm outward smile.

When Ji-sook was young, her older sister, Mi-na, almost drowned. Although Mi-na survived, the water on her brain meant that Ji-sook's sister would live the rest of her life with the mental capacity of a four-year old demanding constant care. Although her sister is sometimes a source of shame in public, Ji-sook never tried to hide her from others.

Fascinated by many kinds of things, her mother encouraged Ji-sook to be an artist. Ji-sook chose violin instead of painting because it was what she wanted rather than what she was good at. Her parents supported her, but Ji-sook didn't study hard and was a bad student. Her body developed late, and she didn't get her first period until she was almost seventeen. That made her continually worried that she wasn't normal—that she wasn't a real woman.

During her high school years, she started smoking and drinking, and sometimes stayed away from home all night. That stressed her family, which was exacerbated when she failed to get into a good university. In spite of everything going on around her, she continued to study violin and once she got into the average university, she started studying harder.

On an exam one day, Ji-sook blanked out and suddenly forgot how to play violin. All she had worked for was suddenly gone. That mysterious

illness would continue for several years, and she lost her confidence and ambition. Eventually her skill returned, and at age twenty-three, she borrowed 150,000 dollars and started her own violin school. It was an immediate success and she was able to repay the loan in less than a year. Her life seemed perfect. She was respected, had a lot of money, and seemed to know her place in the world.

She started dating a man who turned out to be a scoundrel and a deadbeat. She bought him everything, thinking that the money would somehow make their relationship better. An expensive new car and a large down-payment on an apartment did little to change his abusive nature. Ji-sook strongly believed that sex should wait for marriage and repeatedly told him that she was a virgin. One night while they were sitting in the car she bought him, he told her he just wanted to touch her. He overpowered her, then stopped, shocked by the blood and surprised that she really was a virgin. She felt so guilty because she had had sex outside of marriage, and felt like she would have to marry him because they had had sex. He beat her mercilessly for small things, but even when her body was completely bruised and battered, she couldn't give up on him. "At that time, I really felt like I loved him," Ji-sook said. "I would have sold my soul for him." That sense of responsibility continued until one day he beat her almost to death.

She finally gathered the courage to tell her mother and older brother. Her older brother wanted to kill him, but her mother convinced her son to calm down so he wouldn't ruin his entire life. They called him to their house, and when her boyfriend came over, Ji-sook's brother warned that he would kill him if he ever met Ji-sook again regardless of the consequences. Threatening calls continued and Ji-

sook didn't feel safe to even leave the house. Those changed to impassioned pleas for Ji-sook to take him back. That whole mess finally ended when Ji-sook met a man from Incheon on the Internet. The new relationship continued for four years, but Ji-sook was never faithful. She cheated on him countless times numerous successful men, many of whom were married, simply because she could catch them. No matter what she did, none of the men could bring her happiness and satisfaction. A dentist caught her eye, and the two of them started talking about marriage in spite of her still being in a relationship with the first man from Incheon.

She realized one day that she loved neither of them, and broke up with both of them. A few weeks later, she fell in love with a different man. That seemed to be perfect until he cheated on her with a prostitute. Although Ji-sook felt like she somehow deserved his unfaithfulness due to her own past infidelities, she still felt devastated and couldn't trust men for a long time after that.

Around the same time, her brother developed a chronic heart problem and passed away suddenly at the young age of twenty-nine. Ji-sook was completely devastated. Her family was torn apart. Ji-sook had believed in God and blamed God for her brother's death. "I thought God couldn't do that! How could He allow this to happen to my family after my sister grew up retarded?" Ji-sook cried out in pain. There were no answers, and her faith was completely destroyed. A few months later, she believes God made her believe in Him again, allowing her to see that death isn't the end and that she can meet her brother again even in heaven someday.

Ji-sook decided to take a year off after her thirty-first birthday to travel around the world and spend some of the money she had carefully saved over the past nine years teaching. Her parents agreed with her decision, believing that she would marry when she returned. After spending forty thousand dollars visiting more than twenty different countries she returned with no desire to marry.

She converted to Catholicism and started playing violin at Mass. Her parents believed in Buddhism at the time, but eventually the entire family converted to Catholicism because of her and to make their family peaceful.

She closed her school and returned to study for a Master's degree in violin. After graduating, she tried to enter a doctoral course, but once again failed numerous times. In spite of the setbacks, she never gave up because it was such a strong goal for her. However, it was not meant to be at that time. After opening another successful violin school, she was finally accepted into a PhD course. Now she works full-time running multiple schools and studies in another city three days a week. She reaches one goal and sets another. Although men around her are intimidated by her success and drive, she continues unabashedly. She has finally found a great man who loves her and they are slowly building trust in their relationship. Marriage is a continual thought on her family's mind because she is now in her mid-thirties. She isn't sure about marriage with him because they are both so busy, and doesn't want to marry only because her parents want that. Ji-sook related,

I could marry for my parents, but that is stupid. I'm not really sure what to do. I don't think most Korean guys really want a virgin anymore, so that's not a problem. I just feel like I am successful in my own right and don't

need to marry a man to be complete. For some reason, Korean women think marriage is their job. They are generally housewives who don't work. I think Korean women are mostly lazy. They don't want to work, preferring to spend money and relax all day. I have too much ambition and potential for that life.

Ji-sook finished her life story thus far by talking about the implications of Koreans studying English. She believes Koreans who speak English aren't normal. "To learn a language is also to learn its culture. It's the opposite of our conservative culture, which I believe means having a closed mind to change. Having an open and accepting mind is just easier for me. I think it is one of the positive benefits of studying a foreign language." The question remains whether her society will accept this newfound liberality.

### **Vocabulary:**

Barge- (n) A big ship that is used for carrying products.

Creed-(n) A belief or religion such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, or Islam.

Exacerbate-(v) To make something worse.

Infidelity-(n) The act of breaking someone's trust. In a relationship, cheating on a partner.

To feel devastated- Completely destroyed

Unabashedly-(adv) Without shame or fear of what others might think.

### **Journal and discussion questions.**

Answer these questions in a journal, in small groups, or both.

1. What were four events that shaped Ji-sook's life?
2. How would you have reacted to the difficulties Ji-sook faced? Do you think you could have survived as she did? Why or why not?
3. Did Ji-sook cause the bad events in her life to happen to herself? Why or why not?
4. Are there any similarities between Ji-sook's life and your life or your friends' lives?
5. How are you different from Ji-sook?
6. What advice would you give Ji-sook about love or life?
7. Where do you think Ji-sook will be ten years in the future?
8. Do you believe Ji-sook will be happy in the future?
9. If you could talk to Ji-sook, what questions might you ask her?
10. Is Ji-sook a typical woman? Why or why not?
11. What are some of the dangers of learning a foreign language and learning a new culture?

## **Optional Activity (30-45 minutes)**

### Success Trees

Materials: Large pieces of paper, markers or crayons, old magazines with pictures, scissors, glue.

In small groups, discuss what success means to each of you. Remember to discuss the different areas of your lives, such as love, work, family, and money. Each person could say something like "Being a success means....." or "To me, success is....."

Agree on 10 things that are crucial to all people in your group. Create a success tree with pictures to show these aspects of success. You can draw your own pictures or cut out pictures from the old magazines. After your group has finished, display your poster and walk around to look at other groups pictures. How is your group's definition similar or different than theirs? Did the other groups add anything you left out?

## **YU-NA**

Yu-na grew up as the youngest of seven children in the city of Miryang, South Korea. Miryang is a quiet city of about 100,000 nestled between mountains and criss-crossed by rivers. Historically, it was an agricultural city which also served as an important crossroads for transportation from the south of the peninsula and Seoul, Daegu, and other major cities in the north of the country.

Her grandparents had really wanted a son, and had threatened her mother that if she did not produce a son they would have purchased a concubine for her husband. Finally, child number six was a son, and Yu-na said that if she had been a boy instead of a girl, her grandparents would have donated the male baby to her uncle to raise, as he couldn't produce the coveted son either. This practice was quite common in ancient Korea, but it is disappearing and changing with the same rapidity as the rest of the society. Her family was perfectly traditional and even more conservative than most families at that time. The men and women ate at separate tables and females were expected to be the men's servants. If the men wanted water, the women got it. If the men wanted food, the women got it. If the men wanted anything, the women got it. As the years passed, that conservatism changed, and now the men in her family help their wives with household chores. Yu-na mentioned that the increase of feminism in Korea had both positive and negative effects. She said that, "On the one side, morality is declining, and people are becoming too free. Men are getting weaker and weaker. On the other side, at least now women can remarry and change their children's family name to match their new husbands."

Being the baby meant being doted on by all her sisters and her mother. Growing up, there were always gifts and love for her and her brother. Her older sisters weren't really cared for but she was spoiled with every possible treat. Throughout her childhood, money was never a problem, and she went to all sorts of expensive academies throughout her childhood. Spoiled little Yu-na was the perfect angel, and later this became the burden she carried into her adult life.

Although many fathers reduce their role to merely being a breadwinner, this was not the case with Yu-na's father. "I loved my father, even more than my mom. He had worked in the U.S. Army, so he could speak English very well. Some of my best memories were him teaching me the ABCs when I was six or seven," Yu-na said. He gave her a love for English, and language. Eventually, he was one of the reasons she trained to be a Korean and English teacher.

When she was seventeen, her fairytale world turned upside down. Her beloved father got a terminal illness. Over the course of two years, her father got sicker and sicker.. Along with his health, her family's financial condition worsened, and she eventually had to get a part-time job tutoring middle school students. At the time, she recalls that she was immature and didn't care about her family so much as the ability to keep buying and doing everything her heart desired. Throughout his illness, her father repeatedly told her to "remain innocent until marriage."

Yu-na's father's biggest fear was not his own health and imminent death, but rather that her behavior would deteriorate after his death and she would become an immoral tramp who would shame the family's name. Then one day, the warnings stopped.

At the age of nineteen, Yu-na's beloved father died, turning her world upside down. Less than three years later, her mother passed away, leaving Yu-na shocked and devastated to her very core.

During that time, she met her first boyfriend who always helped her and took care of her. His incessant chasing bored and angered her because of the ease with which she captured his affection. For a long time she rejected his advances, but he persisted. She related, "I didn't have any parents, and I was terrified that his family wouldn't accept me." They dated for five years and then he proposed. Their families met as was the tradition when two people wanted to marry.

Yu-na's fears of rejection were confirmed when one day his mother lied and told her that her son wanted to study medicine overseas in order to split them up. Her would-be mother-in-law wanted a good (rich) wife for her son. In her eyes, Yu-na simply wasn't good enough.

Depression set in. Days and weeks of tears turned into months. She contemplated suicide endlessly, mulling over the most effective way to end her misery. Yu-na finally realized she had to do something to change her life.

Volunteering for others helped her break out of the darkness, and became a lifelong passion. Indeed, helping others became a driving force in her life that helped her overcome the circumstances she had been dealt, and return to some semblance of normal. A fear of marriage and of allowing herself to become close to people remained deeply embedded in her mind.

Compounding those fears, one of her closest cousins married a man after dating for more than five years, only to find out that her new husband was terribly abusive. After repeated beatings, she

mustered the courage to file for divorce. Her life was ruined. She couldn't remain in her hometown because it was too dangerous. When she moved to a new city, she couldn't let anyone know who she really was out of fear that he would find her. Adding insult to injury, her ex-husband was awarded custody of their daughter because he made more money than her. Now her ex-husband's mother is taking care of the daughter, but he never allows his daughter to see her mother. Even to this day, Yu-na understandably has a very valid aversion to marriage in spite of her family's wishes and societal pressures to marry because of her age.

After all the stress and drama in her life, she decided to do something about her passion for English and studied abroad in New Zealand. This changed her life forever. "While I was in New Zealand, I realized how I had always been so shy in Korea. I always did what others thought was right, but that wasn't the real me," she said. Her home-stay mother became her heroine and opened Yu-na's eyes to the possibilities and strength of women. The lawyer she stayed with was a single mother in her early forties who dated men fifteen years younger than her, and had so much confidence and life wisdom. Upon returning to Korea, Yu-na's friends and family did not see the difference, but she knew that a big change had taken place inside her. Her shyness had been replaced by confidence and a love for traveling. Yu-na was growing up. The changes in her made it impossible for her to stay content in Korea for long. "It felt so stuffy here," she laughed as she took a sip of lemonade. "I couldn't stand the judgmental stares, where every move I made was based on how others would perceive it. I had to disappear. My escape was a trip

to the United States.” As she got off the plane in New York, tears of pride welled up in her eyes. For the first time in her life, she knew what it felt like to be a truly independent adult.

Although she became more and more independent, Yu-na remained faithful to her father's last wishes. She also remained single, afraid of another heartbreak or meeting a man similar to her cousin's ex-husband.

Then one day she met a successful Australian man named Emmanuel. They started dating, and when Yu-na was thirty-two, she gave him her virginity although she never felt like she really loved him. She felt so guilty and dirty after making love to him, but they continued dating, even though he had no intentions of anything more serious. After a few months, he told her that he had lied about his age and was actually forty-four instead of thirty-five. He had lied about being single too. His wife and young children were waiting for him back in Canberra. She felt hurt and angry. Yu-na tried to separate but he just laughed it off. The weight of her guilt is a heavy burden for Yu-na to bear. In her words, “I can't marry a Korean man now because I'm no longer a virgin. What makes it worse is that none of my family or friends know about my secret. I can't tell them because they all think I'm such a perfect pure angel.” She may be a perfect angel in their eyes, but she is torn by the one side of her that wants to please everyone else, and the hidden side where she fantasizes about romance, sex with strangers on the street, sexy lingerie, and one-night-stands where she can leave with no strings attached.

He returned to Australia, and Yu-na once again immersed herself in her work and volunteering. Throat cancer put all her dreams of travel and

helping people poorer than herself on hold. For months she was in and out of the hospital and lost her voice completely for several days. After a grueling surgery and weeks of rehabilitation therapy, her voice returned. Those long, lonely hours were spent thinking and thinking about her life. "In the end, I realized that it can give me happiness when I give happiness to others. Even though I can't follow all my dreams right now because I have to go to the hospital for checkups every three weeks, I keep giving my time to help others and it brings me a lot of happiness. That's enough," she said with a smile. Now she is involved as a volunteer with many international organizations and is planning to travel abroad to continue her education. She recently fell in love with a Korean man, but she was afraid to tell him how she felt because of all the pain men have put her through before. Yu-na smiled a sad smile as she finished her interview saying, "I live to see his beautiful smile, but I cannot tell him how I feel. When he calls, I feel warm inside, but I am afraid this is another case of one-sided love. Maybe love isn't for me."

### **Vocabulary**

To Embed (v), Embedded-(adj) To put into place very securely, something that cannot be moved or forgotten.

Incessant-(adj) Never ending or stopping.

To be doted on/ to dote on someone- Cared for, shown a lot of love.

Judgmental-(adj) Making opinions about someone's moral choices, deciding whether someone's actions are good or bad.

A spoiled child- A child who is given everything and rarely told "no."

One-night-stand -(n) A sexual relationship that lasts only one night where both people probably never see each other again.

To compound (something)-(v) To make something worse by adding something else.

Volunteer-(v) To help a person or group willingly and usually for free.

### **Journal and discussion questions.**

Answer these questions in a journal, in small groups, or both.

1. How has the role of women changed over past century? Is it better or worse now?
2. How was Yu-na affected by her parents' conservative nature?
3. What are some issues or problems that have impacted Yu-na's love life?
4. Do you know of anyone who has traveled abroad in order to escape problems or to create a new life?
5. Have you ever had a scary experience that made you think deeply about your life?
6. Do you volunteer your time or give money to groups that do good work for others?
7. Why do people volunteer? Do they get something out of it?

8. Has anyone close to you ever died? How did you and your family react?
9. What advice would you give Yu-na if you could talk to her?
10. Do you think Yu-na will be happy if she studies abroad?
11. How might Yu-na change over the next five years?
12. Do you think a society changing is inevitable? Is changing from a conservative society to a more open society a good or bad thing?

### **Optional Activities (15-30 minutes)**

#### 1. Pros and cons of change

Materials: Paper and pens for each group.

In small groups, divide a paper by drawing a line down the middle. On one side, write "Good things about change." On the other side, write "Negative things about change."

Think of ways your own culture has changed over the past fifty years. What are pros and cons of those changes? Try to think of at least fifteen for each side. If time permits, choose one secretary from each group to report to the class. Conclude the activity by discussing how changes can occur in a positive manner.

#### 2. Letter writing

Individually, write Yu-na a letter commenting on her story following the format for writing a personal letter, including a greeting, conclusion, and an appropriate closing such as "sincerely," or "yours truly." You might want to include any advice, how it

is similar to your own experience, or how you felt as you read about her life. After you finish your letter, put your letters around the room and read what others have written to her. If there is time, choose which letter you like the most and stand next to it. After all students have chosen a letter they like, go around and tell what you liked about that letter.

## **JI-EUN**

Ji-eun, like many Korean women, grew up in a very poor family. Her father was a bus driver she rarely saw, and her mother took odd jobs like peeling chestnuts to help the family survive. She grew up in the city of Masan, a port city in the south of Korea. Masan was a mixture of fishermen, farmers, and fascinating contrasts that changed dramatically as she grew up. Most Korean children spend hundreds of hours after school studying in *hakwons* but Ji-eun's parents never told her to study hard. Even if they had, there was never enough money to afford the expensive tuition of those after-school institutions. Instead of studying, she helped her mother and grew very close to her.

Even without studying hard, Ji-eun got great grades, got accepted into one of the top universities in Korea, Seoul National University, and graduated at the top of her class. It was the same time as the Asian IMF financial crisis, so the hundreds of résumés she sent out got no replies. "It was heartbreaking for me. I thought I was such a great student. I graduated from one of the best schools in Korea, but there were no jobs to be had. It was a shocking wake-up call that helped me see the realities of my dreams and fantasies," she said. She started dating a Korean man, and one day had her first terrible kiss when he suddenly jammed his tongue down her throat without any warning. "I was so shocked and innocent at the time," she laughed. "I'm just glad that I've found out all men aren't such terrible kissers," she continued with a big smile on her face. They broke up and she started dating another man and at the age of twenty-two, she had sex for the first time. Ji-eun related that,

“like many people, I had been pretty curious about sex. I was scared that it would hurt, but he was experienced and knew what to do. Sex isn't really as important as being close and having a good time with someone.” Then she dated a younger man for about four years. He was never a good boyfriend and made her feel unattractive. Work and friends consumed his life and he never had time for her. There was a continual feeling that he had been cheating on her, and one day she decided to break it off with him. She decided to continue her education and finished a Master's degree in Denmark. At the age of thirty, it was her first time to be away from her parents and to have her own space. Although she had taught English grammar for many years, she had never had the chance to communicate in English or to learn about another culture. Studying abroad made her more open-minded and a lot more honest. She became more independent and for the first time in her life started making new friends from around the world. She dated another foreign exchange student from Norway named Osteen who was completely open about everything. His frankness rubbed off on her. That experience changed her entire outlook on life, but, as she was to be reminded upon returning to Korea, it didn't change Korea. She went back to Korea and shocked all her friends by trying to kiss their cheeks in greeting. Adjusting back to Korea was very difficult and she hated Korean culture. In her words, “Studying in Denmark really showed me that Korean culture was very unique. After studying abroad, I saw a lot of things that I couldn't stand. For example, it seems to me that Korean women need to be more independent. However, being a good Korean woman traditionally means being quiet, docile, generous, having a low

education, and being a good wife who will be nice to her parents-in-law. Many Korean women foolishly care only about looks, make-up, and fashion, but don't care enough about making a long term plan for their own lives. In addition to that, Korean men who are forty to sixty years old don't think they need to be polite to younger women. Unlike in Denmark, Korean men don't say sorry when they bump into younger women on the street. For the first time in my life, I realized Koreans are rude and angry as drivers and put everyone's lives in danger. I really didn't feel like I fit in Korea anymore even though I was still completely Korean.”

She landed a job with an international trading company, only to find out she was going to be paid quite a bit less than men in the same position with less education than her. Because she was a woman, she was relegated to getting coffee, answering phones, and other menial tasks that had nothing to do with her extensive training or job description. Even the language her male co-workers used seemed to be carefully chosen to belittle and degrade the female staff. There was never a chance for advancement or any sort of fulfillment. She quickly tired of the trivial work and stifling work environment and quit a year later. She related that “I learned an important lesson from that job, even though I hated every minute of it. Success and a job I love are both very important to me. Satisfaction is the key.”

She got out of that job, but sexual discrimination would continue to plague her. After realizing she loved research, she started researching her doctoral thesis. The male professors tend to recommend male students because there is an assumption that females are just going to marry and will never continue in careers in academia.

Having a high education often intimidates men she dates now. On one blind date, the man wouldn't even give her his phone number because he felt so intimidated by her education and confidence. Ji-eun now prefers dating foreigners, which is often a taboo in more traditional circles in Korea. "I enjoy the freedom of dating foreigners, but unfortunately many of them only look at girls as partners for sex," she sighed. "I want someone who can appreciate me for exactly who I am. I want to be with someone who can appreciate and stimulate my mind." For Ji-eun, that futile search will continue.

## **Vocabulary**

Trivial -(adj) something meaningless or simple.

Futile -(adj) useless, ineffective, producing no results.

Discrimination -(n) the act of limiting opportunities based on one's gender, race, or another distinction.

To belittle someone or something -(v) To make someone feel insignificant, small, and unimportant.

Frankness (n)/ To be frank -(v) to be direct and to-the-point, to be honest and direct.

## **Journal and discussion questions.**

Answer these questions in a journal, in small groups, or both.

1. How have you felt discrimination in your life?
2. Are you intimidated by people with more education than you have?

3. Would you consider marrying someone of a different social status than you?
4. How do you think the generations have changed in how they treat women and men?
5. Have you ever been disappointed when your expectations did not match reality?
6. What lessons have you learned from negative work experiences?
7. Who are the rudest people you have encountered in your life? Are any of those experiences explainable through differences in culture?
8. Should people date people from other cultures? Why or why not?
9. What was your first experience with someone of the opposite sex? How did that affect your subsequent experiences?
10. Have you ever found a job where you could be successful *and* enjoy it?

### **Optional class activity**

Imagine how Ji-eun's life would be as a movie. Who would be the stars of this movie? Would people want to see it? What details would have to be changed to make it into a blockbuster? If time permits, role-play a skit following her life with your changes in front of the class.

## **EUN-SOO**

Eun-soo grew up with two brothers and two sisters. As the youngest, she was expected to be brave and quiet. At the young age of thirteen, her father lost his three-year battle with cancer. At the time, his death brought relief because he was finally free from all his suffering and pain, but her mother was left with five children with no one around to help her. Her mother had to run a Korean restaurant alone. As Eun-soo grew up, she felt like everyone in her town was watching her mother, waiting for her to fool around and mess up. Her family lost a lot of land and property because a young man took advantage of her precarious situation.

Against this background, it was no surprise that Eun-soo's life was in turmoil. She often snuck out, was caught, punished, and then would repeat the same cycle a week later. Her oldest sister, Ji-hye, married in spite of her mother's disapproval. Her family and job didn't match Eun-soo's mother's wishes for her oldest daughter, and it turned out over time that her suspicions were correct. The man turned out to be a playboy and chronic liar. He wasn't nice to her, and Eun-soo was the only person around to support her Ji-hye when she miscarried her first baby at seven months. Eun-soo was only fifteen and recalled vividly how her brother-in-law kept trying to get more and more money from her mother's restaurant instead of getting his own job. Her family finally forced Ji-hye to divorce because of how badly she was being treated. People in the small community were continually watching them because they had no father and seemed to be just waiting for any sign that they were failing. Perfection was impossible, and Eun-soo felt the tiny pricks of their gossip all through the years as she became a young woman.

Eun-soo rarely dated Korean men. Her first boyfriend was a half-Japanese, half-Korean who had divorced parents. She met him while learning Japanese from her sister. While dating him, some friends told her that they were all going to meet at a friend's house. When she got there, she found herself alone with a stranger. She was powerless to stop him and he raped her. Students who were downstairs finally heard her screams and came in. They stopped him and beat him mercilessly, but the damage was already done to her sixteen year-old body and mind.

Ashamed and unable to say anything to anyone, she felt like it was her fault somehow. Depression set in, but she tried to

ignore it and to act as if nothing had happened. Secrets became her reality. She was torn up inside, but outside, she was a beautiful, tall, and busty woman who matured early. She seemed confident, but it was yet another lie. Her gorgeous physical appearance was repeatedly taken as an invitation for abuse. A member of her church who was also her music teacher met her one day in the school music room. He started closing curtains, then tried to touch her sexually. She ran away, but after that, she never felt comfortable even going to school.

Home was no better. During the summer, she was sleeping in her room upstairs when someone jumped on top of her. She woke in shock to find her older brother straddling her trying to rape her. Once again, she felt as if it was her fault, as if by being beautiful meant she was asking for it. She excused his behavior because he was under a lot of pressure from his mandatory military service.

The stress from everything caused her to run away a few times. Then she turned to pills and drugs--anything to ease the pain and help her escape the reality that was her daily life. At the age of twenty, Eun-soo married an American man although she did not love him. More than for love, she married him to get away—to escape the hell around her and to have her own family. Her older brother tried to force her to change her mind and not marry him. Although he slapped her repeatedly, she wouldn't say no to the marriage. Finally her older brother stopped slapping her and apologized. The newlyweds moved to Germany where Eun-soo had a painful miscarriage. This was another secret to be kept. She couldn't love herself at the time and didn't care about anything. A year later, she was pregnant again and after twelve painful hours of labor, she saw her son's beautiful face. Everything was new to Eun-soo. Suddenly she had everything she thought she had hoped for, but she did not know how to be a mother. After the 100<sup>th</sup> day birthday party, the moment that historically symbolized the baby had passed the dangerous period and would survive, she finally decided to divorce her husband. Her husband disappeared with the baby to the United States. Eun-soo never heard from her ex-husband after that.

Although she was upset, she was also relieved and glad it was over. She later found her son again when he was fifteen years old and wanted to see him, but was petrified that the second time might not work out. She went to the United States but was out of control and couldn't stay, and never mustered the

courage to see her young son again. She called her mom and returned to Korea where she served drinks at a bar and waited tables at her mother's new restaurant. Her new life back in Korea was impossible to adjust to as well. Just as oil and water can never mix, she couldn't fit into the society she had grown up in, and she couldn't stay with her family.

At a bar one night, she met a German. He fit the type she was looking for--someone with a good job who would be a good husband and father. Heindrich was a gentle and respected man, so she cared for him. Everyone envied her because he seemed so perfect. She married him because he was what everyone else wanted. He was a perfect man—too perfect. Cleanliness and control were everything to him. He tried to control and change her into his ideal through all sorts of manipulation.

Once again, Eun-soo was petrified of repeating the same mistakes of her first marriage, but they eventually had a son together and got married during the ninth month of her pregnancy for the benefit of her unborn baby.

While she was pregnant, her new husband's personality changed and he stopped caring about her. The pressure to present an image of perfection and respectability started to choke Eun-soo. Her new son became everything to her and consumed her life. She often neglected her own well-being, but the motions she was going through were never from the heart. There was continual pressure to be someone she wasn't—to live a lie—to act. Alone in a foreign land where she knew no one, she suffered through three more years of solitude.

Nothing she did was ever good enough, and her husband who seemed perfect to everyone outside continually tried to put her down. "I felt like the life there in Germany was choking me. I was dying and I knew I had to leave," she said. "How could I live without any emotional support?" Every day she contemplated leaving until one day she finally mustered the courage to leave the suffocating marriage.

Once again, her high hopes for marriage and a happy family were completely crushed. She was awarded custody of her young son, but everyone in the small town was watching her, just waiting for her to make some mistake so they could gossip about it to her ex-husband. That lasted about six months, and her son was caught in the middle. Eun-soo started feeling guilty about the material things her ex-husband could give her son but she could not. Her son started hating her and

eventually her ex used his good job to win custody of her son. As Eun-soo related, "someone had to suffer, so I did what I thought was best for my son, and went back to Korea so he could get on with his life." As had become the routine by then, it was Eun-soo who suffered to keep the peace.

In Korea, an older friend who had known all about the whole ordeal offered her a job bartending in a different city where she could start to pick up the pieces and start over again.

Eun-soo fell head-over-heels for an American man for no reasons and a thousand reasons at the same time. For the first time in her life, she had found someone who accepted her as she is. He understood her without having to explain everything. Even though she is ten years older than he is and has lived her life fully, she felt a spiritual connection to him in ways words cannot express.

At this point in her life, she feels proud of herself for not giving up. She related that she believes she knows what it feels like to lose everything because of love for someone else and has experienced what it means to be completely selfless. The pain of her life has made her who she is and what she is. Now she is totally open-minded and feels like nothing can bother her anymore. Her experiences at the lowest of lows taught her how to get back up and now she feels completely reborn. For the first time in her life she understands herself and is free enough to talk about her pain and help others.

In her words, "Korean women have many responsibilities and always have to think about others more than themselves. They have to be extremely patient and forgiving towards their husbands without ever having that same luxury for themselves. Why?"

## **Vocabulary**

(To be) awarded custody of someone/ to win custody of someone—A judgment, usually after a divorce, that decides which parent will keep the child.

To miscarry (v) /To have a miscarriage -(n)when a pregnant mother loses her baby.

Turmoil -(n)a state of confusion; everything is rough and upside-down.

Manipulation (n)/ To manipulate -(v)to control someone using devious methods, trickery, and psychological influence

### **Journal and discussion questions.**

1. Did Eun-soo do the right thing by leaving her husbands?
2. What would you have done in her situation?
3. When is divorce acceptable?
4. What things would you have done differently if you were in Eun-soo's situation?
5. When is it acceptable to make selfish decisions?
6. Have you ever experienced the piercing eyes and ears of gossips?
7. How is the death of a loved-one sometimes a relief for the survivors?
8. How did the need to project the "perfect image" affect her life? How has what other people think affected your life? Is this a positive or negative thing?
9. Do you know anyone who has married someone against his/her family's wishes? What was the result? Should people listen to their family and friends wishes about who they should marry?
10. How do people change after they get married? How have you or the people around you who have already married changed?

## **Maria (1)**

“Greed will tear a family apart,” Maria said with a sigh. “It’s never easy to understand another person’s thinking, but you can be sure of that fact,” she continued. In Maria’s family, it is her second oldest brother-in-law’s wife, Sally, who is the source of the contention. Maria’s own family was well-off until she was a junior in high school.

Then her grandfather died, and according to the traditional Korean customs, it was her father’s duty as his oldest son to perform the grueling last rites that included receiving streams of family friends paying their last respects and performing numerous ritual bows almost continually. Ten days later the mourners finally stopped coming. Her father and family were never to be the same. His continual bowing every day combined with the stress and little sleep caused an illness that left him paralyzed for the next twenty years.

His paralysis paralyzed the family as well. Never would he return to his construction job, and never would the family be the same. Maria remembered the devastation she felt with a sober look on her face and said softly with tears in her eyes, “Time doesn’t heal wounds, and anyone who believes otherwise has never felt the real pain of life.” Part of Maria’s strength came from her mother, who unflinchingly and unselfishly supported the family. Both Maria and her mother were forced to learn agriculture, and then worked long hours in her grandfather’s fields. There was never a question; it was just doing what needed to be done. As with many things, Maria accepted her lot in life and made the most of it.

Life comes in seasons and eventually Maria got married. What she didn’t know was that her mother-

in-law was carrying an enormous amount of debt. The problems began immediately because Maria's husband felt obliged to save his mother at the expense of his own new family. To complicate matters, Maria is a devout Catholic and her husband's family members are all staunch Buddhists. Her mother-in-law did her best to drive the couple apart, but over time and through many trials, eventually she began to accept Maria and now their relationship is a pleasant one in spite of it all.

Her husband's job then took them to Japan for five years. Cut off from everyone she knew, Maria was utterly alone in a culture that was completely different from her own in spite of the close geographical proximity. She couldn't speak Japanese and she had no friends. Before going to Japan, Maria was normally very shy, often hiding when her husband brought colleagues or friends home. The solitude in Japan was too much for her and her children and she knew she had to do something.

Out of desperation she followed her son's classmates home from school one day. Then she made some food and, with trembling knees, introduced herself to the complete stranger who opened the door. At first the Japanese lady was quite scared, but when she saw their two boys playing in spite of the language barrier she opened her heart to Maria and a deep friendship blossomed. "When I left, we cried so much! My neighbors who had saved me from the terrible loneliness had become such good friends. They even helped me pack and cleaned my bathroom! Everyone from the baby to the grandmother saw us to the station and I could see the jealousy written all over the other passengers' faces."

Back in Korea, the readjustment and reverse-culture shock was incredibly difficult to handle. Neighbors and the place that was supposed to be *home* shocked her as being so closed and selfish in contrast to her Japanese home. "It seemed to me that Koreans only think about earning money and educating their kids. I hated that. Isn't there more to life than that?" she asked. "My oldest sister is the poorest of all of us, but she is the happiest person I have ever met!"

As Maria's own new family got richer, her husband's character started to change. She said, "He knows the right way to do things and is a good leader, but as we got wealthier, we started arguing a lot more. His hot temper and my own stubbornness often clashed." There is no question she loves him, but, as she said, "it takes time and patience to make a relationship work." After more than twenty-five years of marriage, Maria knows what she is talking about. Our interview neared a close as she said, "My family is a lot like Korea; we both have a very troubled history, but we adamantly remain positive with a hope for a better tomorrow."

However, a better tomorrow is never guaranteed. Three years ago her husband quit his lucrative position at Samsung and started his own company. It failed and the family was plunged into another difficult time. At the age of forty-eight, she started helping support the family by teaching cooking and working as a salesperson until her husband was able to get back on his feet. Now she is in her mid-fifties and loves traveling and meeting friends while learning new things.

Tomorrow is not promised, but Maria has high hopes that it will bring bigger and better things.

## **Vocabulary**

Lucrative -(adj) something that makes a lot of money

To be paralyzed -(v) Unable to move arms or legs—also “To be paralyzed on one side of one’s body” or “To be paralyzed from the (neck/waist) down.”

Unflinchingly -(adv) without hesitation or any sign of changing or moving from one’s position.

Proximity -(n) nearness

Adamantly -(adv) steadfastly, with great determination

## **Journal and discussion questions**

1. Continue Maria’s story how you would imagine it five years later.
2. How does money change a relationship?
3. What are some things that are vital to make any relationship work?
4. Does time heal all wounds? Why or why not?
5. Is money related to happiness? Why or why not?
6. What would you do if your spouse’s job took you to a foreign country where you didn’t know anyone nor even a few words in the language?
7. Should a wife always follow her husband if he gets relocated? Should a husband follow his wife if she gets relocated?
8. What has been your experience with in-laws (the family of someone’s spouse)?
9. Are educating one’s children and making a lot of money noble goals for one’s life?

10. Can two people from different religions have a successful and happy marriage?

### **Optional activity**

Compare the above story with portions of how she told it below. How would you tell her story? How would you organize the information to make it effective for the reader? Are there any details which you think should be omitted or added? *As you read this, think about how you would change it to the third-person. Also, think about how you would rearrange the information so that flows better. After you read both stories, write her story in your own words.*

### **MARIA (2)**

Maria is a fifty-four year old mother of two children that lives in the large Korean city of Busan. Here is a portion of her life-story in her own words.

I realized that the most difficult thing in life is to understand other people. I met several kinds of people who think completely opposite of me. Nowadays, I have some trouble because I cannot get along with people. For example, my sister-in-law and I are always fighting because of our disagreements. She grew up in a very rich family, and now expects everything to be given to her. After she came to my family, she couldn't understand our family because we are not so rich. My father worked very hard to build schools and bridges around

Korea. Gradually, my family became richer and richer, but then her father got sick when she was in middle school, and we have had difficult times since then. When my grandfather passed away my father, who was the only child in his family, had to perform the ceremonial bows for his father. There were so many mourners that my father had to bow continuously for more than ten days. He couldn't sleep during that time, and it weakened his body considerably. When my father returned to his construction job, some of his relatives argued with him which caused him more shocks. The combination of the fatigue, shock, and a poor diet caused him to fall and injure himself severely. For almost thirty years, he was completely paralyzed on one side of his body and could only walk with assistance.

My oldest brother had to carry the burden of his big store. My father waited and waited to get better, but finally gave up when he realized it was impossible and he was never going to recover. It was so difficult for my mother to take care of my father and the rest of our large family. When I was in middle school, I was a rich person, but after his accident, we became a very poor family. My mother went through such a difficult time, and now all of us want to help her have an easier life in her old age. Unfortunately, my sister-in-law doesn't take care of my mother, and she only cares about her family. Last spring, I wrote to her that I wanted to make our relationship better, but she misunderstood and got even angrier. It's my biggest problem now.

When my sister-in-law was born, she was baptized as a Catholic. I am also a Catholic, but I have a hard time understanding how she can act so selfish when she has the same religion as I do.

I wrote a letter to her trying to make amends. The rest of my family praised my bravery because they all had problems with her. My sister-in-law wanted to borrow money from my mother, but because of my father's condition, we didn't have the money to loan them. In Korean culture, older people expect that their first son will take care of them in their old age. My mother gave my oldest brother the little money she had saved, thinking that he would help whoever needed money in the family. Unfortunately, my second oldest brother got jealous. When my two brothers opened a medical clinic, they had a really hard time, but my sister-in-law didn't care about their financial difficulties and continued to want the finest things in life, including expensive clothes and trips abroad. She was oblivious to the family's difficulties, which created many of the problems that continue to this day. After I got married, I thought that this family was my family now. My mother-in-law had a lot of debt and wanted us to divorce, but we stayed together. My family almost collapsed from the weight of their debt. For the first five years, my husband was so mild and loving. I love my husband, even though he has some problems. He is very authoritative, but he knows what is right, and he is a good leader. Unfortunately, my two brothers are too weak in comparison to him, and their wives control them. I argue

with my husband frequently because of our different characters and he has a very short-fuse. When he gets angry, I cry a lot. Every time he gets promoted, it seems that he gets angrier and angrier because of the stress. At least he says it's from stress, I think it's because he is getting prouder and prouder with each promotion. Once he quit his job at Samsung for three years, and our relationship returned to how it was when we were newly-weds. Once he returned to work, our relationship once again worsened as he quickly received promotion after promotion. We also argue about our sons' education. We both had different ideas for them. I wanted to send them abroad, so we needed more money. I started working in order to help pay for their education as a salesperson. I had been a teacher before, and continued to teach private lessons. My husband was promoted to vice-president, and wanted me to quit my job, so I did. Later I took another job teaching cooking. My son passed the competitive university exam and started studying at the prestigious Tokyo University in Japan.

### **Vocabulary**

Choose six words you do not know and find their definitions.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

### **Journal and discussion questions.**

Write ten questions that explore your story of her life and its relation to your own life.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

### **Complete their stories**

The next section contains short, incomplete stories of various Korean women. As you read them, think about the connections between their lives. What is similar? What is different? How do conflicts between religion, sexuality, and tradition affect each of the women? What sort of questions would you ask these women? How would you complete their stories?

## **EU-JIN and NONG-AE**

Eu-jin was one of the oldest students in my class, but also one of the sweetest. She had been studying English for many years. In her interview, she told me how she kept many notebooks of all the things she ever learned, reviewing them with vigor. Her story began with a recital of Nong-ae's story, a story with roots in reality that has been embellished over the years to almost mythical proportions.

Nong-ae was a governess in Jinju, a city just north of Busan, South Korea, during one of the many Japanese invasions of the past 300 years. Her rise from poverty to fame epitomizes the story and strength of so many Korean women.

Nong-ae's father died early and for the next few years, she lived alone with her mother. Many women in Korea are not much more than chattel, even to this day. It was no different for Nong-ae. Because of family poverty, her uncle sold her at a young age to the governor, where she excelled in her jobs. Eventually the governor's wife died, and the governor remarried Nong-ae.

Rather than turning into a fairy tale, the tragedy of Nong-ae's life continued. Her husband died in a Japanese invasion soon after their wedding. Determined to avenge his death, she took matters into her own hands. She disguised herself as a prostitute at a Japanese victory party. As part of her preparations, she put on ten thick jade rings. Then she seduced a high-ranking Japanese commander to a flat rock overlooking the beautiful *Nan* River near the castle in the city of Jinju. However, romance was the farthest thing from the grieving widow's mind. As they danced into the night, Nong-ae embraced the commander, locked her fingers together with the jade rings, and plunged the two of

them into the murky depths, becoming a heroine to future generations of Korean women because of her virtue and sacrifice for something bigger than herself. Eu-jin then continued her own story. She married for love at a very young age soon after finishing her studies to be a teacher. More than forty years later, she still sparkled when she remembered the beginnings of their marriage. That sparkle turned disappeared when she discussed their relationship now. She said, "I never used to hate him, as he is simple in nature I usually can control him." That fairy tale is over. Over the years, his affection for her has turned into dissatisfaction and complaints. "I feel stagnant now. A relationship need to be fresh, but how can freshness continue over so many years?" she asked. As an example of the downturn, she related how once she was sick and her husband got angry at her. He berated her for her carelessness and for getting sick. In her own way, she silently absorbed the abuse and pressed on. Over the years, she's developed the motto, "human beings always suffer pain." Eu-Jin believes that human beings become stronger by overcoming hardship and conquering tough obstacles. "I never had property," she continued. "My mind was always my greatest asset because no man or woman can take that away." This outlook allows her to continually be amazed at the wonders of the natural world. She is clearly an intellectual who loves reading a wide variety of literature and often quoted authors she had admired. One of her favorites is when Einstein once said "I'm smaller than a speck of dust. Thus, I bow my head to God's nature." The wonders of the natural world are often her only companions, as Eu-jin feels lonely in a city surrounded by thousands of people. She finished the interview, saying her only goals are simple ones.

“I want to prosper in wisdom and health as I mature. As long as my children are happy and successful, I’ve succeeded in my life. In fact, success is defined along the same lines for many Korean women; childbearing is perhaps the only way for a Korean woman to be successful.”

### **JI-YEON**

Heaven forbid if you are an infertile woman, whether the infertility is on your part or the part of your husband. Ji-yeon is a young and beautiful Korean woman, but there was sadness behind her eyes during our first interview. “I can’t have a child,” she said. “It’s not my fault, but I’m going through such hell because of it. I can’t even be a real woman without a child!” The doctors said her body is fine and that the problem was with her husband, but it was Ji-yeon who shouldered the blame and was ridiculed and berated for the lack of a child. Every year she went to the family holidays empty-handed and was viewed as a failure—an incomplete woman, pilloried for having no children, a fact that was completely beyond her control.

Finally, Ji-yeon's luck changed. One day she sent a triumphant email with the subject line “OH MY!” and said simply, “I went to the hospital and saw a doctor this morning. I'm pregnant!” With that short sentence, she can finally fulfill her purpose in life as a mother sacrificing her life for someone else. Her newborn son makes her welcome at family holiday gatherings, and now she is called “Jang-ho's mother,” instead of her given name.

She still feels empty and aimless, but doesn't have much time to think about that as her son takes all her time. Her relationship with her husband is still chilly, but that doesn't seem to bother her much. Occasionally her mother will take the child and she

can go out with friends, where they might have a few drinks at a bar and then go sing. Has much changed since Aristotle likened women to ovens whose only purpose was to create babies?

## **SU-JONG**

Su-jong is a nurse in her early forties. She has two children who are in middle-school.

Her husband has a great job for a multinational software firm and she enjoys working. Soon after her children were born, her relationship with her husband became as cold as ice. There was no more attraction, no more love, no more intimacy. They could not divorce because of the children and society, so they chose to stay together. Now they have two completely separate lives. They live together, but have separate bedrooms in separate halves of the house. They haven't made love in more than seven years, and both lead their own lives which cross for a frosty twenty minutes every morning at the breakfast table. For all practical purposes, they are divorced but continue living the lie in order to keep everyone else happy. Su-jong started working at a bar where she met a younger Canadian man. They ended up having an affair for three years, and Su-jong felt alive again. Her husband has his own girlfriends, and neither cares about the other's relationships so long as the image of a perfect family is maintained. Image is everything.

## **Kyoung-mi**

Kyoung-mi's story begins with religion. Like many Koreans, Kyoung-mi grew up in a largely Buddhist household. Her decision to convert to Catholicism was met with staunch resistance by her mother for the first year. She met her husband on a bus when she was nineteen. They started dating and went home together one Saturday a month. The relationship progressed in this manner for three years. At this point in the interview, Hye-jin got quiet, and I knew there was something she wasn't telling me. "Well," she explained, "in Korea, women are expected to remain chaste until marriage, and any sexual activity outside of marriage labels a woman a whore. I had wanted to be a nun, but my hormones told me otherwise. I got pregnant, and there was no other option for me but to keep the baby and get married. Most of my friends and even some members of my family don't know that my precious daughter was conceived out of wedlock. I don't know what they would think or say if they did." Religion-based conflicts were the norm for the first few years of their marriage. An atheist husband, Buddhist mother-in-law, and her struggle to come to terms with what she saw as a terrible sin, created an uncomfortable environment that somehow gave way to acceptance by all involved. Life was pleasant for the next few years, but in February, a routine check-up turned her world upside-down. "You have ovarian cancer," the doctor told her. She had surgery, then had to return to the hospital three hours every day for the next three months. This arduous recovery process was a time where she did a lot of thinking and reflection on her life. Her family supported her in ways she never imagined possible. Her eyes clouded with tears as

she described how her loving husband had patiently helped, even when he was exhausted, how her in-laws would do various things to help or to cheer her up, and even her young daughter would pitch in to help fill the void. She became closer to God through the experience and now attends Mass regularly.

*Thank you for reading. I am sure you enjoyed reading their stories as much as I did while hearing them and writing them. Resilience and hardships are common themes throughout their lives, and I am sure you, the reader, will find other themes which resonate with your own life and inspire you to grow. If you have any comments or would like to share your own story please email me at [dmiretti@gmail.com](mailto:dmiretti@gmail.com).*