The Prodigal Daughter

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When I was about 11 years old, my grandmother used a Trinitron television to extract a solemn promise: that when the time came, I would agree to marry only a Korean. We sealed the bargain with entwined pinkies and a very expensive, oversized cardboard box marked SONY. As the matriarch of my mother’s side of the family (lore has it that we are one of the last direct branches of Korea’s final royal dynasty, the Yi* Dynasty), it was a most binding agreement, about equivalent to signing in blood.

The TV lasted much longer than my promise. Because exactly 11 years later, I did the unthinkable—and married someone not of my race.

As recently as four years before my marriage, during a visit to Korea, I remember my grandmother pointing out an interracial couple on the street, and remarking that clearly the Korean girl was either a well-dressed prostitute flaunting her latest client or a wealthy student with her English tutor. So when I married at 22, although my grandmother sent delegates from Korea, she herself did not attend my wedding. Instead she chose to go on a South Seas cruise. It was difficult to leave Korea more than once a year, she explained in a message via my mother, and this year, she needed warmer weather.

Although the relatives who did come managed to enjoy themselves immensely (my mother made sure there was plenty of Korean delicacies in addition to the usual catered wedding fare) and even sent back praise-filled reports of my husband, my grandmother’s absence did not go unnoticed.

As I settled into my peripatetic married life (13 moves over the last decade), my grandmother’s annual worldly travels waned. Over the past decade, one by one, my at-first resistant relatives met and welcomed my husband. My parents glowed with all the praise heaped on my near-perfect better half. As one aunt raved about his gentleness and generosity, an uncle rejoiced at his sense of humor and adventurousness, a cousin jealously compared him to her spoiled spouse, and so on, until it seemed my husband could do no wrong. All encounters were reported back to my grandmother, every detail intact.

It took eight years and my 30th birthday for my grandmother to actually meet my husband in person; I had decided to face this major milestone in the land of my birth. My parents, who kept an apartment in Seoul, would also be there—to serve as buffers. So we nervously headed for my grandmother’s domain. Literally. First stop for us and the end...
tourage of relatives who met us at the airport was my grandmother’s apartment, to pay our respects. My husband entered her home and was greeted formally. But he immediately broke all barriers by just stepping up to my grandmother with open arms. The bear hug took my grandmother by complete surprise, but she accepted graciously.

And that set the tone of the 10-day visit. My grandmother chose to accompany us on most of our tourist jaunts to countless palaces, memorials, and historic landmarks. And when she became tired, my husband was right there at her side offering a steady arm. By the end of the trip, the two were actually clowning around. Once he even even carried her on his back for a few paces before my grandmother laughed so hard that they both had to sit down. We left Korea with priceless memories, and my husband with a newly devoted in-law.

Two years later, I was pregnant with our daughter. From throughout the family, scattered whispers still came back to me about how my poor mother worked and sacrificed for her daughter, only to see her betray the family lineage with a biracial daughter. But my mother, more than anyone, was ecstatic. After almost 10 grandchildless years, she had been convinced that she would never have any. When my daughter was born, my mother still claimed that she was far too young to have anyone refer to her as “Halmoni” (Korean for grandmother). But she smiles gleefully every time our daughter calls her so.

But the true test was yet to come. So back it was to Korea, this time for my grandmother’s 80th birthday, for which all the relatives were summoned last November. Upon arrival, the greeting entourage again whisked us straight to my grandmother’s house. In the car, we primped and preened—not over ourselves, but our one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, for her first true command performance.

This time, it was my grandmother who offered my husband the first hug. Then almost immediately, my grandmother went to our daughter and pointed out the pictures she kept on her mantel—a series of baby pictures, which she announced she rotated regularly, and were the only pictures she kept in her living room, so she could see her great-grandchild every day. Within minutes, our daughter was dancing for her great audience, and squealing with my grandmother in utter, innocent happiness.

In spite of the dread over time changes, not to mention the relatives, the birthday celebration week proved to be a joyful experience. And our daughter, like her father, charmed the entire family, one by one. She was a delightful addition to the Lee family, who took center stage even during my grandmother’s actual birthday banquet. As solemn as it was, everyone was smiling at our daughter’s antics. Four generations of Lee women, all gathered around to celebrate the rich, long life of the family matriarch. Just imagine the photo opportunities. They did not go unexploited.

We returned from Korea with another child in the making—rather fitting to conceive on home soil. So far, we’ve only heard congratulations from the Lee relatives. I’m sure some people are still talking about my “poor mother” and her daughter’s disloyalty. The child, after all, would be yet another reminder of my 20-year-old broken promise.

In the end, I remain (in)famous as the one—and, still the only—family member to mix the pure blue blood of the Yi dynastic line. But then again, I’m a mere female. Which means that in our Korean family records, neither my name, nor my husband’s, nor my daughter’s,
nor our son-to-be’s names will ever be mentioned anywhere. After much meandering, both my brothers have finally found themselves Korean-born spouses, ensuring that even this American-transplanted branch of the Hong family will continue with purity.

In spite of her efforts to preserve the sanctity of Yi blood, the family records will not preserve my grandmother’s name either. That absence from the family tree is something my grandmother and I will always have in common, no matter how much my life decisions have diverged from her expectations of me. In the end, I will have cast a mere shadow on the Yi name, as fleeting as the Trinitron that ended up at Goodwill. When we’re gone, there will be no records of our existence, on either the Lee or Hong sides, or of my broken promise. But while we’re here, we have joy beyond measure in our daughter, in a son about to be born, and in a family bond that has been bent by time and distance, but not broken.