

Sharing an Airbnb With My Parents for Seven Weeks

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/12/style/modern-love-korea-sharing-airbnb-with-parents.html>

Korea was my parents' country. They wouldn't need me there as they did in Canada ... right?



Credit...Brian Rea

By Susan Yoon

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I was sitting in between my parents on a 15-hour direct flight from Toronto to Seoul.

I was going to Seoul to work on a book project. My Airbnb had enough room for us all. So when my parents brought it up as a half-joke that they would come, too, I didn't think it was unreasonable. Until the trip neared, that is. Seven weeks? Together?

"I'm nervous about going with my parents," I said repeatedly to my friends. "Manage their expectations," they advised me.

"Don't forget I'm going to work," I told my parents.

"Oh don't worry," my father said. "We're going to do our own thing."

"You think we want to spend our whole time with you?" my mother added, laughing.

That was the one thing that put me at ease: our shared understanding that in Korea, my parents could be as independent as they wanted, without any language or cultural barriers.

Korea was their country. They wouldn't need me there as they did in Canada.

I was 10 when we immigrated. Immigrant children know that the real culture shock in a new country is the way your parents come to depend on you to navigate the world that once belonged to them. My siblings and I had no choice but to embrace the change: We learned a new language, started to eat a lot of cheese and got new English names.

As the plane began to accelerate down the runway, my father smiled widely. “Wow, this is it!” he said. “We’re going to Korea.” They had been just a few years earlier, but I hadn’t been back in more than 25 years.

We slept, hunched over our economy seat trays. When we landed, it was pouring rain.

In the haze of jet lag the next morning, my mother announced that the first thing they wanted to do was visit my paternal grandma’s grave. We had talked about visiting a few relatives, but going to Grandma’s grave had never come up, and it irked me. It was starting: family obligations usurping my time.

“Let’s go and say hello,” my father said.

“You guys go,” I said. “I don’t need to go.”

The first week was rough. We were upside down with the time change, and I was annoyed by their constant parenting. But soon we settled into a routine, spending the day separately and reuniting for dinner.

During one of those dinners, my parents let it slip that they didn’t know how to navigate Seoul’s massive transportation system. I didn’t understand. If they could speak and read Korean, why couldn’t they figure it out?

I downloaded Naver Map on my father’s phone. “These are all your options for getting there,” I said. “See?”

“OK, I got it,” my father said.

It wasn’t until a few days later that I discovered he hadn’t gotten it, that he and my mother had been navigating the city on archival memory — taking the bus toward directions and not actual locations.

I showed my father again. “This dot is you, and this is where you’re going. If you turn, the dot turns with you.”

The next morning I saw him in the small street outside our Airbnb with his phone nestled in his hand, practicing.

I updated my friends through Instagram stories. “How is it being among your people?” one friend messaged me. “LOL, are these my people?” I replied, the “LOL” hiding my irritation. Korea was my parents’ country, and Koreans their people. But the question lingered. Who were my people?

Two weeks into the trip, my mother declared that they were going to Grandma’s grave the next day. “Without you,” she said. I hadn’t realized they hadn’t gone yet. Looking forward to a day alone at the house, I told them that it was a great idea.

But the next day they decided not to go. Grandma's grave is in Paju, near the North Korean border, and the bus route was too complicated. "Maybe it's OK not to go this time," my mother told my father at breakfast. "She'll understand." My father nodded. I drank my Nespresso, saying nothing.

While my father showered, my mother took me aside. "He's not going to tell you, but your dad would really like it if you came to Grandma's grave."

"Why?" I asked. "Remember we said we were going to do our own things?"

"He wants to show her how well you grew up. He wants to show you off."

I laughed, but I was deeply moved. I decided to ditch my day of work and accompany them.

"We need flowers," my father said as we approached the graveyard. We assumed there would be a flower vendor near the entrance.

There wasn't.

I gathered some brightly colored wildflowers from the perimeter of the parking lot and tied them together with a long piece of grass. It reminded me of my sister and the clover necklaces we used to make as children.

My parents got busy weeding around the granite headstone, which had a combination of Hangeul and Hanja, on the front and the back. "Your name is on the back," my father said. "See here?" I looked, and there was my Korean name carved beside those of my siblings and cousins. It felt odd to see our names on the headstone — all of us, the living and dead, connected.

"Take a picture," my father said as he and my mother flanked the grave. Looking at my parents' faces through the lens of my iPhone, I felt a sudden wave of tenderness.

In the seven weeks we were in Korea, my parents and I managed to see all of our relatives, even my uncle in Chuncheon, the last city we lived in before we came to Canada. My uncle drove us down memory lane to our old apartment. It looked abandoned. My father and I walked quickly through the apartment complex, trying to reconcile our memory of the past with the present.

Back in Seoul, my mother noted that the apartment in Chuncheon was the last place Grandma lived. I had forgotten, but as soon as she said it, I remembered: Grandma's room was right next to the entrance. Every time I walked in after school, she would knock from the inside with her cane and ask, "Who is it?"

"It's Sun-kyeong," I would say. I'd open the door and see her sitting on the floor, her cane directing me to some kind of task. "Go pick the dandelion leaves from outside," she said once, pointing to the window. I remembered the day I came home from school and no one knocked and asked who I was. And through the half opened door, I saw that her room was empty.

Before we knew it, the trip was over. Back home in Toronto, my friends asked how Korea was. “Amazing,” I answered each time. If they asked why, I didn’t quite know how to explain it.

“Was the food good?” they asked. But it wasn’t that.

“Did you get work done?” they wondered. It wasn’t that either.

I didn’t know how to tell them that the trip was amazing because of my mother and father. That I realized how I was a part of them, and they were a part of me. That we don’t belong to languages or countries. That one day when my father and I took a cab home from a baseball game, I heard the driver say to him, “Oh, you’re a foreigner?” And my father responded, “Yes, from Canada.” And I couldn’t unhear it.

I didn’t know how to tell my friends that when we are in Canada, we are from Korea, and when we are in Korea, we are from Canada. We are always from somewhere else.

One day near the end of our trip, my parents and I went to Insadong and my father split off to do his own thing. I texted him the location where he should meet me and my mother. Then, I called him, just to make sure.

“Do you know how to get here?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

When he met us exactly where he was supposed to, I was so proud that I had to look away.

My Grandma died only four months before we moved to Canada. We had been accepted for permanent residency but she was too frail to make the trip. My parents didn’t know what to do and didn’t tell her that we were moving.

But she knew.

“Tell your parents, don’t forget to take me,” she told me and my siblings over and over. “Don’t forget to take me.”

I hope she knows that I won’t forget. That we did take her. That maybe all we have is each other.

Susan Yoon is a children’s book writer and author of “Waiting for Tomorrow.” She lives in Toronto.

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