

## MARYANN



Korean Dance of Peace

My parents were both from North Korea. My mother escaped when she was five and her little sister was two. She has stories about her sister crying and they were scared to death. It was kind of the typical thing, like today, with coyotes. They would flee and hide in the bushes during the day and walk at night.

My father, he never talked about it ever. He was a typical Korean man: They don't talk; they just do. They bury the past and that's why we came to America, so we could escape the past and whatever oppression he was under. Whenever we asked him why we came to America, he would always say, *All you need to know is that we came to America to get opportunities for our children. We came here for you and for the future.* That's all he would say.

Most of the stories that I tell you about his past were told to me by my mother. Actually, we never sat down and talked about it, sometimes she'd blurt something out, it would just come out of the sky, out of the clouds.

In South Korea we were wealthy. We had maids, we had American-made products, we had everything and we were living high. No one knew what my father did except once in a while we had to be quiet. The gates opened to our property and there were these big white people coming in. Their energy was really efficient and they'd beeline from the gate to the front door of the house and all the doors and windows were closed *bum bum bum bum bum* and we had to keep quiet. Then after a couple of hours they'd come out and beeline to the gate. We never knew what they were but they certainly didn't look like Koreans! We never questioned it.

Just like when my father was in Vietnam. My mother said he was the manager of a land development project or he was on a business trip. But I'd see these pictures of my

father and he's in a helicopter or he's in front of guns and artillery. I think he was working for the American government in a military way. Koreans fought as allies of the Americans. And sometimes he did recount to me about what he experienced in Vietnam. I remember he said something like *They couldn't mess with us because what we had done was so horrific. Oh, yeah, we were so powerful, we would put their heads on stakes.* So I don't think he was in the private sector developing land!

Years later, I met an American man my father's age and he had been in Vietnam. He said, *We Americans really tried in Vietnam but what we wanted was to have Koreans on our base because the Koreans were ruthless.* He said, *There was a village nearby and there was some suspicion of Vietcong there. The Koreans razed it, they burned down the whole village with the people in it.* He said, *The Koreans did not kid around and the Vietcong were actually afraid of the Koreans so when they got wind that there were Koreans in your troop, it was a vacation. We could party all night long and behave however we wanted. We had no fear. We had Koreans.*

So given that story and my father telling me about heads on stakes, I wouldn't be surprised if he were involved directly in some of the horrific actions. I never got the true story.

One day in Korea, I was seven years old and my father came home and said *We're leaving. We're going to America.* We left everything behind and that was it.

So we came to the States and my father worked as a construction worker and my mom worked as a maid in a town with no Asian people. He got a phone call one night, and the next couple of days we rushed to move out of our little apartment, packed everything into a car and drove ten hours to another state. And suddenly he had lots of property. So that's still a mystery, OK? That's a mystery. He had all this property, so much, all this money and available funds, so much that he would start Korean businesses for other people and that's how he became such an important figure in the Korean community. I don't know where my father got the money. We would have all these huge parties— hundreds and hundreds of people coming into our house and they would come to pay him back. He didn't charge interest. He didn't care about that. He just wanted to help his people, but they would bring a gift in appreciation. They'd always bring a TV, we had five huge TV's and we said *No more TV's!* We couldn't even watch them because it was bad for us. We were supposed to study.

There were threats against our family. I don't know where they came from but all of a sudden he employed these two local heavies and they became our bodyguards. We couldn't go to school or out on the street without them accompanying us. Then one of the bodyguards went to prison or got shot. Everything was so shady.

Back in Korea, there's corporal punishment for kids. You get beaten, even brutally, by your father. It was a given in that generation and it's not seen as child abuse the way it is here. It was just a fact. That's how you were disciplined. But then in the middle of my

childhood, I came to America so I was very confused about what was right and what was wrong and why I was abused, why I was singled out to be abused and it was really brutal. My sense was it wasn't just discipline, it was pure rage, repressed rage. I saw a monster lurking in my father. For a long time I hated him.

I finally realized it was PTSD in a big big way. I believe it came from trauma in his past and it was very intense. You can't go through that kind of horror in Vietnam and what happened to him in North Korea when he tried to escape. He wouldn't talk about it. He didn't tell me about his many attempts. It was my mother who told me. It was on his 16th attempt that he finally made it to South Korea. I just can't imagine what he had to go through the first 15 times. I was never told in so many words that he was tortured. I'm sure he was punished for trying to escape. To what extent and how they tortured him I don't know, but I know it wasn't just a lecture. These are North Koreans! I think his will of iron was created by that. By his ability to withstand so much adversity and punishment.

He was so strong I felt you could chop off every one of his fingers and he would still stand strong to protect his family. That's the kind of character he had. I think that's why my mother just trusted him completely because she told me this once. She said, *You know, I never met a man like your father. I knew that nothing nothing could ever happen to me when I was with your father.* Except when *he* did it to her. Which he did. He beat her. I hate to say it but that was part of the culture: you have to keep your wife in line. And you know what they did? Back then on the wedding day, you know what they would give the daughter as a wedding gift? A sword. *This is to kill yourself if you ever feel the need to leave the family or your husband.* This is how they treated the women back then.

My father wasn't just a monster. There was part of him that was so purely loving. That light bulb just goes on now – that he had PTSD – after my father's death. Now I think he had no outlet for his pain except his family and his wife. He didn't know any better. I know his brutality did not come out of his essence. His word was gold. He was so honest. And that's how I was raised. He wasn't malicious or evil. He was this amazing person who would be there hell or high water to help people. And I don't think anyone is born evil.

But I saw evil after we moved to our house in the suburbs. I had a friend there and it was her mother, this big bouffant lady. This woman acted in the neighborhood just like the mother on *Leave It to Beaver*. They even had a white picket fence. But she was evil. My friend had a brother, though later I learned he was a foster child. And I thought *I* had it bad! He was abused. She would chain him on his neck or ankle and she would dress him in a tutu. It was this shiny thing with spaghetti straps and she'd put lipstick on his face and have the kids surround him and she'd say *Dance!* and she'd poke him with a stick and he'd be crying. He was crying. And she would start *Shake that butt! Shake that butt!* He was two years younger than my friend and me and he had cigarette burns on the back of his hands. She, the mother, smoked. She was so big and strong and all the

kids were just standing around aghast and she took so much glee in it. It was beyond abuse. It was horrible. My father was never like that.

Yes, there were witnesses to that abuse but we were all kids. And we weren't really witnesses. We were the audience.

I tried to tell my mother. I don't think she really heard. She just kind of shrugged it off, like *This is America. Don't question it.* I knew it was so horrible, but still. I never connected that my friend was complicit at all. As a kid, you do think that's just the way things are. Especially for an immigrant, you don't understand things. If this was your introduction to another culture...well, maybe it *is* American.

That evil woman would abuse that boy and I didn't know how to react. An immigrant child grows up very confused. You don't know what's right and wrong. You don't even know what your own rights are. You don't know what's part of your culture and their culture. So you just close down and I think what it did was it trained me with skills of observation. And that was my American upbringing.

It was really tough for me growing up. When I left home after I graduated college I was also looking for a different prism and I started saying, *You were an abusive father, it was child abuse, I hate you, you tortured me. Why was I singled out, why was my brother the Number One Son and why was my baby sister the Princess, and why was I beaten horribly?* I went through crippling depressions and for awhile I didn't talk to him.

It's very difficult to say where one thing begins and where the overlap is between culture and your personal experience. As a child you don't really question anything until you get to mid or late adolescence and that's when you start rebelling and you know there are things you don't like but you don't know if it's the culture or if it's your father or if it's just that *I hate everybody and I'm just miserable!* If I'm depressed I don't know whether it's because of abuse or if it's because I'm a teenager or because I don't fit in because I'm an immigrant. You just don't know the root of all these symptoms of depression and anxiety.

I was questioning things, I was miserable, upset all the time. The threat of the abuse coming again was torture. I remember watching the clock, thinking my father was coming home. That's a torture. Knowing that he's coming. The anticipation of something happening, that's torture. The anticipation. That inescapable feeling of torment and there's no way out. It's not just the infliction of pain but the fact that it's going to happen.

I did have somebody who helped. When I was in sixth grade I felt tortured. I was being beaten by my brother. My sister would pick up the phone and call my father if I didn't give her what she wanted and my father would come home and beat me.

I saw the school counselor but I was really ashamed. I didn't want anybody to know. But her name was Miss Wyndham and I loved her so much. I finally got to talk to somebody. I never told her about my father. It was from this shame and also I didn't want my father

to get in trouble because at that time we knew if your parents hit you it's child abuse and they can go to jail. So I never talked about that but I always looked forward to going into session with her and just talked and she was so understanding, and just *interested*. I'd say *I did this, and I made this*, and she'd say *Ah! Wow!* and I just loved talking to her. I remember writing down her name and phone number. She said *If you ever want to call me, you can call me*. I remember writing it on my little pencil case in case I ever needed her. Nothing changed in my home life but I just couldn't pick up the phone to call her. I just remember praying, *Miss Wyndham, Miss Wyndham please please please send some of your power my way*.

My sessions ended with her and I asked about her. She was in the hospital with appendicitis. I was so excited that I'd get to give her something! So I ordered flowers for her and then she came back to school and said *Oh, thank you so much*. And I'd never had a *thank you* so heartfelt. I was embarrassed but so happy. I was just lit up inside.

When I had my school play, the *Pirates of Penzance*, I was one of the General's daughters and I didn't even know how to speak English perfectly like everybody else but I was in this play and everybody's parents came and their friends and their relatives came and of course my parents didn't come. But Miss Wyndham came and after, backstage, she gave me flowers. I was so thrilled but so embarrassed because everybody was whispering and I didn't want them to know she was my therapist. I said she was a friend of the family. She was beaming. She said *You were so beautiful!* and I was like *I was?*

I never ever ever forgot her. She was kind of my life raft in this storm and fog and I was in turmoil and she was the lighthouse and I thought *I want to do what she's doing*. I wanted to be there for kids. Even though she didn't know everything that was going on, just the fact that I had her presence and she had so much sympathy...Whatever I said I felt so much love from her that I'd never felt from anyone else in my entire life ... just the fact that she cared. She cared about me and listened to me and that saved me. And that gave me hope.

This was also the kind of person my grandfather was. He was my support, he's the one that fought for me, he's the one that understood me. Back in Korea, he raised me. But later he said America ruined me.

This is why I'm so cautious that I can't even raise my voice with kids. I can never never never curse at them, never. Because I know how fragile they are. I know what it feels like. I remember being so sensitive growing up, everything hurt me. But now I can use that sensitivity for understanding, empathy, healing. It helps me and strengthens me and is available to me so that I can connect with others who might be in pain.

I wish I had known what my father went through. I'm not one to shy away from ugly details. I wish I understood more because he had a character that was solid iron. His character was like an iron post and it went down so deep in the ground there's no way you could move it.

I never saw him vulnerable. Except...when he would get together with other Korean businessmen he'd come home late at night and I always thought I don't want him to come home to a house where everyone's asleep. I always thought he would feel so unloved if he came into that silent house, so I would wait up for him. I don't know where that came from, the connection with your abuser or maybe I had more empathy, I don't know. Everyone else was asleep but I always made sure that I had a book or was doing something so it wouldn't look like I was waiting for him. He would always come home, drinking, and he would weep. He would always weep. He would weep with me. He would sit down in his armchair and I would sit on the foot of the armchair and he would cry. And he'd call me his favorite. So it was torture because I felt like I'm loved by my father the most but he abuses me the most. I couldn't make sense of it. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. That's the part that's a mystery to me.

There's so much he never told us and now it's too late to know.

My father would sacrifice everything – anything – for someone he loved. And every one of those people that he helped? He would do it out of his heart. He would listen to their sob stories and then help them. I learned from my father nothing was impossible. Knowing what I know now about PTSD I know that trauma – and not just one but repeated trauma – caused the brutality.

I didn't talk to him for two years. I didn't talk to him. Then one day I don't know what came over me but I called my mom and said *Is Dad there* and she said yes, and I said *I want to talk to Dad*, and she called to him *Oh! Come here, come here!*, He got on the phone and I said *Dad*, in Korean, and this is after he'd had two strokes. After a long silence, I heard him say in a shaking feeble voice, *I'm sorry*. I said *It's OK, Dad*. I could hear him crying and then I could hear my Mom crying.

Now one of the things that I regret is that his dream was to go cross-country in an RV, to see this big beautiful country called America.. When he was really sick in the hospital I wanted to take him out of the hospital and take care of him and go with him in an RV and have him see America the way he wanted to. But it was too late.

On the shelf there, those are his ashes. I love him.

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