

Yes, I'm confusing. Why is this Korean girl born in Staten Island studying Hebrew and Arabic? Why does she subscribe to the Jewish Review of Books? People still subscribe to the Jewish Review of Books? Why would anyone choose to be born in Staten Island?

Please, let me explain. First, I did not choose to be born in Staten Island. We soon moved to Brooklyn where I grew up as a child of Korean immigrants in a Russian Jewish neighborhood. My parents were from Jejudo, a small island off the coast of South Korea. But here in Brooklyn, we were an island of our own. To our north was the Hasidic-Jewish neighborhood of Borough Park. To the west, Bay Ridge, which contained a growing population of Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian immigrants.

We lived in an apartment above my parents' grocery store. The place is a neighborhood landmark. At White Mountain Grocery nothing was assumed, everything questioned. As I rang up customers' Wonderbread, they would have disagreements over politics, faith, everything your mother told you not to talk about. (I had early exposure to the concept of adult diapers.) At home, "home" was a confusing concept. I was immersed in a broth of cultures, eating Korean kimchi, going to Passover seders, and reading Dostoevsky. Just kidding. I read, like, Harry Potter and Shel Silverstein.

During high school I began feeling unsettled by my existence. Which is to say, during high school others began to feel unsettled by me. Again, why is this Korean girl studying Maimonides and Chaim Potok? Except the questions were no longer innocent; they were definitively prescriptive. Underneath furrowed eyebrows and crossed arms was the real question: Why is this Asian girl not studying Asian things?

The puzzlement, suspicion, disdain that I receive for what I chose to study comes from people's fixed notions of what it means to belong. We live in a world where first times matter—first sex, first love, first time you think Yale's an okay place. (Don't worry, only 2 of those 3 have happened to me.) So, my studies supposedly belonged in this realm of "Asian things" because my first word was not "Mommy" but "Umma," and because of heritage, one I had a duty to protect from assimilation. As my mother always said, "Family first."

The suspicion hurt because it didn't only come from strangers. I was 15 when my dad died from an aneurysm. From that moment a whole Pandora's box of doubts was opened. In a moment of mutual frustration and anger, my sister asked me, "When are you going to study Korean? Why aren't you studying Korean history? You don't think that there's something wrong with that? That you're running away?" To which I replied, "You majored in applied math, right? Why didn't you major in Korean applied math?" But inside, I was afraid that a part of her was right. And I was afraid that such a slight to my heritage would bring about my greatest fear: forgetting my dad.

I remember, earlier this year, shuffling through some old books and finding an anthology of American Beat writers. I turned to Allen Ginsberg and had the terrifying, warming, overwhelming sensation of recognition when I saw, scrawled there in the margin, my father's handwriting. You might know the Beat generation as hippies, or as rebel travelers.

I think about this a lot when reflecting on *appa*. When I was little, he always told me: *Save everything*. But months after appa's death, my grandmother told us that my father loved running away. He dreamed of coming to America, with reckless abandon and an unhealthy love of Frank Sinatra, and he lived it. He never got to go "back home," as in Jejudo. But I don't think that was ever the point.

On a trip to Jerusalem, I met a bold, orange-haired woman named Tuva who proclaimed, "People love the past. We love it because it proves why we're here and what we get to call home. But that can be oppressive."

People love the past. We love belonging inside it, because it's a way to cope with others and with ourselves. But I don't think that to embrace running away means to deny the past at all. The term "running away" is positional. It requires an origin point. It is the opposite of denying home. Home, belonging, is not a particular time or place. I think it's a particular desire. I eat kimchi, and I speak Hebrew. Why not?