



Haemi Balgassi

Author

Connecting voices through generations

When I was seven, my parents, my three-year-old sister, and I moved from our home in Seoul, South Korea, to the United States. My maternal grandmother had moved there a few years earlier, and arranged for us to follow.

Initially, I only felt excitement. My heart soared at the thought of seeing my beloved grandmother again, the grandmother who had helped raise me for the first four years of my life, whose departure three years earlier had left a gaping hole in my childhood. And, I was eager to see America, the country far across the ocean I had heard so much about. The country where, according to my schoolmates, Coca Cola was rumored to flow from kitchen faucets. The country whose people didn't just live in mere houses, but castles. The country Mickey Mouse called home.

But, after arriving in Westfield, Massachusetts, that May in 1975, it soon became apparent to me that my schoolmates and I had been misled. Our small apartment was a far cry from a castle. Even more disappointing, there was nothing remarkable about the kitchen faucets. And, it turned out that Mickey lived in California, a place so far away, it might as well have been another country.

That summer was my first without books. I had been forced to leave all my treasured books, too heavy to pack, behind in Korea. "In America, there will be more books than you can imagine," my parents had promised. It was a comforting thought.

Without books, I had to settle for my grandmother's stories that summer. She told me I was born to a free Korea, the first girl in genera-

tions of our family to be born under Korean rule, not Japanese. I didn't know why this was so important to her, but I could tell by the light in her eyes that it was.

My grandmother spoke of being a young woman in the harsh winter of 1951, escaping war with her three young daughters on the icy roof of a southbound freight train. They were on the roof because the cars below were already packed with people.

I listened, wide-eyed, trying to imagine my mother and aunts as girls like me, riding on the roof of that freight train.

That September, I enrolled as a second grader in the local elementary school, and found myself struggling to stay afloat in a sea of an unfamiliar language. I could see kindness in my teacher's face, but not in most of my classmates'. At first theirs reflected curiosity, but soon they sensed that I was floundering, sensed the wall I had put up around me, and their curiosity turned to contempt, and worse, indifference.

And so I withdrew. Although everyone in Korea had called me a chatterbox, in America I had made up my mind never to speak again. In school my decision hardly seemed dramatic. After all, I barely knew a word of English, and no one knew what a chatterbox I had been. But when I refused to speak at home as well, my parents worried. And the more they worried, the more I allowed myself to hope. I hoped that my silence would show them that we didn't belong in this bewildering new country. I wanted to go home.

Months blurred by. At school, I was isolated from the other kids in my class. I spent most of my school day down the hall, with a Special Education

teacher and a handful of other kids who spoke little or no English. But even in that small room, I felt alone. I was the only one who spoke Korean.

Then one day the Special Education teacher called in sick, and I had no choice but to spend the entire day with my homeroom classmates and teacher. Had this been any other day of the week, I doubt I'd remember. But as it turned out, it was Thursday library day.

For the first time, I followed the class to the school library, a room I'd never known existed inside the cold brick building. My heart leaped when I saw all those shelves filled with books. It didn't even matter that the words inside were English, not Korean. I knew that the words were waiting for me to learn them. I knew that they were waiting to be my friends.

By the fourth grade, I not only knew how to speak and read my new language, I'd embraced it. That year I won a statewide creative writing contest, and for the first time I knew that I wanted to be a writer. I can't remember ever wanting to be anything else.

It was in high school that I first tried to write the story my grandmother had told me all those years earlier ... the story of riding on the roof of a freight train during the first harsh winter of the Korean War. The result was *War Child*, a short essay that appeared in the school's literary magazine. I had a sense then that I would try to write the story again one day. But, I wasn't ready.

Years later, I was a wife, a mother, and a published writer. My short stories and poems had appeared in a number of adult readership magazines and literary journals. But my thoughts kept returning to my grandmother and mother's wartime stories. So I sat down to organize my memories of the stories I had listened to as a child. I recalled my mother saying that she, a five-year-old on that June day in 1950, could hear the dull roar of the approaching tanks as North Korean troops pushed into Seoul. She said that through a child's eyes, the day seemed almost festive at first. The North Korean fighter planes that flew overhead dropped thousands of sheets of paper like party confetti.

Children played in the streets, pretending it was snow. My mother was too young to read what was printed on those fliers. Most contained just a single word: *surrender*.

My mother and her family, like thousands of others, tried to flee Seoul before the tanks arrived. My grandparents, my mother, and her sisters were just yards away when the bridges exploded before them, destroyed by a panicked South Korean Army in an effort to prevent North Korean troops from crossing the river. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children lost their lives.

I began to write **Peacebound Trains**. With words, I created a young family, much like my grandparents'. The family in **Peacebound Trains**, like my real family 50 years ago, spends long hours underground as bombs and gunfire light

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up the night sky outside. In the first winter of the war, the family in **Peacebound Trains** flees Seoul by night, carrying only a few bundles, forced to leave the life and home they know behind. In real life, my grandmother, too, fled her home on a bitterly cold, unforgiving winter night. Like the family in the book, she and her three young daughters crossed the river on a flimsy fishing boat.

But, unlike the family in the book, her husband, my grandfather, was not with them. After hiding for weeks in the basement of his home, my grandfather was betrayed by a neighbor that summer. On that terrible August night, North Korean soldiers charged into my grandparents' home in the outskirts of Seoul, and pulled my grandfather and a friend from their hiding place. The soldiers beat both men in front of their families, then dragged them away. My grandmother never saw her husband again. At age five, my mother had lost her father.

I wrote **Peacebound Trains**, not only to honor my mother and grandparents, but also to share their story with children ... a story which echoes the stories of many other Korean families, and countless families throughout the world who have been torn apart by war even today. I want my daughters and their friends to know that the Korean War was a real war, not a mere "conflict," as

some history books claim. It was a real war to the million South Korean civilian men, women, and children who were killed. It was a real war to the two and a half million others who lost their homes. It was a real war to the soldiers who fought and lost their lives, many of whom were American. In this country, the Korean War is sometimes called the "Forgotten War." I wrote **Peacebound Trains** to help people remember.

My novel, **Tae's Sonata**, was inspired by a more recent, more personal history. Tae, the story's viewpoint character, is a thirteen-year-old Korean-American girl immersed in two distinct cultures. In the novel, Tae struggles to find a balance between them, as well as between her home and school life. In writing Tae's story, I tapped into my memories of the Korean-American church that my family attended, where every Sunday I watched my mother blossom again with confidence, happy to put aside her broken English for an afternoon. I remembered my piano lessons, how I struggled to play "with feeling" as my mother wanted me to. I remembered the uncertainty I felt as a new American how, even after I became a citizen, I still ached to fit in, to feel "normal."

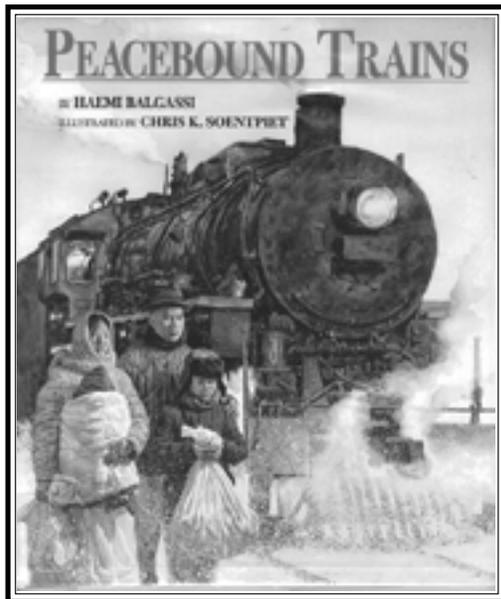
I didn't realize then that what I was feeling was normal. Feeling geeky and out of place wasn't unique to Korean-American girls. It was a burden

of thirteen-year-olds everywhere. If only I'd known that then.

Tae's Sonata started out as a New Year's resolution for 1996. I was intimidated by the thought of writing a novel, but both my editor, the late Dorothy Briley, and writer's group urged me forward. I started writing on New Year's day, and finished the first draft just five weeks later. In my waking hours, I hardly left the keyboard that month. I lived, breathed, and dreamed through Tae ... or maybe it was the other way around. It was as if Tae had waited years for me to hear her voice and tell her story, and now could not stay quiet.

And for me, that's how it begins. Some writers work successfully from fully plotted outlines. I'm not one of them. For me, a story begins with a character. I listen to the character, and let him[her] guide me into the story. Sometimes it begins with just a voice. Other times, I see the character vividly, but have to coax him[her] to speak to me.

I write for children because I was a child myself when I fell in love with books and stories. The girl I used to be still lives inside me, still demands that her voice be heard ... perhaps to make up for all those months she chose silence. I write for her because she continues to inspire me. And, I write for my daughters, Adria and Louisa, who inspire me with voices all their own.



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