

# MERIDIAN

NO BORDERS



ISSUE  
39

# MERIDIAN

*The Semiannual  
from the  
University of Virginia*

Issue 39 ♦ Summer 2017

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## SUSAN KIM CAMPBELL

### *Neapolitan*

MY MOTHER CRIES. WHEN WE COME HOME FROM SCHOOL, WE CATCH her crying. She explains, wiping her eyes on her apron, “Girls cry, Grace. You and Lily cry. Mommy is a girl, too.”

“Ok,” I say, but what I don’t say is that Lily is seven and I am nine. We’re supposed to cry. She’s stopped for now, though, which makes us glad.

My mother unloads groceries from our 1982 Chevrolet Impala. Grandma got it new last year but then she had to stop driving so now it’s ours. It’s green and huge. When my mother drives, she sits up very close to the steering wheel and tells us to shush.

My mother’s friend Ducky comes over. Her real name in Korean is “Duk hee.” Since she moved to California from Korea, she tells people to call her Ducky. She’s the only other Korean person we know in town, besides my mother. She leans in close and tells me, “Be a good girl. Help your mother.” She smells like cigarettes.

It doesn’t seem like Ducky helps my mother. Instead she follows her around and around the house while she works, and they talk and talk in Korean. I only know a few words, but from what I can tell Korean is loud.

“What is mommy saying?” Lily asks. “She said halmuni, that means grandmother,” I say. We’ve never met our other grandmother, who lives in Korea. I try to picture her, our mother’s mother.

Sometimes my mother speaks in English. We hear things like, “He never listens!” Sometimes she’s angry. Her words come out in a harsh sputter like the noise you make right before you spit. It’s a sound I cannot make.

She and Ducky talk while my mother puts away the food. They talk while she cooks. She makes oxtail soup, which they eat sucking the marrow out of the bones. She makes us peanut butter and jelly.

Lily and I play ping-pong in the garage. When my mother used to play she always beat us, even my father. She was a ping-pong champion in Korea, she says.

Ducky goes home to her husband when my father comes home from work. My mother cries at night, too. Then my father comes out of their bedroom and says, "Mommy is sick, so she's gone to sleep early." He serves us ice cream, the Neapolitan ice cream we save for special occasions. I like the chocolate stripe the best and Lily likes the strawberry, so we trade. We leave the vanilla, but instead of eating that part as our mother does, our father just leaves the bowls in the sink and lets it melt.

"What kind of sick?" Lily asks, from the twin bed next to me. I tell her to go to sleep. I feel bad because I don't do enough homework or enough chores. On these nights my father sleeps on the couch. In the morning my mother folds up his blankets.

My mother shouts a lot. The next week it's about Grandma. She is bossy and strict, and Lily and I are afraid of her. She taught my mother how to cook American food when she first married my father and came to the United States. When Grandma visits, my mother cooks pot roast and mashed potatoes. Grandma tastes each dish and makes a face, yes, no. She won't let Lily and me talk, but raises a finger in the air when we try. My father just nods yes, yes to all this.

Grandma fell and broke her hip, so now she wants to come live with us. "We don't want her to," I say, but Ducky says, "In Korea we take care of grandparents." My mother nods slowly, but when my father gets home we hear them shouting.

"You promised!" my mother says. She wants to take us to visit Korea this summer. She says she's lived here ten years without seeing her family. My father says that we all have to stay and take care of Grandma. The night ends with more Neapolitan ice cream.

One day soon after that Lily and I come home after gymnastics class to find my mother standing out front in the driveway by the car. "Get in, girls!" my mother says. She is smiling, and it is a smile I have not seen before.

Our suitcases are already in the trunk. We are very surprised.

"Are we going to meet Daddy?" Lily asks, but my mother does not seem to hear her. She is focused on sliding her seat forward behind the wheel and adjusting all of her mirrors.

Lily and I climb into the back seat. We like going on trips. My mother drives through town for a while, slowly and carefully like she does. We are going towards the freeway, which she never does.

Suddenly we hear people honking their horns and shouting. Lily

and I scream, because cars are coming towards us! My mother is driving the wrong way, up a street where cars are coming off the freeway. She stops and pulls the car over, shaking. She shouts at us to be quiet and puts her head down on the steering wheel. This is scarier than the cars.

We sit there a long time. Then we see flashing lights and a police car stops behind us. "Ma'am?" a police officer asks my mother. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Lost!" she says finally. "I—I am going to meet my husband and - I am lost." The police officer frowns. He checks her driver's license but he does not seem to understand.

He peers into the back seat and motions us to roll down the window. "English?" he asks. "Can you girls speak English?" He asks if we know where we live. I don't say anything, but Lily tells him.

"I'll take you home, ma'am," he says gruffly, to my mother. He stands there, waiting on her, until she starts the car. He watches while she turns our big boat around so we are going back the way we came. He drives ahead of us, slowly. My mother follows, slowly. Lily and I huddle in one corner of the back seat and keep quiet.

"It's ok to cry, Mommy," I say, but she keeps on her eyes on the road and I can't see her face. Finally, after a few blocks, she says softly, "You have to do what the policeman tells you, girls." Her voice sounds all strange and wobbly, but I am just glad she is talking again.

Lily sniffles and I wipe my eyes on my sleeve. The policeman drives us straight home. As we turn the corner onto our street, no one says a word. We see our father's brown car parked in front of our house.

That night we finish the Neapolitan ice cream.

There's just one sliver of vanilla left in our freezer, alone and forlorn.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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