

Excerpts from Novel Manuscript for *Lisa Bae: A Diasporational Fairytale*

By Jules Chung

1995

Anyone could see they were brothers. Their features were different, but they were alike in the deep ways that come to the surface. Like the way happiness hits. Happiness would flit across their faces in the same way. The moment they smiled, they were revealed as rays of the same star.

I was in love with Steve, the youngest. I kept this to myself because I was dating John, the eldest, and had been for one year. I was thirty. My age was among the reasons I was not to mess this up.

“You’re so lucky,” my mother crooned. It was the sweet tone she used to deliver edicts. They were always oblique, implied rather than stated, framed as wishes rather than instructions. But as the eldest, I knew that when it came to my life, her wishes were commands.

“You were *born* lucky,” my mother said. “Everyone is about to die from jealousy. My daughter is going to marry Dr. John Park.”

“We’re not engaged, Mom,” It sounded dry as I said it. I had never mastered the chirrupy tones that came so naturally to my sister Jenny, the favorite. I had never really tried. Jenny’s sweet and cajoling way was so alien to me that any attempt at it felt like self-betrayal.

My dryness alarmed my mother. Her alarm sounded like a burst of anger.

“What’s the point of dating so long if you’re not getting engaged?” she demanded, stamping her foot. “Is there a problem? Are you just wasting time?”

My mother was spinning out.

“I’m not wasting time,” I said. “I would never waste time. You taught me that.”

I managed a smile to mask my feelings. Resentment rose and left its tang in my throat. My mother didn’t detect any trace of it, though. Placated, she sweet-talked me again.

“That’s right. I did teach you that. I taught you well. My Lisa is the best. Aigoo...”

As she cooed, my mother brushed my cheek in her customary way, three times in rapid succession with a touch that was half caress, half smack.

I know what you’re thinking: How typical. What an overbearing immigrant Mom. What a stereotype. But before you judge, let me suggest that a cartoonish idea about another person reveals the nature of the mind holding it. Isn’t a stereotype just a lack of imagination about

another human being? Sadly, such poverty of imagination is often married to a lack of compassion.

After I am struck with thoughts like these, I feel spent. My heart gets heavy. I usually need a moment to gather myself, so I tend to sit back in my chair and take a sip of whiskey. At least I don't smoke anymore.

Daughters, when they are young, are often the least compassionate when it comes to their mothers. But I should speak for myself. Now that I am a certain age, I tell this story to repent.

My mother--Mrs. Bae in her circles--willed the future she wanted into existence. The only one who stopped her from getting what she wanted in life was God. She left Seoul in 1968 to accompany her husband to Philadelphia. To be precise, she had been granted the visa because of her nursing degree, so my father was the one riding the coattails. I imagine that my father vowed the moment the plane took off that he would never, ever feel beholden to my mother again. As soon as he was able, he would make sure that my mother was free to stay home and raise children. That was the kind of man he wanted to be.

While he toiled toward a business degree at the Famous University, she toiled at the hospital for veterans as a nurse. With a newcomer's English but a powerful mind, she read charts, received often supercilious orders, and cared for ailing American men like her own life depended on it. Because in a way, it did. Without her job, my parents could not have stayed.

The early days of their life as a couple were infused with precarity. Precarity tinted their entire lives like a phantom drop of blood that suddenly landed in a glass of water. For

years, no matter how much they wanted their lives to feel like a cold, clear glass of refreshing water, they could never escape the dread of that drop ruining everything.

Maybe you're quick with numbers. Maybe you realized that I was three in 1968. I don't mention myself in these early scenes of my parents' life in America because I wasn't there. I wasn't with them. But more on that later.

By the year 1995, my mother could see the finish line. She had three grown daughters, who were all--in her mind--renowned for their education and beauty. She would have them all married off soon. All of her toil and heartache, all her sacrifice and suffering, was ransom for one dream: To see her children settled in good marriages. If God had burdened her with three daughters, then her mission was to make sure they met and married good Korean men and gave her Korean grandchildren.

My sister Jenny had other ideas, though.

"Mrs. Park says Daniel has a single friend, Jenny."

"That many?" I said. "Amazing."

Jenny giggled. My mother swept a spoon through the soup. She peered into the bubbling pot. Sundays were for early dinner at the house with all her daughters. Now that Jenny and Sharon were living at home again, Sundays were a portal through which we all became actual children even though we were 30, 24, and 22. At least that's always how it felt.

The thought that my parents might give me some space once I was married was almost enough to make me rush down the aisle.

“No, thanks,” was all Jenny said.

“What do you mean ‘no, thanks?’” Mom sounded irritated. She went from calm to angry so fast, always.

“Not interested,” Jenny said. “It’s gross.”

I filled a water pitcher. My back was turned, and I couldn’t help smiling. I was curious where Jenny was going with this. Wherever it was, it was going to be interesting.

Mom held the spoon mid-air. She looked at Jenny.

“What do you mean ‘it’s gross?’” She squinted her non-comprehension.

“It’s incestuous. My sister is dating Daniel’s older brother. Too close.”

My mom looked at me to translate the word ‘incestuous.’

“People in the same family having sex,” I said without looking at her. I ferried the pitcher to the table. “With each other,” I tacked on.

“Ya!” Mom yelled. “When did I say to do anything like that?” She glared at Jenny, but it wasn’t a real glare. You could see the laugh in the corners of her eyes.

Jenny, giggling, ran to Mrs. Bae and encircled her shoulders.

“Don’t be so literal, Mom. I just mean it’s weird.”

“I said Daniel’s *friend*, not Daniel.”

“Sorry, Umma. Didn’t mean to offend you.” She gave Mrs. Bae a peck on the cheek.

Mrs. Bae swatted the air. “I’m not offended,” she said, her face brightening. “Your mother is a sophisticated woman. Didn’t you know?”

“She is.” Jenny squeezed Mrs. Bae and pressed her cheek against hers.

The phone rang. Mom picked it up. Her voice began to glow. Listening to her chitter-chatter with whoever was on the line, one would think Mrs. Bae was all sunshine. Eventually, Mrs. Bae palmed the mouthpiece and stage-whispered to Jenny. “It’s Rachel.” She beamed.

“I’ll take it in my room.” Jenny bounded out of the kitchen and ran upstairs.

Mrs. Bae chatted with Rachel a moment more. I heard Jenny’s voice say ‘I got it, Mom’ through the receiver. She had to repeat herself, though, because Mrs. Bae clung on. ‘Are you still in L.A.? How’s the movie business? Do you have a boyfriend?’

“Bye, Mom!” Rachel said, firmly.

After she hung up, Mrs. Bae opened a cabinet. She pointed to the top shelf.

“Lisa, get those soup bowls for me.”

“Mom, why do you put things you need so high up?”

“I only use those on Sunday. And you’re always here to get them. Isn’t it lucky I have a tall daughter?”

As I reached for the bowls, I noticed how much taller than my mother I was. Was she shrinking? I felt an impulse to hug her, so I did.

Mrs. Bae braced. Her body felt like a plank. She patted my back and said, “Ok, ok. Don’t be so clingy. You’re grown up now.”

I felt stupid. Why did I always forget?

“Where’s Sharon, anyway?” I said. “She’s old enough to help.” I laid the metal chopsticks and spoons. They clacked as I circled the table.

“She’s studying for MCATs. You know that. Leave her be.” She tutted. “For someone who’s going to be forty any minute, you’re still rather selfish, like a child.”

“I guess having children someday will make me big-hearted.”

1980

I am fourteen. I am sitting in an audience with the most terrifying girls in the school. I am one of them. I have clawed my way to the apex in six years.

I spent my first year in the United States in tears of rage. I spoke no English, wore the wrong clothes, and was generally lonely and miserable. I was eight.

My mother, whom I hadn’t seen since I was three, was hollow-cheeked and weighed down. Bulky with Sharon growing inside her and drained from chasing two-year-old Jenny around, she still did my hair every morning. I was the first child, returned from exile. A stranger to my mother and my mother a stranger to me, I learned quickly that I could guilt her into doing things, but that if I pushed too hard or chose the wrong moment, I’d feel her palm on my cheek or her knuckles digging into my skull. But those moments were rare. She fed me,

bought me beautiful coloring books, taught me how to read in English, and told me constantly that I was pretty. I loved her exactly as if we had never been apart.

My parents left me in Seoul with my grandmother when I was three. The thought of getting settled in the States with a three-year-old daunted them. They arranged to have a friend fly out with me after six months. This friend's plans changed. Six months got pushed to a year. A year bled into two, then three, four and five. This long separation had been unintentional according to both my parents, but I did not see a lot of intention behind the plan to reunite with me.

“Well did you try to get me sooner?”

I remember asking when I was nine. I remember asking in fluent English. I was precocious, and many adults found me unnerving. My mother was no exception. She looked away and said that they tried, but it couldn't be helped.

“Life was difficult,” she said. “It was better to leave you with Halmoni and Imo. You were happy. At that age, the most important thing for a small child is to be happy.”

I don't remember my years in Korea, but I suppose I was happy. My face in all the pictures is consistent--red lips pursed, dimpled cheeks plumped with suppressed laughter, twinkling eyes in happy crescents under a set of heavy bangs. My Imo took the photos. I think to this day how wise she was, how emotionally intelligent she must have been even though she was only nineteen and a student. She had the foresight to say something--I wonder what--to make me suppress a giggle just as she clicked the shutter. Every picture of me sent from Korea shows me with the same happy, peach-like face. As a good younger sister, my Imo realized she

was a sort of ministry of propaganda. Nothing but good news about me must reach America lest my parents' resolve wobble. Again, those early years were defined by precarity. My Imo knew on some intuitive level that her older sister and brother-in-law were living a knife's edge existence and did not need any added worry. She made sure that the packet of photos she mailed twice a year showed a daughter who was well-fed, well-dressed, and generally shining. I imagine that any hint of shadow on my face would have broken my mother's heart.

By the time I got on the plane to reunite with my parents, I was old enough to understand the hushed comments, pitying glances, and schoolyard taunts that reminded me that although I did have a mother like my schoolmates, she had moved to America without me. And even though I was only eight, I knew that it was my duty to be a good daughter when I arrived. Any scratches or dings on my heart were not to show. They would upset my parents. The atmosphere of enforced good-humor clung like humidity.

It took a while, but I am happy now at 14, or so I believe myself to be. I am in the clique of popular girls. The whole grade peers at us sideways to see what we do, say, and wear, who we accept or don't accept. It is the end-of-the-year talent show, and every performer is backstage with their heart in their mouth. They know that no matter what they do, there is always the chance that one of the loudmouths in the crowd will yell an insult to get my friends and me to giggle, which would set the whole auditorium ablaze with mocking laughter. No amount of glaring from the principal or our teachers could snuff it out.

The first three performances are unremarkable. A baton twirler, a singer, and a ballet act (*not* a ballerina). Everyone receives polite applause and some light whooping from friends.

“Hey, Lisa,” one of my friends whispers, why aren’t you up there? You’re better at ballet than that girl.”

“I quit.” I don’t look at my friend as I answer, and my answer is dry to conceal that her question grates. I keep my eyes trained on the stage.

The fourth act is Steve Park. Wearing a neat blue oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up, khaki trousers, and pair of brown leather shoes with laces, he strides out with his cello.

I remember this moment years later and the sensation remains the same. When Steve emerges with that enormous cello and crosses the stage, the air changes. We quiet ourselves, like birds before a storm. Our eyes fix on this odd boy, who is thin, quiet in class, and whose skin is so pale and poreless it glares against the black of his bushy hair. His adult posture, his stride, his palpable contempt for whether we like him or not is breathtaking.

Steve takes his seat on the folding chair under the spotlight. He does not look at the audience even once. He might as well be alone. His eyes down, he lightly plucks the strings. He reaches with his bow hand to adjust something. Someone coughs. It has no effect on Steve’s concentration. He draws his bow quickly a few times to make a final check. When he is satisfied, he crouches, ready to play.

He inhales, loudly. He begins.

The next two and a half minutes are obliterating. No one in the room can perceive anything but the music. It flows, it eddies. It loops, it unwinds. It rocks, it undulates. It is as fine as it is ferocious. Later, I learn that this event was the Prelude from Bach’s Cello Suite No.

1 in G Major. To my electrified body and stupefied mind, it is the sound of love. After the last note, a chord, Steve lifts his bow high, where it hangs, cueing us to hush.

We obey the cue, but only for a second. The auditorium explodes. We are on our feet applauding, whooping, and cheering. I even whistle like someone hailing a taxi in an old-timey film. Mrs. Stout, the vice-principal, sets aside her mirthlessness for the outpouring, letting us be as loud as we want for as long as we want, as the moment demands. Steve is a phenomenon. He bows deeply, then does it again when the applause does not die down. He leaves the stage to still thunderous clapping.

The rest of the talent show is meaningless. It's as if the rest of the performers know it too, as they all trudge or rush through their mostly spiritless acts. Steve's genius has completely taken the air out of the rest of the show, but we at least have the manners to clap enough to let everyone save face. When it is over, we rise to return to class, and the auditorium swells with the sounds of adolescent boorishness. As we file out, the usual boys preen with their antics and, as usual, draw reprimands from teachers. It seems whatever spell Steve had cast before has been completely undone. We turn back into the nattering idiots that we were at that age.

I wriggle out to the aisle, past my friends, who ask where I am going. I ignore them. I rush down the carpeted walkway to the front row, where all the performers sat as they awaited their turn, and where they all returned when they finished.

At first, I don't see Steve, and my heart sinks because I think he is already gone. But then I spot him. He is off to the side in a quiet corner by an exit no one is using. He crouches down, gently laying his cello back in its case. As he snaps the clasps closed, I approach.

I stand over him, waiting for him to notice me. When he rises, he hoists the cello case off the floor and bumps me in the chest with it. I pretend it didn't happen. He seems confused to see me.

I am taller than he is. The top of his head comes up my nose. Steve, silent, stares at me, waiting. His eyes are rimmed with dark lashes. He is unblinking, unsmiling.

"I just wanted to say," I begin. I don't even have the words that I want. My thoughts and feelings cascade. I fumble and finally blurt out the most mortifying thing I could possibly say.

"That was...the most...*passionate* thing I have *ever* heard. You are so very passionate!"

Steve blinks. Then he pats me on the head and walks away.

1996

My mother headed me off in the narrow hallway between the garage and the kitchen. I had come home in the midst of dinner preparations, made apparent by the delicious fug in the air and the long cooking chopsticks in my mother's hand. She wagged them in my face, like she was erasing something with the tips, and whispered.

"Don't say anything stupid. Be nice."

Curious, I slipped off my shoes and dragged my suitcase into the kitchen where my mother had returned to her post at the stove. She was turning pieces of battered fish in a pan. I paused to admire the smell and the golden perfection of her handiwork when Jenny ran into the kitchen in socks and slid, almost knocking me over. Squeezing me around the shoulders, she squealed in a stage-whisper.

“Sharon’s got a man. His name is Ben. He’s enormous.”

I removed my coat and hung it in the hall closet, smacking away Jenny’s hands as she tugged on my sleeves to get me to hurry-come-and-see.

“Just leave it,” she whispered about my suitcase.

We went around to the living room. Jenny pulled me by the arm across the threshold with an embarrassing flourish of an intro.

“Ben, this is our other sister, Lisa.”

I opened my face like an umbrella into a huge smile to cover my surprise. There was a giant in our living room. He stood when he saw me. His shoulders strained against the seams of his sweater. The hedgehog of bristly black hair on top of his slab-like head threatened to graze the ceiling. His mass was so stunning that I quickly calculated how much he must weigh and felt my mind playing tricks on me: I wondered if he wasn’t exerting his own gravitational pull that was making me feel off-balance.

Sharon remained seated on the sofa. She looked diminutive and pretty, even chic. Whatever stresses the first year of med-school had brought seemed to agree with her. Hair glossy and straight, she wore a black turtleneck, tight jeans, and even some lipstick. She was clearly serious about this guy.

The giant smiled as I approached with my hand extended. He loomed over me and engulfed my hand in both of his with the words, “Nice to meet you, Lisa. I’m Ben. People call me Benji, though.”

“You can call him Ben,” Sharon said.

1975

Jenny and Sharon listen, their eyes stretched with fear. I am ten and the big sister, but I am tense too.

The mother frog is about to die.

Our own mother sits in her ruffled nightgown, the covers drawn up high. She is always a little cold. Propped against a double-batch of pillows, her sharp-edged face emoting to entertain, she resembles the wolf dressed as grandmother in the fairy tale. I feel guilty about the thought even though I know ideas like that come from somewhere beyond my control.

We are listening to the story of the incorrigible frogs, a Korean folktale sometimes known as the Tale of the Green Frogs. The story can be summarized in four lines: Mother frog’s disobedient children always do the opposite of what she asks. When she is old and dying from an exhausting life, she asks her children to bury her by the river because she *actually* wants them to bury her on higher ground where her grave won’t be washed away. (You can see where this is going.) To respect their

mother's dying wish, her children bury her by the river, where of course her grave gets washed away.

This is why frogs cry when it rains.

The three of us have heard the story many times, but we listen as if our minds have only now been awakened to language. Through her voice, her face, the gestures of her beautiful hands, my mother spins the atmosphere in her bedroom so that we feel the cold raindrops and hear the rush of the river as the baby frogs croak and chirr, weeping for their mother. Their grief becomes our grief. Their remorse, our remorse.

My sisters lean forward elbows propped on the slippery bedspread. They hang on our mother's every word. I do something else. It's something I have begun to do ever since I realized that Dad hitting me is a fact of life: I drift out of my body and look at us, like I am watching myself and everyone I am with on a screen. My mother hangs her head and closes her eyes. She pats her heart to quell the pain, the inexpressible sorrow, as she intones in some sort of archaic, literary-sounding Korean, "If only those frogs had *listened* to their mother while she was alive, they might have avoided this piteous fate."

Jenny stands at the foot of the bed. She makes a nest with her chubby forearms and buries her face. Tiny Sharon, who is about to start school but still in diapers, bursts into tears, wailing.

It dawns on me that there is a problem at the center of the story. I need an answer.

My cheek is still warm from the moment my father's rock-hard hand struck it like lightning. He strikes like lightning every time--except with lightning, there are warning clouds. We are alone in the living room this time, and something I say smacks of disrespect. I thought I was just being me.

He turns his back afterward and goes outside. I hear the car start in front of the house and the sound of the engine fade as it drives away from our curb. He is getting some air, more cigarettes too, probably. He looks like a gentleman and thinks of himself as one. You can tell by his hair, his clothes, his posture. He smokes a brand of cigarettes that looks English.

Mindlessly, I push the flesh on my cheekbone around, massaging it, fascinated with how it still hurts and how, even though it hurts even more from my manipulation, I can take it.

My question escapes my lips and breaks the storyteller's spell.

"If her children always do the opposite of what she says, why doesn't she just say the opposite of what she means? Why does she wait until she is about to die?"

My mother looks at me.

"What?"

I continue, believing her question to be neutral, a pure expression of curiosity about my curiosity.

“If the frog’s children always do the opposite and that upsets her so much that she gets sick and dies, shouldn’t she have figured out sooner that she should *say* the opposite of what she wants? Didn’t she understand her own children?”

Jenny shoots me a look of alarm. She senses a line--and that I have crossed it.

“You think you’re so smart,” my mother says, “but you’re smart in a way that’s bad.”

“I’m not bad!” I shout.

My mother is startled. She laces her fingers together and lays her hands over her heart. Tilting her head, she regards me like I myself am a question to be answered.

“I’m not bad,” I say again. I attempt to reign in my rage, but I’m not very successful. Through a tense jaw, I force the words, “I’m just asking a question.” My head congests. My eyes flood. I blink, refusing to spill even one drop of myself.

My mother suddenly grabs me by the chin. Her touch is gentle, but her brow furrows.

“What happened to your eye?”

“There’s nothing there,” I say.

I had looked in the mirror to check for a mark or a bruise. There wasn’t one. I made sure the redness in my cheek was gone before I came to join my sisters for storytime.

My mother stares into my left eye while my sisters, gripped by childish morbid curiosity, clamor to see what she’s looking at. Taking my face in both palms, she smooths her hands down my cheeks in a gentle, ironing out kind of way. Her face is set in a look I can’t read, but which my adult self will look back and recognize as resolve.

I walk to her dresser and peer into the mirror. My left eye has a bright red starburst in it, spreading from the outer corner toward the iris. Broken blood vessels.

“It’s bleeding!” Jenny cries.

My eye isn’t bleeding in the sense Jenny means. Nothing is seeping out, but there is red where there should not be.

A car door slams outside in the dark.

My mother rushes Jenny and Sharon off to their room. They scoot, obedient. I am about to leave too--the last person I want to see in the world is my father. But my mother holds my wrist and keeps me.

The front door opens. The terrible moments drag while my father slips off his shoes and hangs up his jacket. Through the walls of our little house, the sound of his throat-clearing snarls.

He appears in the doorway. I look to the side. My mother draws me to her, encircling me with her arms.

“Do you see what you did?” she says.

My father inhales, then tries to protest, to justify, but my mother cuts him off.

“You think that because I don’t have a job here I don’t have any choices, but I do,” she says. “If you hurt them, it’s the same as you hurting me. Do you understand?”

My father puts his arms akimbo, a sign that he is gathering strength, loading. He opens his mouth to speak, but something in my mother’s face makes him stop. He looks at me. I don’t know if he can see my bloodstained eye from where he is, but I don’t care. I look away.

He leaves the doorway. The sounds of the refrigerator opening. He is getting something to eat. An apple, apparently, as we hear the unmistakable crunch.

My mother tucks me in and spends a little extra time with me that night. She tells me how smart I am. How good. How pretty. She tells me I am right. The mother frog really was a silly goose. A smarter mother would have used reverse psychology and said the opposite of what she felt to keep her children on the right path.

“Those frogs were just kids,” she says. “How were they supposed to know anything?”

Her voice soothes me, and I drift into sleep. The glow from my night light seeps through my eyelids.

Until that night, I had thought we four were hostage, that our father’s ability to earn money is what held it all together. I suddenly see that my mother is the actual linchpin.

My mother is a lion tamer.

I am comforted, but then jerked awake again. My mother is laughing on the edge of my bed. She has had a realization and says, delighted, “But if those frogs and their mother figured it all out perfectly, there would be no story!”

I giggle, not fully understanding.

It was a long, long time before my father hit me again.