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Opening extract from
The Sun is Also a Star

Written by
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prologue

CARL SAGAN SAID that if you want to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe. When he says “from scratch,” he means from *nothing*. He means from a time before the world even existed. If you want to make an apple pie from nothing at all, you have to start with the Big Bang and expanding universes, neutrons, ions, atoms, black holes, suns, moons, ocean tides, the Milky Way, Earth, evolution, dinosaurs, extinction-level events, platypuses, *Homo erectus*, Cro-Magnon man, etc. You have to start at the beginning. You must invent fire. You need water and fertile soil and seeds. You need cows and people to milk them and more people to churn that milk into butter. You need wheat and sugar cane and apple trees. You need chemistry and biology. For a really good apple pie, you need the arts. For an apple pie that can last for generations, you need the printing press and the Industrial Revolution and maybe even a poem.

To make a thing as simple as an apple pie, you have to create the whole wide world.



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daniel

Local Teen Accepts Destiny, Agrees to Become Doctor, Stereotype

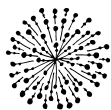
It's Charlie's fault that my summer (and now fall) has been one absurd headline after another. Charles Jae Won Bae, aka Charlie, my older brother, firstborn son of a firstborn son, surprised my parents (and all their friends, and the entire gossiping Korean community of Flushing, New York) by getting kicked out of Harvard University (*Best School*, my mother said, when his acceptance letter arrived). Now he's been kicked out of *Best School*, and all summer my mom frowns and doesn't quite believe and doesn't quite understand.

Why you grades so bad? They kick you out? Why they kick you out? Why not make you stay and study more?

My dad says, *Not kick out. Require to withdraw. Not the same as kick out.*

Charlie grumbles: *It's just temporary, only for two semesters.*

Under this unholy barrage of my parents' confusion and shame and disappointment, even I almost feel bad for Charlie. Almost.



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natasha

MY MOM SAYS IT'S TIME for me to give up now, and that what I'm doing is futile. She's upset, so her accent is thicker than usual, and every statement is a question.

"You no think is time for you to give up now, Tasha? You no think that what you doing is futile?"

She draws out the first syllable of *futile* for a second too long. My dad doesn't say anything. He's mute with anger or impotence. I'm never sure which. His frown is so deep and so complete that it's hard to imagine his face with another expression. If this were even just a few months ago, I'd be sad to see him like this, but now I don't really care. He's the reason we're all in this mess.

Peter, my nine-year-old brother, is the only one of us happy with this turn of events. Right now, he's packing his suitcase and playing "No Woman, No Cry" by Bob Marley. "Old-school packing music," he called it.

Despite the fact that he was born here in America, Peter says he wants to live in Jamaica. He's always been pretty shy and has a hard time making friends. I think he imagines that Jamaica will be a paradise and that, somehow, things will be better for him there.

The four of us are in the living room of our one-bedroom apartment. The living room doubles as a bedroom, and Peter and I share it. It has two small sofa beds that we pull out at night, and a bright blue curtain down the middle for privacy. Right now the curtain is pulled aside so you can see both our halves at once.

It's pretty easy to guess which one of us wants to leave and which wants to stay. My side still looks lived-in. My books are on my small IKEA shelf. My favorite picture of me and my best friend, Bev, is still sitting on my desk. We're wearing safety goggles and sexy-pouting at the camera in physics lab. The safety goggles were my idea. The sexy-pouting was hers. I haven't removed a single item of clothing from my dresser. I haven't even taken down my NASA star map poster. It's huge—actually eight posters that I taped together—and shows all the major stars, constellations, and sections of the Milky Way visible from the Northern Hemisphere. It even has instructions on how to find Polaris and navigate your way by stars in case you get lost. The poster tubes I bought for packing it are leaning unopened against the wall.

On Peter's side, virtually all the surfaces are bare, most of his possessions already packed away into boxes and suitcases.

My mom is right, of course—what I'm doing is futile. Still, I grab my headphones, my physics textbook, and some comics. If I have time to kill, maybe I can finish up my homework and read.

Peter shakes his head at me. "Why are you bringing that?" he asks, meaning the textbook. "We're leaving, Tasha. You don't have to turn in *homework*."

Peter has just discovered the power of sarcasm. He uses it every chance he gets.

I don't bother responding to him, just put my headphones on and head for the door. "Back soon," I say to my mom.

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She kisses her teeth and turns away. I remind myself that she's not upset with me. *Tasha, is not you me upset with, you know?* is something she says a lot these days. I'm going to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) building in downtown Manhattan to see if someone there can help me. We are undocumented immigrants, and we're being deported tonight.

Today is my last chance to try to convince someone—or fate—to help me find a way to stay in America.

To be clear: I don't believe in fate. But I'm desperate.

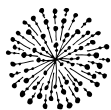


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daniel

REASONS I THINK Charles Jae Won Bae, aka Charlie, Is an Asshole (In No Particular Order):

1. Before this epic and spectacular (and wholly delightful) failure at Harvard, he has been unrelentingly good at everything. No one is supposed to be good at everything. Math and English and biology and chemistry and history and sports. It's not decent to be good at everything. Three or four things at the most. Even that is pushing the bounds of good taste.
2. He's a man's man, meaning he's an asshole a lot of the time. Most of the time. All of the time.
3. He is tall, with chiseled, sculpted, and every-romance-novel-ever adjective for cheekbones. The girls (*all* the girls, not just the Korean Bible study ones) say his lips are kissable.
4. All this would be fine—an embarrassment of riches, to be sure; a tad too many treasures to be bestowed on a single human, certainly—if he were nice. But he is not. Charles Jae Won Bae is not kind. He is smug and, worst of all, he is a bully. He's an asshole. An inveterate one.
5. He doesn't like me, and hasn't liked me for years.



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natasha

I PUT MY PHONE, headphones, and backpack into the gray bin before walking through the metal detector. The guard—her name tag says Irene—stops my bin from traveling onto the conveyor belt, as she's done every day.

I look up at her and don't smile.

She looks down into the bin, flips my phone over, and stares at the case, as she's done every day. The case is the cover art for an album called *Nevermind* by the band Nirvana. Every day her fingers linger on the baby on the cover, and every day I don't like her touching it. Nirvana's lead singer was Kurt Cobain. His voice, the damage in it, the way it's not at all perfect, the way you can feel everything he's ever felt in it, the way his voice stretches out so thin that you think it's going to break and then it doesn't, is the only thing that's kept me sane since this nightmare began. His misery is so much more abject than mine.

She's taking a long time, and I can't miss this appointment. I consider saying something, but I don't want to make her angry. Probably she hates her job. I don't want to give her a reason to delay me even further. She glances up at me again but shows no

sign that she recognizes me, even though I've been here every day for the last week. To her I'm just another anonymous face, another *applicant*, another someone who wants something from America.

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irene

A History

NATASHA IS NOT AT ALL correct about Irene. Irene loves her job. More than loves it—needs it. It's almost the sole human contact she has. It's the only thing keeping her total and desperate loneliness at bay.

Every interaction with these applicants saves her life just a little. At first they barely notice her. They dump their items into the bin and watch closely as they go through the machine. Most are suspicious that Irene will pocket loose change or a pen or keys or whatever. In the normal course of things, the applicant would never notice her, but she makes sure they do. It's her only connection to the world.

So she waylays each bin with a single gloved hand. The delay is long enough that the applicant is forced to look up and meet her eyes. To actually see the person standing in front of them. Most mumble a reluctant *good morning*, and the words fill her up a little. Others ask how she's doing and she expands a little more.

Irene never answers. She doesn't know how. Instead, she looks back down at the bin and scrutinizes each object for

clues, for some bit of information to store away and examine later.

More than anything, she wishes she could take her gloves off and touch the keys and the wallets and the loose change. She wishes she could slide her fingertips along the surfaces, memorizing textures and letting the artifacts of other people's lives seep into her. But she can't delay the line too long. Eventually she sends the bin and its owner away from her.

Last night was a particularly bad night for Irene. The impossible hungry mouth of her loneliness wanted to swallow her in a single piece. This morning she needs contact to save her life. She drags her eyes away from a retreating bin and up to the next applicant.

It's the same girl who's been coming every day this week. She can't be more than seventeen. Like everyone else, the girl doesn't look up from the bin. She keeps her eyes focused on it, like she can't bear to be parted from the hot-pink headphones and her cell phone. Irene lays her gloved hand on the side of the bin to prevent its slide out of her life and onto the conveyor belt.

The girl looks up and Irene inflates. She looks as desperate as Irene feels. Irene almost smiles at her. In her head she does smile at her.

Welcome back. Nice to see you, Irene says, but only in her head.

In reality, she's already looking down, studying the girl's phone case. The picture on it is of a fat white baby boy completely submerged in clear blue water. The baby is spread-eagled

and looks more like he's flying than swimming. His mouth and eyes are open. In front of him a dollar bill dangles on a fish-hook. The picture is not decent, and every time Irene looks at it she feels herself take an extra breath, as if she were the one underwater.

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She wants to find a reason to confiscate the phone, but there is none.



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daniel

I KNOW THE PRECISE MOMENT when Charlie stopped liking me. It was the summer I turned six and he turned eight. He was riding his shiny new bike (red, ten-speed, awesome) with his shiny new friends (white, ten years old, awesome). Even though there were lots of hints all summer long, I hadn't really figured out that I'd been demoted to Annoying Younger Brother.

That day he and his friends rode away without me. I chased him for blocks and blocks, calling out, "Charlie," convinced that he just forgot to invite me. I pedaled so fast that I got tired (six-year-olds on bikes don't get tired, so that's saying something).

Why didn't I just give up? *Of course* he could hear me calling.

Finally he stopped and hopped off his bike. He shoved it into the dirt, kickstand be damned, and stood there waiting for me to catch up. I could see that he was angry. He kicked dirt onto his bike to make sure everyone was clear on that fact.

"*Hyung*," I began, using the title younger brothers use for older brothers. I knew it was a big mistake as soon as I said it. His whole face turned red—cheeks, nose, the tips of his ears—

the whole thing. He was practically aglow. His eyes darted sideways to where his new friends were watching us like we were on TV.

“What’d he just call you?” the shorter one asked.

“Is that some kind of secret Korean code?” the taller one chimed in.

Charlie ignored them both and got right in my face. “What are you doing here?” He was so pissed that his voice cracked a little.

I didn’t have an answer, but he really didn’t want one. What he wanted was to hit me. I saw it in the way he clenched and unclenched his fists. I saw him trying to figure out how much trouble he would get in if he did hit me right there in the park in front of boys he barely knew.

“Why don’t you get some friends of your own and stop following me around like a baby?” he said instead.

He should’ve just hit me.

He grabbed his bike out of the dirt and puffed himself up with so much angry air I thought he’d burst, and I’d have to tell Mom that her older and more perfect son exploded.

“My name is Charles,” he said to those boys, daring them to say another word. “Are you coming or what?” He didn’t wait for them, didn’t look back to see if they were coming. They followed him into the park and into summer and into high school, just like many other people would eventually follow him. Somehow I had made my brother into a king.

I’ve never called him *hyung* again.



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charles jae won bae

A Future History

DANIEL IS RIGHT ABOUT CHARLES. He's an asshole through and through. Some people grow out of their lesser natures, but Charles will not. He will settle into it, the skin that was always going to be his.

But before that, before he becomes a politician and marries well, before he changes his name to Charles Bay, before he betrays his good wife and constituents at every turn, before too much money and success and much too much of getting everything that he wants, he will do a good and selfless thing for his brother. It will be the last good and selfless thing that he ever does.



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family

A History of Naming

WHEN MIN SOO FELL IN LOVE with Dae Hyun, she did not expect that love to take them from South Korea to America. But Dae Hyun had been poor all his life. He had a cousin in America who'd been doing well for himself in New York City. He promised to help.

For most immigrants, moving to the new country is an act of faith. Even if you've heard stories of safety, opportunity, and prosperity, it's still a leap to remove yourself from your own language, people, and country. Your own history. What if the stories weren't true? What if you couldn't adapt? What if you weren't wanted in the new country?

In the end, only some of the stories were true. Like all immigrants, Min Soo and Dae Hyun adapted as much as they were able. They avoided the people and places that didn't want them. Dae Hyun's cousin did help, and they prospered, faith rewarded.

A few years later, when Min Soo learned that she was pregnant, her first thought was of what to name her child. She had this feeling that in America names didn't mean anything, not

like they did in Korea. In Korea, the family name came first and told the entire history of your ancestry. In America, the family name is called the last name. Dae Hyun said it showed that Americans think the individual is more important than the family.

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Min Soo agonized over the choice of the personal name, what Americans called the first name. Should her son have an American name, something easy for his teachers and classmates to pronounce? Should they stick to tradition and select two Chinese characters to form a two-syllable personal name?

Names are powerful things. They act as an identity marker and a kind of map, locating you in time and geography. More than that, they can be a compass. In the end, Min Soo compromised. She gave her son an American name followed by a Korean personal name followed by the family name. She named him Charles Jae Won Bae. She named her second son Daniel Jae Ho Bae.

In the end, she chose both. Korean and American. American and Korean.

So they would know where they were from.

So they would know where they were going.