hand me down

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A friend once told me that the closet- and how “in” or “out” of it you are- is something that is always changing depending on where you are and who you’re with. Coming out of the closet is not a one-time deal. The closet changes with the home you live in, and with what you hang in it.

Today, in Korea, I am seeing my grandmother and my mother. I open the rectangular box that is my closet in the guesthouse I’m staying in, and pick out a high-necked gingham blouse and the rose gold bracelet my grandmother gave me when I first returned to Korea. This is my closet here. I realized how different it was when I was packing to go to Korea for the second time, how the clothes I chose were more polished and feminine and the way I presented myself less- for the lack of a better word, queer. Through the choice of my closet, I pushed myself more and more deeply into it. And yet- don’t we all change our closets depending on where we are and who we’re with? Even those of us who are fully “out,” if there is such a thing in modern society, choose to wear items based on our cultural contexts.

In all honesty, though, I find, as my friend was alluding to, that inside and outside of a closet is not a good analogy for my relationship with my queer identity and the relationships my queer identity is a part of. Indeed, as a migrant, I’ve found that my relationship with my queerness more often comes in the form a suitcase- emotional baggage, so to speak. Here, I hope to share with you five suitcases of my own coming out, and the worlds that I was emerging from, and going into.

I arrived to the United States screaming. My parents always tell this story. During that time, adoptive parents did not have to go to Korea to pick up the children they were adopting. Instead, the children were brought on planes with aides hired by the adoption agency. They would all file off the plane in a row, each woman holding a different adoptee and presenting the child to their parents like precious, well-behaved gifts. A series of perfect, multicultural families made one after another. My parents always tell me that, unlike the other, cute sleeping babies, I screamed and screamed the entire flight. The aide pushed me into my parents' hands and snarled, "good luck with this one."

Later, I would dig through the artifacts of my past life that came with me in a small suitcase. A hot pink child's hanbok, two moon-faced dolls, a few thousand won, and what I thought was an unopenable black box that I would listen to, night after night, in the hope of hearing something more than white noise. Later, I would be asked whether the reason I was attracted to women was because of my mommy issues, and I would wonder whether there was any truth in that hard stone of a statement. I would wonder whether my own trauma, that initial transpacific loss of my mother, that pushing away from even the woman who was paid to carry me across oceans, had led to my own desire to look for deep and transgressive love with women. I don't know the answer to that, and I'm not sure I ever will. Then, though, I did not concern myself with these questions. I just screamed and screamed, and even then I'd like to think that through my scream I distinguished myself from the other, beautiful babies. Not "gay" as in happy, but queer as in "fuck you." My parents call that day my "coming home " day. I wonder now, if I can consider it also a coming out day.

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The summer after my first year of college, I flew away from my parents again, back to the hot, dry desert of Southern California. Before I left, I asked them for a copy of all of my legal documents. I had started thinking about the process of finding my birth family, and in addition to a $30 payment and a letter about myself that my adoption agency requested, I needed to prove my own identity to the people who had stripped me of it initially. For me, though, the letter was what I found the most challenging. Day after day, I sat at my desk staring at an empty document, the cursor blinking on my computer screen, taunting me. Sometimes, the friend I had met in my English class would sit in the large armchair at the other side of my bedroom as I sat, paging through Food Network magazines I had brought from my local library in my hometown. Sometimes, she would tell me fantastical stories about boys who sent her plants in the mail and played violin to her during their night walks. Sometimes, she and I would fall asleep on perpendicular couches and wake up and press our noses against each other, tracing gentle fingers across each other's arms. I loved her, and I loved her for the day that she looked up from a picture of Giada De Laurentiis' permasmile as I struggled yet again to find the words. She told me to be honest and to be brave. She told me to write as if I were writing to a friend or to a date. What would you want someone to know about yourself? she asked me. You're incredible, there's nothing not to like.

Later, I would find the words. Later, I would write and send a letter to my birth parents expressing an unconditional love that crossed borders, that transcended consciousness and was instead embedded in my muscle memory. Later, I would find the words. Later, I would tell that woman that I was tired of denying myself love because of how everyone else saw it. That for me, love happened anyway. Then, though, words eluded me, but I was still happy to sit there, feeling the joy, gentleness, and warmth of love that I would later learn to feel as queer community, washing over me. Those times were not quite coming out, but rather coming in, spinning a tight and cozy cocoon for me to emerge from.

This coming out suitcase was covered in a thin layer of dust, a backpack full of hiking boots and sweaty clothes. This coming out suitcase's zippered mouth was dry and lips cracked, unfamiliar with the red oven of Death Valley. I came out to my parents over spring break last year, a time where I could already feel a divide growing between my adoptive parents and myself. I was struggling as I began to recognize that my family in the U.S. could only be built by the loss of my family in Korea. My parents were struggling to recognize the validity of a family structure that they were not familiar with, one in which there are two mothers, and two fathers, and two brothers, and maybe more to come. I told them I was queer more out of necessity than out of trust. They reacted as I expected, with love heavy with fear. My mother looked down at her hands on the top of a dirty picnic table. "I just don't want things to be hard for you," she told them. "Don't make them harder," I replied. My father called me a few days after the trip had ended. "I don't even know who you are anymore," he spat. Later, I worked to uncover what was buried under his rage and realized that he was struggling with the same question I was- what happens when family loses, or has never held, familiarity with one another? Then, though, I cried, and wished that I did not have as many skeletons in my closet as I did.

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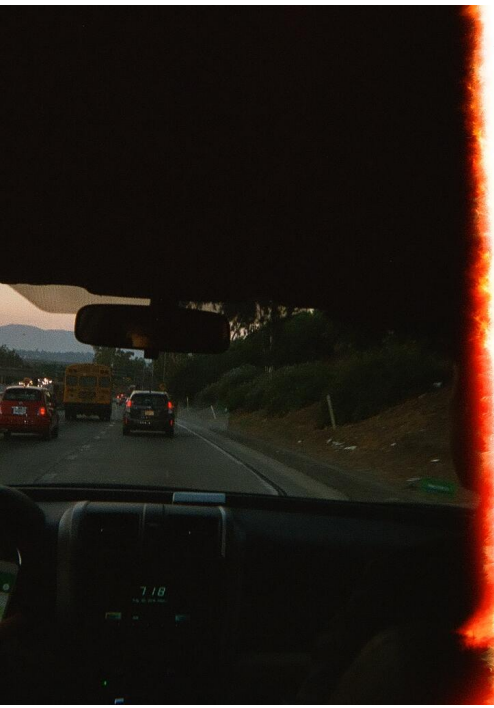
When my mother and I met, in the airport, for the second time in my life, neither of us cried. I was twenty years old, the same age she was when I was born and then taken from her. For both of us, then, there was a lifetime between us. We hugged, that lifetime suddenly seeming both immense and miniscule. She grabbed my suitcase and we walked to her car, saying intermittent nothings between long periods of silence. I looked at the woman who gave birth to me and suddenly realized she was a stranger.

Several days later, after I moved into her shiny white apartment, after I cried in a Mexican restaurant because I had no language to give, after I woke up in our shared bed, mirroring each other, two of our hands intertwined, the others' holding the sharp, bright screens of our cell phones, we finally began to speak.

My mom came home after a night out with six tall cans of beer that she placed carefully in the fridge. I looked up from the two-dimensional food spinning on the flat pane of the television. "Do you want one?" she said slowly, still embarrassed of her flawless English. The few words I had learned in Korean broke before they even came out of my mouth. I said nothing, but I grabbed one and clinked my can softly against hers. We said "kambe." My mom stretched out on the couch next to me. We drank all six of the beers (she drank four, I drank two) that night. We talked about our favorite books, our families, the music we love. We made fun of the music the other person thought was sexy (for her, the Weeknd, for me, Frank Ocean). We danced a little. As the night began to wane, and my eyelids grew heavy, and we slumped against each other, in our drunkenness unafraid of each other's bodies, she said to me, " This time together... It feels like we've just started to date," and I laughed, holding her hand. "That's exactly what it feels like." At the end of the night, I gave my mom the presents I had brought with me from my mother in the United States. She unwrapped a small, blue and yellow beaded bracelet. *Chaelee gave this to me when she was very young. I want you to have it*, my American mother had written. She slipped the clumsy art project onto her wrist, holding it up to the light and I felt myself crying, feeling my past and present, feeling both of mothers' presences so deeply.

Later, my mother would ask me if I have a boyfriend, and I would hear the lie in the absence of my truth when I told her no, I do not. I would not tell my mother about the women I have dated and the one I was deeply in love with, whose music I listened to on repeat, her voice simultaneously breaking and building my heart. Later, I would find myself making internal notes predicting what my mother's reaction would be like if I came out to her. Then, though, I just surrounded myself with the knowledge that my mothers' dual recognition of the queerness of our love was enough. That I had two mothers who I loved deeply and differently. That we all held an understanding, at that particular moment, that love is not something that exists in competition with itself. Then and there, I felt seen; I felt heard.



A few days ago, I went to an art exhibit with a girl I met on Tinder. We sank into bean bags opposite each other, and listened to a voice speculating on how the gender of a room can change depending on who cohabitates it, the fluidity that exists in this type of space. This girl has just moved out of her grandparents' home and into a goshiwon, a room that is maybe best described as a closet. A closet-room that allows her to exist with more freedom, more queerness, than the wider space of her family home. We asked each other about coming out to our Korean families. Later, I told her. Maybe later I will come out to my mom here. I do not know the future, but maybe later. For now, though, I am happy to exist here, in Korea, out and not out, finding and forming queer relationships- ones that don't quite fit into any conventional box. Ones that say, a box is too small to confine our love.

5.

My first coming out story is the story, of course, that we all hold- that of coming out of the warm, safe confines of a womb. I've heard that this experience is so traumatizing for all infants- these first breaths into a wide and terrifying world- that they block it completely from their memories. Like many others, my story holds this trauma- of being born into an unjust world. My story is not independent; it is part of other people's stories, and my birth is part of other people's trauma. As a queer person who knows the history of queer people's children being removed from them, I cannot forget that the woman who gave birth to me was forced to choose between placing me in an incubator and potentially saving my life, and in having a chance to raise me as her own child. As a queer person, I cannot forget that the woman who gave birth to me is one of thousands of other unwed mothers' whose non-nuclear, non-normative family structures were so dismissed by the state that they were forced to send their children across oceans. As a queer person, I choose to concern myself with issues of justice for those most marginalized. As a daughter, I choose to concern myself with fighting for the people I love.

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My coming out stories are about emergence and emergency, and how much, for me, they're tied together, coming out carrying deeply intertwined feelings of fear and urgency, a siren's dangerous and magnetic call. I have struggled so much in writing this essay, in thinking about coming out, of emerging, of arrivals being also departures. I have struggled so much in writing this because I am afraid that I am not out of the closet enough to be writing about this. I have struggled so much in writing this because I am afraid to put myself more out of the closet than I already am. Because of the many stories I can tell about coming out, or staying in, every day, and how much of that is entangled with my adoption. Because my stories are not my stories alone; they are the stories of my mothers, and my brothers, and my lovers. Because both my closet and my suitcase are filled with a collection of hand-me-downs, from the people I am the closest to and from people who I will never meet, or never even know if I met. I have struggled writing this because I have been forced to recognize that the people who are in this closet with me are, in fact, not all skeletons.

Today, as always, I am in the closet and I am out of it. Today, I am fighting for the beings in the closet with me or adjacent to me, the beings in the dark about their families and their histories, the beings whose bodies or families are not recognized by society or the state, the beings who just want to be respected and cared for. Today, I am fighting for being, and loving, for my coming out to be the journey that includes both arrival and departure, for this to be enough coming out for now.