



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.

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.