

"Dear Juno," Persimmons, and Language Loss

How a children's book reflects on the profound impact of losing your first language



K-CULTURE WITH JAE-HA KIM

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When we used to visit my father-in-law, we loved picking persimmons from his tree. My father had always loved persimmons (감), too. And to this day, they still remind me of him.

My father-in-law told my son that if you cut the seed in half, you will see silverware: spoons, knives or forks (but, alas, no chopsticks). I kind of chuckled, thinking that it was just something cute he made up to keep an inquisitive child occupied.

But look at what we found!



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We found spoons in our persimmon!

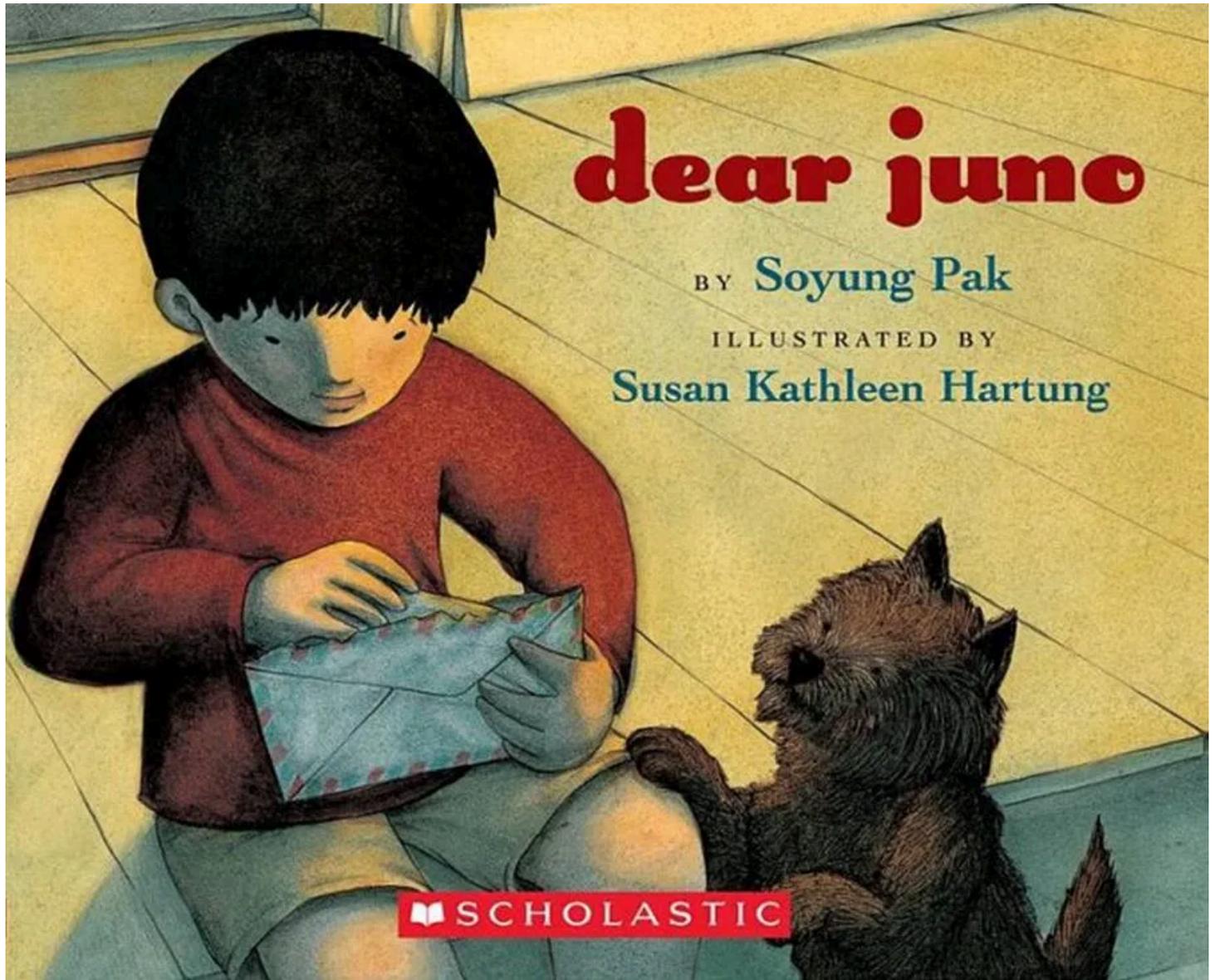
We haven't found the forks or knives yet, but aren't these spoons adorable?

#SonOfJae had an early introduction to persimmons. Back when he was a baby, we read him the book, *Dear Juno* by Soyung Pak. It's about a young Korean American boy who lives with his parents in the U.S.

His beloved grandmother (할머니) lives in Korea. And he can remember all the persimmons she had in her yard. She can't speak English and Juno can't speak Korean.

But they correspond with each other by sending drawings, photographs, and small mementos via airmail.

One day, she sends him a toy airplane. And he understands the symbolic implication. She will be flying out to visit him.



It's a lovely story, and one that my son used to ask for at bedtime even as he grew older. But from the perspective of an adult who grew up during a period when immigrants — especially from Asian countries — were encouraged to assimilate faster by speaking only English, it's incredibly bittersweet.

The loss of language is profoundly quick. It's the first step in losing our culture to supposedly fit into a new one — one that may never accept us. ¹

While Americans still lag behind European countries in language skills — 80 percent are monolingual — a 2022 U.S. Census report found that one out of five people in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home. (In 1980, that figure was one out of 10.)

Not only is it possible to retain your native language — allowing children a connection to their heritage and identity — while also being fluent in English, but lifelong bilingualism is associated with so many benefits, including a delayed onset of dementia.

So why not encourage both?



Both my father and father-in-law have passed away. My father never got to meet my son, but my father-in-law was able to dote on him for many years. What a gift it is to have these core memories.

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- 1 Perpetual foreigner syndrome is when ethnic minorities in the U.S. are viewed as *others*, even if they were born and/or raised in the U.S. This leads to the repetitive and annoying question, “Where are you really from?” — because too many people have an erroneous and preconceived notion of what an American actually looks like.

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