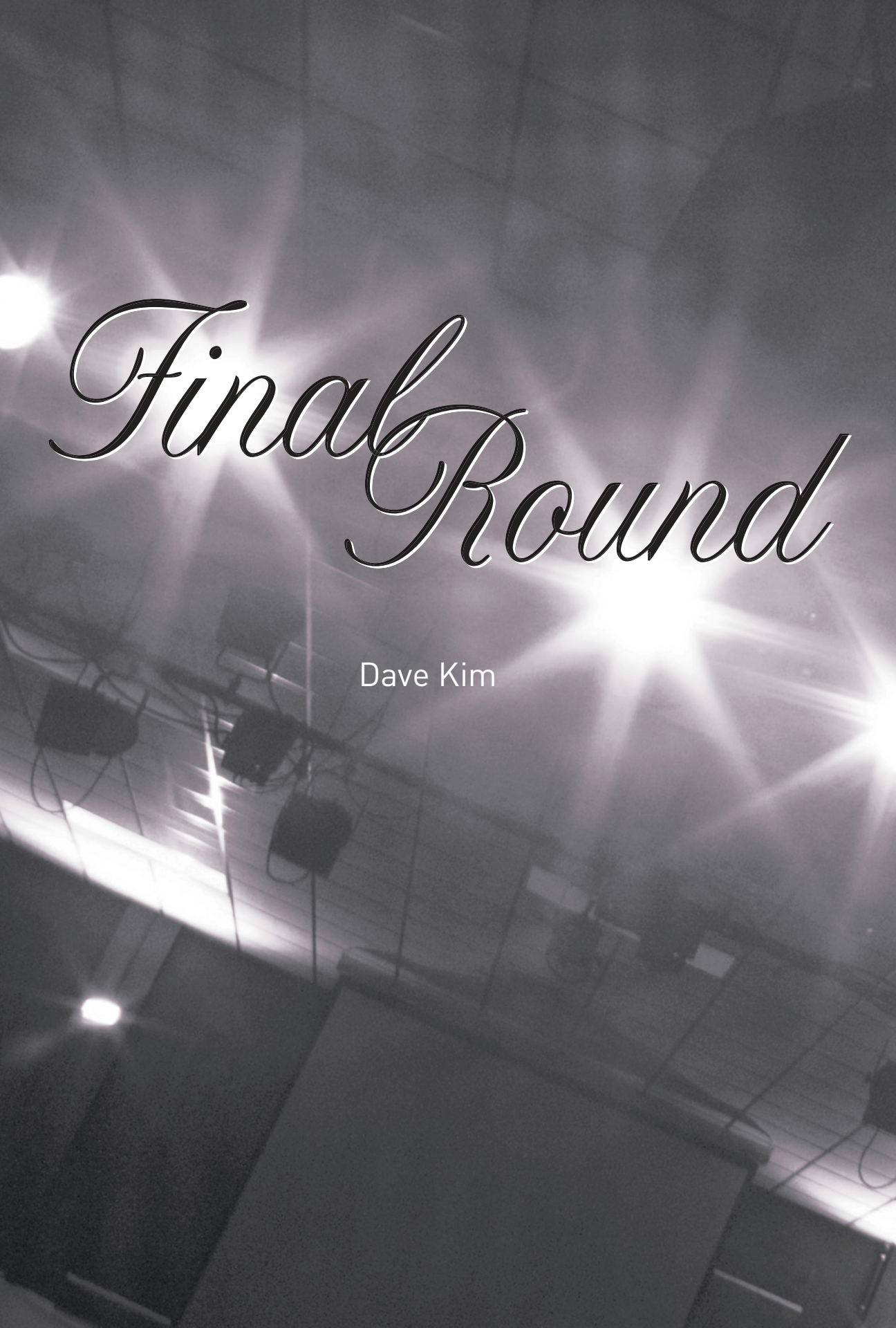


Final Round

Dave Kim

It's the last round of the fourteenth annual Presbyterian United Bible Quiz, and Freddy Hansook Chung of Glendale, California, is in the lead with 7,300 points—2,100 ahead of second place. Staring into the dark auditorium where his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Young Min Chung, are sitting with their well-worn Bibles and sending telepathic cheers to their Young American Hope, Freddy takes a deep breath and locks his fingers over the rubber buzzer pod, which by now is as hot and pliant as a woman's breast, or what he imagines a woman's breast must feel like. The buzzer even has a nipple, a Phillips-head screw working a dent into his palm with each push, and twice

Photograph by Ryan Ellis

Freddy has given it a gentle squeeze for good luck. The buzzer works perfectly, like an extension of his hand. There is almost no delay between the moment of depression and the electronic *brring* of his bell, unlike some of the homemade buzzers he's had to endure in his long quest to qualify for PUBQ XIV, the "Super Bowl of Bible Quizzes," as printed on the event's program. Tonight eleven-year-old Freddy has been vicious and relentless. He buzzes before questions are finished, stating curtly and emphatically the number of palm trees present in Elim when the Israelites arrived there after escaping Egypt (seventy) and reciting obscure, multiline Bible verses without stopping to think or even punctuate.

But in the moments before the first question of this notoriously difficult final round, in which all answers are worth double and triple points, Freddy, the clear favorite to win, is suddenly nervous. He knows that each of the four contestants, even Kyle Peterson with his hapless –800 on the board, has a shot at winning the grand prize: a two-year college scholarship, a $2,000 cash purse and a top-seeded spot in the Interdenominational Bible Quiz Tournament to be held this winter in Houston. He is aware that the questions in this round were written by an external committee of professors, not the church volunteers of PUBQ, to ensure maximum difficulty. But none of this is what is making him nervous.

The 347 audience members sit up in their seats as the emcee, a portly quipster in a vintage tuxedo, explains just how nail-bitingly intense these next sixteen minutes will be, calling for complete silence and, of course, no flash photography. The four Access-TV cameras home in on the anxious teens onstage, and the volunteer orchestra begins its chilling, if slightly off-key, score, cueing the host of the final round, Reverend Richard Sterling of Tallahassee, to step to the podium for Question Number One.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," the reverend booms in a voice like a prewar radio announcer's. "Thank you kindly for your patience. We begin round one with biblical terminology. . . ."

Freddy's stomach is bothering him. Aside from the diminishing wad of notebook paper he's been chewing between rounds, the boy has not eaten in eleven hours. Even the *miyukgook* his mother made him this morning in the hotel kitchenette only stayed down until after registration. Seaweed soup is not his favorite, but his mother had insisted that it was what you ate for good luck. Freddy always knows what days his father is going to a job interview or to meet someone important because the scent of seaweed, anchovy broth and garlic will fill every corner of their two-bedroom apartment. Even three

Freddy leans into his microphone and says, "A tempestuous wind," only nothing comes through the two large-panel speakers mounted to the ceiling except a raspy *achrrrr*. His heart is pounding.

thousand miles from home, in alien Manhattan, his mother made sure last night to stop by a Korean grocery store to buy the ingredients, dragging the family off the sightseeing bus at sunset to get there before it closed. "For someone so religious," his father grumbled as the three of them hustled into a subway car, "you sure take your folklore seriously."

The reverend picks out a crisp index card from the center of the box, raising it to his face with a flourish of wrist.

"Question one, from the Book of Acts, chapter twenty-seven. To what does the term 'Euroclydon' refer?"

Freddy presses his buzzer eons before Carly Wilcott from Iowa City, who is second only because no one else even tries. Carly doesn't know the answer to this unusually difficult first question, worth 200 points, but tells herself it won't matter—the little Asian kid is never wrong. Freddy does know the answer. He remembers the long debate he had with his father about the proper pronunciation of the word, 'Euroclydon,' which made the eighteen-page list of "Hard-to-Say Bible Terms" later brought into his coach's office at Fuller Theological Seminary. (His father wasn't even close.) Freddy leans into his microphone and says, "A tempestuous wind," only nothing comes through the two large-panel speakers mounted to the ceiling except a raspy *achrrrr*. His heart is pounding. Confusion passes over the boy's face, and he looks down at his microphone as if betrayed by a technical mishap. But no, when he grabs the tiny black oblong with his fist, there is a tactile popping sound followed by a squall of feedback. He jumps backward.

"Are you all right, Mr. Chung?"

Freddy leans toward his mic again, his mouth millimeters from the foam windscreen. The crowd is in absolute rapture. They can hear the saliva crackle on his lips as they part to form the "A." He stutters the first part, "a-te . . . a-te," and then draws back again, baffled, before the angry buzz of the answer timer sounds.

There are low but quite audible groans from the front of the auditorium, and Freddy's head snaps up. He squints and stares hard into the audience.

"Miss Wilcott, 'Euroclydon.'"

Carly Wilcott has no answer and sheepishly informs the reverend that her hand must have slipped.

Even with both hands shading his eyes, Freddy cannot see past the beam of the spotlight. He knocks one of his knees against his podium, which transmits a loud, painful thump through the mic. Freddy is chalk-white, struggling for breath, and all eyes in the auditorium are fixed on him. Could something have finally short-circuited in this mainframe of Scripture, this CPU in size fives? The contestants on either side of him move in cautiously. A bright light blooms into the boy's vision, and he feels a quick stabbing sensation somewhere in the back of his head. There is a cough, a sputter, and then, in a high-pitched squeal: *"A tempestuous wind!"*

Kyle Peterson catches him as he falls.

At five-thirty that morning, Freddy Chung was thumbing through an old issue of *Glaze*, a lad mag he'd chanced upon in the hotel lobby, while his parents slept in the room next door. He was still tucked in bed, studying the smooth promenades of the cover model's back, wishing away the elbow obscuring the tip of her right breast, when he heard his mother's acute soprano through the wall. The exact words weren't clear, filtered through plaster, but Freddy could tell she was upset. She gradually built up steam, losing any early-morning restraint, until she was cut off by a short outburst from his father. Freddy stayed frozen under his blanket, the glossy cover of *Glaze* cooling his bare stomach. Rarely did he hear his parents fighting. They were never openly affectionate but never angry with each other either. A minute passed, and then he heard his Korean name, "Hansook," spoken by his mother. As silently as he could, Freddy rolled out of bed, scurried to the door and got down on his hands and knees. With his ear pressed against the cold pine, he could hear most of his mother's words and a better percentage of his father's.

This was how he discovered his father would be going back to Korea to take a job. The old man would be gone at least six years. His mother had known this but was now hearing from her husband that he would be leaving not in several months, as promised, but much sooner—Freddy couldn't make out exactly when. He heard the bathroom door slam. He stayed on his hands and knees until he couldn't hear anything but the quiet ticking of the air conditioner in the far corner of his own room. Then Freddy got back into bed.

He lay on his side, thinking. When Freddy was very young, the man he had been instructed to call *appa* from the day he could speak was just a stranger who visited three or four times a year, who brought him boxes of Hawaiian chocolate and toy planes with "Korean Air" stamped on the fuselage. Then, when Freddy turned eight, his father came to live with the family for good. He was the one who, sitting in on Freddy's fourth grade Sunday school sessions, discovered that the boy could memorize entire chapters of the Bible in a single class and later signed him up for his first quiz. *This,* he'd beamed to his wife, with Freddy on his shoulders and a first-place trophy in his hand, *is our American Dream.*

As he recalled the grueling training that had followed, Freddy pulled the blanket over his head and cocooned himself in the starchy sheets, hoping his mother wouldn't come in at six, as agreed, to administer his practice drills.

Technically, the boy did faint, but he came to seconds after Kyle Peterson caught him by his armpits and set him down on the plush red carpet of the stage. A brief recess is called, and several people in all black jump forward from the swells of the curtain to attend to Freddy. Reverend Sterling assures the audience that Mr. Chung is fine, only a little shaken from stress, dehydrated perhaps. Freddy is taken backstage, where a young woman identifying herself as a registered nurse asks him questions in a patronizing, motherly voice and hands him a bottle of cold spring water. Freddy's mother, surprisingly calm, finally makes it through the small crowd that has gathered and takes her little boy in her arms. She is slim and dignified, with eyes like crescent moons. Freddy does not cry. He peers over her citrus-scented shoulder, looking for someone else, but of course *appa* is not present. This is a mother's moment of rescue.

"Should we call an ambulance?" asks the nurse, who Freddy's mother thinks is far too pretty and fashionable to be a real medical professional.

"What do you think, Hansook?" Ms. Chung asks her son in Korean. "Do you want to ride in an ambulance?"

Freddy shakes his head. He sips slowly from his bottle of water, feeling uncomfortable under the stares of the five or six adults standing around him.

"I want to finish."

"That's out of the question," says the nurse.

A brief argument follows between the two women, more one of tones and expressions than actual debate. After several are-you-sure's from both women and some huffing from the nurse about her professional opinion, the announcer

is informed that Freddy Chung will come back to complete the round. The audience has been waiting ten minutes, suffering through the orchestra's slapdash and slightly inappropriate rendition of "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." They applaud when the announcer tells them Freddy will compete, cheering when the pudgy boy wobbles back onstage. Reverend Sterling utters a short prayer of thanks, and the fifth round commences with a fanfare of brass and "Go Freddy"s.

The *miyukgook* had been blander than usual, since Freddy's mother was forced to use packaged soup base rather than her famously pungent anchovy broth. They ate on the floor of Freddy's room, with the soup pot (borrowed from the hotel kitchen) and various *banchan* set across two phone books. Rice was of the peel-off, microwaveable variety, eaten right out of the palm-sized polyvinyl shells in which it was packaged. His mother kept poking bits of *banchan* into his bowl with her chopsticks, a habit that had recently become one of Freddy's pet peeves. He was eating slowly, unresponsively, and the spinach and bean sprouts were piling up over his rice.

"What's the matter with you?" his mother asked. "You're eating like a dormouse."

"Leave him alone," his father said, chewing on a hotel croissant. His shirt and tie were peppered with brown flakes.

"Hansook, eat. This meal was made just for you."

Freddy scooped up some *miyukgook* from the pot and dumped it into his bowl.

"I don't understand why we couldn't go to a Korean restaurant," said his father. "There are plenty of them in Manhattan."

"They're overpriced, and the food is awful," his mother explained, as if for the hundredth time. "They're for tourists."

"Who told you that?"

"I just know."

Freddy crammed a heaping spoonful of rice and seaweed into his mouth and set his bowl on his lap. He stole a long look at his father as he chewed, searching for any hint of unease. His father's face was pale, smooth as a sheet, neutral. Oval, wire-framed glasses made it look rounder than it already was, and the swooping black tuft of his hair betrayed no signs of baldness. He had the rare and unfortunate body type that looked fat but wasn't: his face was pudgy and grooveless, but he was thin under his always-too-big American shirts.

He was needed in Seoul, desperately, as a sudden shortage of decent engineers, compounded by increased competition from other airlines, had called for pardons of past sins.

"What are you staring at?" the man asked, washing down his croissant with a swig of Starbucks. "Mom says you have to eat all this if you want to win."

"I don't want to win," said Freddy.

Once a scholar himself, Freddy's father supported anything that he believed would make his son smarter and more competitive. In a previous life, Young Min Chung had been an engineer, a laureled employee of Korean Air's Aircraft R&D division, who, due to circumstances involving blatant nepotism, a jealous executive and an errant punch in a Seoul *soju* bar, had moved his family to the United States and begun juggling odd jobs in Seoul, Incheon and Greater Los Angeles. His career's downward spiral had ended four years ago with a video rental shop in Orange County, which he bought and managed with two of his grad school buddies. Young Min swallowed his pride and forced himself to believe that family, food and a roof were all a man needed in life. Once a month, for his intellectual sanity, he met with five other overeducated men from Seoul who had also left the country that had made them experts in their fields to run liquor stores, dry cleaning shops, delis, ice-cream parlors and gas stations. After year three in California, even as the video store kept losing money, Young Min made himself believe he was happy—that politics and packaged confections aside, America really was superior to his mother country.

So the call from an old friend at Korean Air had blindsided him. He was needed in Seoul, desperately, as a sudden shortage of decent engineers, compounded by increased competition from other airlines, had called for pardons of past sins. Young Min said yes, then called back and said no. They threw more money at him; they made promises of opportunities he knew were out of his league but would go to someone far less qualified if he didn't go. He thought of Freddy hustling off to the library with his secondhand backpack, which made a tenuous popping sound whenever it was packed full of his Bible coach's textbooks. He thought of the baffling silences he shared with his wife

whenever they brought up the subject of paying for college, which was coming up faster than they had expected. He thought of Seoul, its pulse, its smog, its overflow of universities. His wife, who had once written a political column for a Korean daily, could go back to writing. When he broke the news, he was surprised to hear her say she was staying—even after her teary meltdown. She and their son were Americans now.

"Your shirt's a mess," Freddy's mother said, dabbing at the flecks of red marinade on the boy's button-down. "Put on a different one after you're done eating."

"Mom, can I go to Korea this summer?"

"You have your church retreat. And tutoring."

Freddy's father got up and walked to the window, reaching into his pants for his pack of Marlboros.

"I don't need tutoring," Freddy said without cockiness, and it was true.

From the window: "Why do you want to go?"

"I don't know," Freddy mumbled in English. "I just do."

He folded a corner of one of the phone books, thinking of houses with sliding paper doors and wide-eyed Korean teens greeting their American-raised cousin at the airport.

"I want to see where I was born."

"Finish your breakfast," said his mother.

After stringent orders are given by the nurse and two PAs who helped Freddy backstage, the spotlights are reduced in intensity by 25 percent. Freddy can now see into the first six or seven rows of the audience; he has a clear view of his mother's silhouette and the empty space next to her. Anyone in the first two rows looking at Freddy Chung might be intrigued by the way he seems at once sharply focused and completely absent, his eyes darting about the room but always coming back to an arbitrary point somewhere in Orchestra Row D or E. They might see the gray circles of sweat forming under the armpits of his dress shirt, the sweat beads on his nose and upper lip. They might notice the shaking and his white, double-handed grip of the podium. But few are looking at Freddy Chung now. Nearly everyone's eyes are on Marissa Kline-Vallejo, who is delighting the crowd with her sudden surge of correct answers and closing in fast on Freddy's lead.

Freddy is smart enough to know that his father is probably just on an important phone call in the lobby or paying the price in the men's for the latte he had this morning (Young Min denies his lactose-intolerance). But still he imagines

his father boarding a plane with a one-way ticket in his hand, his favorite flying shirt rolled up at the sleeves. Freddy cannot shrug off the ugly feeling that his mother will greet him after the quiz with a practiced, steely gaze and tell him that they'll be going home without *appa*.

At first Freddy just ignores the empty seat. Then he tries to visualize his father, mentally draw him into his seat, so that he can get on with the questions, of which he has attempted two and scored on just one. When visualizing fails, Freddy grows red with anger, in part at his father but mostly at himself for allowing this lapse after the months he spent training to *not* have this kind of rank-obliterating anxiety attack in the last few minutes of the second-most-prestigious Bible quiz in the country.

Around him hands are slamming buzzers and pumping up and down as the others' scores creep up to his. He daydreams, remembering the training sessions with his father, the long Q&A sessions and recitations wherever they went. They drilled together several times a week, Young Min reading questions from a quiz book as they baited lines at the pier or watched planes fly out of LAX at Dockweiler Beach. There were no times consciously allotted for bonding, per se; the real task at hand was making Freddy a champion. But practice questions would lead to explanations and, inevitably, personal narratives, often about subjects totally unrelated to theology or Scripture, and Freddy found himself looking forward to their Sunday afternoons. He believed that his father knew, or could at least pull off *pretending* to know, everything. He acted like he hated his father's long lectures on particle physics and the behavioral patterns of mackerel, but the truth was that Freddy hung on every word. The man was irresistibly data-driven. Whether Freddy wanted to admit it or not, his father had achieved for him the status reserved for rock stars and action heroes: he'd become a *role model*.

Freddy is having this ill-timed epiphany, blinking back a second one about the impending loss of said role model, when he hears his name called through the speakers.

"Freddy? Are you there?" says the reverend, drawing a few fierce laughs from the crowd.

Freddy looks down at his buzzer and sees that it's lit, a pretty honeycomb pattern that he hadn't noticed until now. When or why he pressed the thing, he has no idea, but the timer is ticking, and everyone seems to be expecting some kind of answer.

"Um—the Holy Trinity?" he stammers, knowing that it is the most pathetic thing he's said in his life.

The reverend coughs into his fist as the incorrect tone bleats its two descending notes.

"Miss Wilcott. The speaker of the line, 'Dost thou retain thy integrity? Curse God and die.'"

Freddy does not hear the correct answer (Job's wife) given by Carly Wilcott or the deafening cheers of a crowd that cannot believe how bizarre this final round has turned out to be. He does not hear the two-minute warning, the first seven notes of "Onward Christian Soldiers" played on an echoey synthesizer to the left of the stage or the cries, "C'mon *Fredday!*" and "Chung, Number One!" from those who still want the Korean boy to win. He does not engage in any of the body language expected after a wrong answer—the quick nod, the shrug, the chuckle of disbelief. The expression on his face is one of puzzlement and uncertainty, as if he's just tasted a new dish and can't decide if he likes it.

The three other contenders are tearing into these double and triple points like wolves into an unguarded bounty, stealing glances every so often at the former Slugger of Scripture, who's just standing there with his lips tucked into his mouth, holding the sides of his podium like it's going to blow away in a heavy wind. Reverend Sterling has stepped up the pace, seeing that it is now a close match between the top three, and questions are being asked and answered so fast that the Correct/Incorrect indicator in the judges' booth can't keep up. The last two minutes are a discord of buzz and bell sounds, fumbled words and overlapping voices.

Marissa buzzes and answers, a fill-in-the-blank on the healing of the ten lepers. Carly gets one wrong—the length, width and height, in cubits, of Noah's ark—and Kyle swoops in second for the kill. Marissa lands a doozy on Habakkuk and sets off the crowd again. Kyle buzzes but can't bring himself to answer one about the parable of the mustard seed; Marissa finishes it off. Marissa sets one up—the number of foxes Samson set on fire—starting to answer correctly and then changing her mind; Carly gets it right. Kyle can't get the next one, and Marissa capitalizes. Another one on King Ahab; Marissa is right there. Three more quick ones: Carly, Marissa, Marissa.

In the middle of a question on the calling of Levi, there's a loud clarion call and a bursting sound meant to simulate fireworks, though it sounds more like microphone cables being yanked out of an amplifier.

The round is over. The audience is in an uproar.

Scores: Kyle Peterson, 3,900; Carly Wilcott, 8,900; Marissa Kline-Vallejo, 9,250; Freddy Chung, 9,250.

In the middle of a question on the calling of Levi, there's a loud clarion call and a bursting sound meant to simulate fireworks, though it sounds more like microphone cables being yanked out of an amplifier.

Young Min Chung is standing just inside the exit doors at the northeast corner of the auditorium. He did not leave the room to answer an important business call or to go to the bathroom, though his stomach keeps telling him he will have to eventually. It's not exactly clear to him why he got up and pushed past the knees of the fourteen shouting adults in his row, why he was overcome with emotion watching his son sound off the answers to questions they'd practiced for months and then faint, for pete's sake, or why he kept thinking of the boy's request that morning to see Korea. He's also not sure why he took out his phone, planning to regretfully inform the high brass at KAL that he would not be joining them next month, and why, numb with shame, he'd dialed his wife's number instead and left a blubbering voicemail telling her, for the first time in years, that he loved her, that he was sorry. He has been taught his whole life to control himself in front of his family, taught that the honorable man provides and sacrifices without an emotional support group. Now he is embarrassed and confused at the exit doors, holding a soft pretzel that he bought to distract himself but has yet to bite into, powerless to walk back into the theater.

The house lights are up, and everyone is dashing for the bathrooms before the tiebreaker round begins. The announcer is reminding people that there will only be a ten-minute recess rather than the usual fifteen between rounds. It is almost midnight. Veterans of past PUBQs are explaining to others that the tiebreaker round is a verse-off: the contestants are given prompts of famous biblical passages and must recite each verse, according to one of three acceptable translations—King James, New Revised Standard or the New International (the last begrudgingly included)—within sixty seconds. The best of ten wins the quiz.

Young Min takes a bite of the pretzel because he doesn't know what else to do with it. It is chewy and cruelly salty. White, coarse salt crystals fall from his lips to the carpet. The crowd is buzzing with speculation and debate, and he

hears his son's name tossed about like a ball in a schoolyard. "The kid just lost the will to play," someone says, and Young Min's ears go hot. He wants to run backstage and take his son from all of this, jump on the next plane back to LA and head straight for the pier. *What the hell are we doing here?* he thinks.

Freddy Chung does not plan on competing in the tiebreaker round. He is waiting patiently to tell this to an adult, but the only ones available are too busy adjusting his clothes and combing his hair to ask how he's doing. When they are done making him look presentable, he escapes into the waiting area, a receiving platform for set pieces, and sits down in a metal folding chair. There is a table in the corner full of snacks and noncaffeinated beverages. Marissa Kline-Vallejo is nowhere in sight.

He is surprised to see his father's silhouette in the cool blue light of the doorway. It takes a moment or two to register the approaching figure as real, since Freddy has just spent the last fifteen minutes drawing, erasing and redrawing the man from memory in his head. Pulling up a crate next to his son, Young Min sits and smiles. Kosher salt dots his wrinkled black suit.

"You're doing great, Hansook."

Freddy studies his fingernails. "Where'd you go?" he asks in English.

"What do you mean, where did I go? I've been watching you."

"I was looking for you!"

"I had to step out to make a call," he explains, befuddled by the sudden blast of volume from his son, who is now glaring daggers at him. "I was watching from the back."

"You're a liar," Freddy mumbles.

"Speak up," his father commands. "A man should be heard when he talks."

"I don't want you to go."

"I'll be right there in the front row. I'm not missing another second."

Freddy shakes his head, still looking down.

"I mean to Korea."

The boy does not notice, but Young Min feels a stirring in his gut then, a hard pull, as if there are strings attached to his innards and an invisible hand is yanking them down all at once.

"Did your mother tell you that?"

"I heard you guys fighting this morning."

Freddy rubs his ankles with his shoes, wanting to do this somewhere else, perhaps at the pier back in California or a theme restaurant with a plate of ribs on the table.

"I'm sorry you had to hear it that way. But we should talk about this after the quiz, don't you think? After this last round?"

"I don't want to do this anymore," the boy says.

"All right," his father shoots back.

"I hate these stupid quizzes."

"That's fine with me."

"I'm never doing them again."

"I'll never ask you to."

The boy is breathing hard, struggling to keep a step ahead of his father. The man is famous for his reverse psychology, and Freddy, though he doesn't know the clinical term for it, immediately recognizes its tactical potential. He cannot let his father go this route. He fears his father will just as easily say, "Sure, I'll stay if you want" to end the discussion and then take off for Seoul in the middle of the night. He squints at him through the blue glow.

"You know you can win," his father says.

"I don't care."

"And you're going to walk away."

"Yeah, like you."

From upstairs there are muffled sounds from the orchestra, signaling the end of the recess.

"I'm going so I can support you and your mother."

"I don't care."

"I'm serious."

"So?"

Freddy's frustration builds as he wishes that he didn't sound so helpless, that he had the ammunition and strategic expertise to construct an argument.

"Fine, I'm going for *me*," his father says, staring somewhere over his son's shoulder. "I'm going because my inadequacies as a parent and as a husband are impossible to live with, because I don't want to be forty-six and bankrupt and have no career prospects. I'm going because I don't want my son to remember me as incompetent, poor and depressed. I'm a selfish bastard, Hansook. That's why I need you to let me go."

Freddy understands about 20 percent of the crisp Korean statement just issued to him, but he gets the general sentiment. His father sounds firm but not insensitive. His eyes say, "Don't you see?" and look vaguely optimistic, two commas open to possibility, obscuring the mess beneath. Father and son sit in silence for a while.

"You understand?"

Freddy shrugs.

"Say you're okay with it."

"No."

"Just say it."

Someone hollers for Freddy to come up because the round is about to start.

Freddy knows what he says won't make a difference—his father is as good as gone. He wants to hate him, defy every word, deny him a son's consent. Then he looks at his father, who, even with (could it be?) moist eyes, looks confident and ready for anything, assured of the world and himself. The trumpets resound upstairs, and in a blast of memory Freddy remembers a morning three summers ago and his disinterest when he was told, at the attention-deficient age of eight, that *appa* was here to stay. He remembers the quick transitions from *Who cares?* to fascination to idolatry as he'd watch his father poring over texts as thick as cinder blocks through the crack of his parents' door, how he would later sketch crude approximations of Boeing 747-400 wheel and fuel systems for the fridge. But mostly he remembers that first morning, when his father, glowing like the summer day he arrived, picked him up in the middle of *Time Force Rangers* and told him in Korean, then again in English, "I'm gonna be your real dad now!" The man was invincible; he was as hopeful for the future as he is now. But as firmly as the man's jaw is set in this strange room in New York City, as piercing as his eyes are, he needs Freddy to send him off, to give him the go-ahead. He cannot leave in peace without it.

Freddy fakes a yawn. He swallows a lump.

"All right, I'll go and finish."

The boy stands, straightens his shirt and suddenly finds himself in a suffocating hug. The side of his father's face is pressed tight against his chest, and the feeling that rushes through Freddy is completely foreign, an awkward and hazardous love, as if the duties and codes that keep us human were being overwhelmed by the very humanness they preserve. The embrace is short but long enough to be irrevocable, both the summary and starting point of something good, a friendship perhaps. It also reveals the bald spot that Young Min is always careful to hide.

When they break away, his father is dry-eyed and all business.

"Get rid of any baggage. You got anything in your pockets?"

Freddy shakes his head.

"Turn them out."

He reaches into his black twill pants, bought for $15.99 at the army surplus store, and takes out a dime, some lint, a water-bottle cap and a moist wad of

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notebook paper. His father takes it all, wrinkling his face at the paper lump, and tosses everything into a nearby wastebasket.

"You're gonna be the best," he says, in English. "I can tell."

The audience is in total silence. By competition rules, if a contestant is not present when the round begins or hasn't at least requested a time extension, he or she is automatically disqualified. Chung's podium is empty, and Reverend Sterling is seconds away from reading the first question. Was the pressure too great for the little Dynamo of Doctrine, the Titan of Testament? Time is running out on the digital display above the stage, and everyone is standing. A minute ago, some were screaming, "C'mon, Chung, get up there!" and chanting his name, but now the tension runs too high. The seed of hope in Marissa Kline-Vallejo has grown to palpable excitement as she flirts with the thought of being the champion of PUBQ XIV without this extra round. Some are whispering, telling each other they aren't surprised—the kid was toast when he walked off after Round Five. The final twelve seconds tick down on the timer, prompting one or two insensitive members of the audience to start yelling, "*Ten, nine, eight . . .*"

Then, from the far-right section of the crowd, the section with the unobstructed view of backstage left, a loud and lonely cry sounds like a sentry's warning in the night. The spectators crane their necks to see for themselves, and even the orchestra players put down their instruments to look. Reverend Sterling throws up his hands as cheers spread from the right of the audience across the center rows to the left sections, to the mezzanine and balcony, back down to the very rear of the orchestra seats, until the whole auditorium is roaring and whooping, for Freddy Chung is back onstage.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Dave Kim



"I never placed better than third in the Bible quizzes I competed in as a kid, so part of the impulse to write 'Final Round' might have come from a long-repressed fantasy of winning one. Years ago my mom accidentally threw out the few trophies and medals I did manage to win. This issue of *TMR* and a fake bronze dove with a missing foot are all I've got to show for my quiz days.

"My father, a pastor, died when I was six, so Young Min is really an amalgam of some of the surrogate dads I had growing up, plus one or two of my buddies' fathers. The cliché is that fathers are nonexistent in first-generation immigrant families; they're either out working fourteen-hour days or they're emotional Houdinis who avoid real rapport whenever possible. In the Korean communities of Southern California, where I was raised, both these types were common. Dads were never around, or, if they were, they never said much to us. Some lived in different states or left the country altogether. We were a generation of kids raised by our mothers and Super Nintendo.

"But the clichés don't account for the affection hidden in our mysterious fathers, one that usually took the form of hard-nosed sacrifice but sometimes bubbled visibly, if briefly, in our moments of triumph. I wanted to show that part of the dad in 'Final Round' rather than tackle a particularly sad or anguish-filled story. This piece started out as a send-up of the Great American Bible Quiz. I decided to keep the playful tone and write about love too."

Dave Kim was born in Seoul, Korea, and raised in Los Angeles. He teaches part time at the City College of New York, where he received his MFA. He lives in Brooklyn. "Final Round" is his first published work of fiction.