Hi, I'm Frances Cha, and my debut novel, *If I Had Your Face*, was published in April by Ballantine Books, Penguin Random House. And it is set in the very intense, extreme city of Seoul, which is where I am right now. And it follows four young female narrators, who are not born into wealth and status, but they are trying to carve out a life for themselves in this landscape.

And for one of them, one of the main characters that the book opens with, she decides that the way to make her life better would be to undergo an extreme, invasive surgery of the face that would reconfigure her jaw line and make her look like a completely different person. And her goal in doing so is to get a job at a room salon, which is a very luxurious underground hostess bar where businessmen pay thousands of dollars a night to be entertained by beautiful women who pour them liquor and make them feel very special.

And the book goes into a lot of behind-the-scenes of different industries and societal issues that are unique to Korea. One example would be a storyline that follows one of the narrators obsession with k-pop. And that draws largely from my own experience being very immersed in the k-pop fandom myself, particularly when I was going through a very difficult time in my life, and just how escapist and immersive and very intense that culture is.

And a second storyline that I wanted to explore, which I touched briefly on before, is that of beauty and everything ranging from the detailed rituals of k-beauty, which has been covered by beauty media and magazines in the US as well. But also that of plastic surgery, which is relatively prevalent here in Korea, more so than other countries. And the reasons why some women choose to make these decisions, and how it’s not one that’s born out of vanity or superficiality but rather a desperate and urgent choice that has been made to make their life better. And often kind of a last resort, being faced with very few other options to get a job or improve their love life or gain confidence generally. And it is a controversial topic, so I do hope that you will come to it with an open mind and would also love to hear your thoughts about it.

So I hope you enjoy and share what you thought. Thank you very much.

[Sujin is hell--bent on becoming a room salon girl. She has invited Kyuri from across the hall to our tiny apartment, and the three of us are sitting on the floor in a little triangle, looking out the window over our bar--dotted street. Drunk men in suits stumble by,]
contemplating where to go for their next round of drinks. It is late and we are drinking soju in little paper cups.

Kyuri works at Ajax, the most expensive room salon in Non-hyeon. Men bring their clients there to discuss business in long dark rooms with marble tables. Sujin has told me how much these men pay a night to have girls like Kyuri sit next to them and pour them liquor, and it's taken me a long time to believe her.

I'd never heard of room salons before I met Kyuri, but now that I know what to look for, I see one on every side street. From the outside, they are nearly invisible. Nondescript signs hang above darkened stairways, leading to underground worlds where men pay to act like bloated kings.

Sujin wants to be a part of it all, for the money. Right now she is asking Kyuri where she got her eyes done.

"I got mine done back in Cheongju," says Sujin sorrowfully to Kyuri. "What a mistake. I mean, just look at me." She opens her eyes extra wide. And it's true, the fold on her right eyelid has been stitched just a little too high, giving her a sly, slanted look. Unfortunately, the truth is that even apart from her asymmetrical eyelids, Sujin's face is too square for her to ever be considered pretty in the true Korean sense. Her lower jaw also protrudes too much.

Kyuri, on the other hand, is one of those electrically beautiful girls. The stitches on her double eyelids look naturally faint, while her nose is raised, her cheekbones tapered, and her entire jaw realigned and shaved into a slim v-line. Long feathery eyelashes have been planted along her tattooed eye line, and she does routine light therapy on her skin, which glistens cloudy white, like skim milk. Earlier, she was waxing on about the benefits of lotus leaf masks and ceramide supplements for budding neck lines. The only unaltered part of her is surprisingly her hair, which unfolds like a dark river down her back.

"I was so stupid. I should have waited till I was older." With another envious look at Kyuri's perfect creases, Sujin sighs and peers at her eyes again in a little hand mirror. "What a waste of money," she says.

Sujin and I have been sharing an apartment for three years now. We went to middle school and high school together in Cheongju. Our high school was vocational so it was only two years long, but Sujin didn't even finish that. She was always itching to get to Seoul, to escape the orphanage that she grew up in, and after our first year she went to try her luck at a hair academy. She was clumsy with scissors though, and ruining wigs was expensive, so she dropped out of that too, but not before she called me to come take her spot.

I am now a full--fledged stylist and a few times a week Sujin comes into the salon where I work, at 10 a.m. sharp. I wash and blow--dry her hair before she goes to work at her nail salon. A few weeks ago, she brought Kyuri in as a new client for me. It is a big deal
for smaller hair shops to snag a room salon girl as a client because room salon girls get their hair and makeup done professionally every day and bring in a lot of money.

The only thing that annoys me about Kyuri is that sometimes she speaks too loudly when she is talking to me, although Sujin has told her that there is nothing wrong with my hearing. Also, I often hear her whispering about my “condition” at the shop, when my back is turned.

I think she means well though.