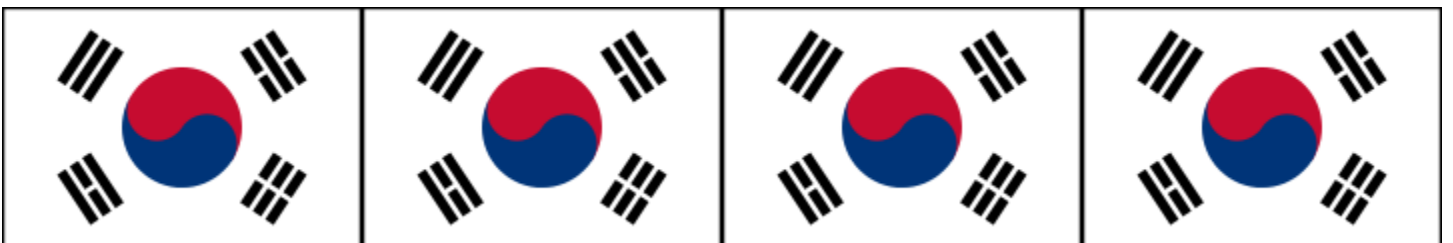


Korea Lit

Spring Edition 2016



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Korea Lit

We are proud to publish the fiction of Korean writers and non-Korean writers who have lived in or experienced an aspect of Korea (even in countries other than North and South Korea). We seek to give new writers a voice and established writers another place to present their work. Our hope is that all the stories published on the pages of Korea Lit will give readers some glimpse of Korean culture, no matter how small. This may come in the form of mystery, romance or even alien invaders.

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Azaleas

By Robert Perron

Downhill a few kilometers, at the edge of the village, Sang-min found a drinking house. Outside leaned bicycles piled high with thatched baskets. Inside men sat on mats around low tables, the room warm, twisting with tobacco smoke. Heads turned to take stock of the young stranger: worn combat boots, faded field jacket, military knapsack.

A familiar voice said, “So I guess you’re discharged.”

Sang-min smiled. He had stopped to inquire but here sat Jae-wook, the object of his inquiry. Jae-wook, businessman of necessity, poet and philosopher at heart, or so he proclaimed. At the start of the war, Sang-min had been drafted to the infantry (despite two years of university), wounded by shell fire, and transferred to a supply depot run by Jae-wook, older, a civilian. The two men shared talk and books. They reviewed their woes, how the slaughter of his platoon pounded Sang-min’s ears as medics evacuated him, how Jae-wook watched his father and brother blindfolded and shot on charges of collaboration. Sang-min would recite: “If man is born to live, / what should I worry? / Man lives till he dies.” Jae-wook’s eyes and lips would glisten: “Ah, the poetry of Kim So-wol.”

Soju was poured and wine bowls lifted.

“My young friend, what are you doing up here?”

“You invited me.”

“Hah. But I never thought you’d take me up on it, come to such a godforsaken place.”

“There’s no work in Seoul. And Pusan?” Sang-min’s family had fled to the bottom of Korea ahead of the first invasion and stayed. But Sang-min, the lesser son, rebellious, never getting on with his father, jaded by the woes of war, had no desire to join them. He wanted to make his own life.

“So I thought I’d walk north and look up my old counselor.”

“Well I’m glad you’re here.” Jae-wook tapped the side of his head. “I’ve had an idea brewing.”

Sang-min laughed. Always a plan.

Jae-wook leaned forward. “But it may take some time. There are contingencies beyond my control.”

Sang-min drank from his wine bowl then motioned south in the direction of the back road he had descended. He described a small farm on a sharp corner in the hills with a woman and two foreign-looking children. “They seem to be alone. Do you think she’d take on help?”

An old man coughed and spit on the floor. He wore the white flowing robe, white baggy pants, and high black hat of a provincial elder. His goatee fluttered wispy white and he smoked a long, bamboo-stemmed pipe.

Jae-wook said, “Let’s take a walk.”

Outside, shops bent into the dust of the main road. Traffic moved by foot, bicycle, and ox cart. Bouncing mini-buses converged at a plaza of packed dirt in the village center. Military vehicles abounded, mostly American – jeeps and diesel-spewing trucks. On the far side of town, Sang-min made out the middle expanse of the Imjin River and its far bank where the no-man’s land between the two Koreas began.

Jae-wook produced cigarettes and a narrative. The old man inside headed the Hwang family and controlled what wealth remained along this section of the river. The war had cost him both sons. His three daughters were married off, his wife dead. A mess for the future of the family, Jae-wook explained, with nephews and sons-in-law vying for power as old Hwang, indifferent, spent his time in drinking houses and brothels.

Jae-wook raised a finger. “But where there’s a mess, there’s opportunity.” He had a cousin, daughter to his mother’s sister, close in age to Sang-min, named Hyo-chu. Jae-wook suggested to Hyo-chu a match with old Hwang, was sure he could pull it off, that Hwang would not be able to resist a last conquest, a young bride of allure and elegance. Hyo-chu reacted with red-faced anger not about to waste her life on an old man. But that’s the point, Jae-wook told her, he was old.

“I’m guessing you pulled it off,” said Sang-min.

Indeed. Hwang slobbered in anticipation of the wedding night. The nephews and daughters expressed dismay but had no sway over the old man. As for Hyo-chu, she came to appreciate the folly of romance over security. After the wedding night and a few more nights, Hwang returned to the brothels. While he drank and fornicated, Hyo-chu secured leadership of the household, by nature gracious, not flouting her beauty. The daughters now adored her. Even the nephews had mellowed.

Jae-wook and Sang-min stripped their cigarettes military style, extinguishing flame with thumb and forefinger, tearing the paper, letting the tobacco flutter to the ground. Sang-min enjoyed Jae-wook’s story-telling, the subtle changes of tone and facial expression, the sweeping gestures and intimations of confidence, but grew anxious as the talk drifted from his immediate concerns of food and shelter. He asked again about the woman in the hills with the small farm.

“She’s Eun-mi,” said Jae-wook. “Her family stayed put ahead of the first invasion. Big mistake. The northerners ripped them from their land. Eun-mi ended up in Tongduchon as a prostitute.” Jae-wook paused. “But a savvy one.”

“How so?”

“She came back with enough money to reclaim the farm. Although. Why bring those bastards? One looks half Chinese, the other American. Maybe not so savvy.”

“What of her family?”

“Dead. Or taken north. Who knows? So she has title to the land, even as a woman. Hmm. Why not? Go see if she needs help while I sort things out here. Let me know if it doesn’t work out.”

Sang-min retraced his steps on the primitive back road, steep and barren but for copses of leafless saplings, and arrived at the sharp corner above the small farm, where level ground formed a rough square a hundred meters to the side, sufficient for house, outbuilding, two small rice paddies, and a vegetable plot. Sang-min saw no oxen or pigs, but hens pecked the ground with alacrity, one strutting and squawking like a rooster. The narrow house had four raised rooms in tandem and a sunken kitchen whose stove pipe ran under their floors. A slim portico, no more than a shelf, fronted the house, with sliding doors giving entrance to the bantam rooms. A thatched roof extended over the portico.

Sang-min squatted and observed, not to spy, but to gather wit and nerve. A boy, close to four, with pronounced eye folds, on occasion glared at him. A round-eyed girl, two or three, waved. The woman, Eun-mi, ignored him. Her age seemed mid-twenties like his. They might have been siblings, both short with oval faces, flared nostrils, and wide mouths.

Sang-min squeezed the flame from his cigarette and sprinkled the remaining tobacco on the ground. He dropped from the road and approached Eun-mi who was striking the early spring earth with a hoe.

“It looks like you have a lot to do, what with the planting season upon us.”

Eun-mi continued striking the ground. Sang-min saw that the round-eyed girl stood next to him and bent over extending his right forefinger.

“What’s your name, little one?”

The child wrapped her hand around Sang-min’s finger. “Hana.”

“Hana, a beautiful name. My favorite.”

Eun-mi stopped swinging the hoe and turned to Sang-min. “I see you’re a great charmer.”

“Look,” he said, “I need employment. You need help.”

Sang-min stood arms at side as Eun-mi made several more swipes at the earth before responding. “First, I can’t pay much more than room and food.”

Sang-min remained silent.

“Second. How do I know you’re not a freeloader, or worse? Okay, we’ll try it, but on probation.”

A week later, Sang-min stood across the road by a stream, the water source for the farm. For washing, Eun-mi brought over clothes, soaking and pounding them on rocks. For other use, the water needed to be carried. Sang-min sank two buckets and pulled them out full. He ran a bamboo carrying pole under the handles, hefted, and balanced the buckets on his right shoulder. Crossing the road with the slopping water, he shook his head. Soon the paddies and field would require many such buckets.

Eun-mi looked up from the kitchen. “I have good news. Your behavior being exemplary, your probation is lifted.” That evening Sang-min sat for the first time on the floor of the first room with Eun-mi and her children, Kyung-wan, the wary master, and Hana, as yet ebullient, holding bowls to their mouths, pushing in rice, kimchi, and boiled eggs.

“Is your room okay?” said Eun-mi.

“A bit cold at night.”

“Yes, too far from the kitchen. Move next to us, to the second room.”

Next day Sang-min dragged from the outbuilding a back carrier and addressed Kyung-wan who followed his movements. “Hey, little warrior. Do you want to help me today? Ask your mom if you can go into the hills.” Sang-min hoisted the wooden frame to his back, crossed the road with Kyung-wan, and climbed for half an hour, until the farm appeared toy-like. “A little higher. On the top of this hill I’m sure we’ll find many dead branches.”

Sometimes the boy helped and sometimes he grew restless or tired. If restless, he ran across the hilltop with a stick fighting an imaginary foe. If tired, he lay on his back with arms askew. The warmer days made lying on the ground in the sun a comfort. Sang-min worked a steady pace, gathering thin, dead branches broken by winter’s harshness. He cut or snapped them into meter lengths and laid them on the arms of the back carrier until they rose to its height.

One morning, Eun-mi placed in Sang-min’s hand a crumpled thousand-hwan note. They needed seeds and seedlings for planting as well as rice and vegetables to hold them over. Some dried fish if there was enough money.

“Cigarettes for yourself.”

“Maybe some meat,” said Sang-min.

“Too costly. We have kimchi and eggs.”

In response, Sang-min addressed a delicate matter. The hen that strutted like a rooster was not laying eggs. She seemed to have the status of pet but these days pets were luxuries. And yes she would be a bit tough, but sufficient boiling would take care of that.

Eun-mi interrupted. “You want to kill Hye-su?”

Sang-min closed his mouth, retreated to the second room, retrieved his knapsack, and set off for the village. He stopped at the drinking house and found old Hwang but not Jae-wook. Hwang’s face was gaunt and his eyes red; he coughed and spit. Several men called out hello.

Sang-min found a grocery where he obtained everything, even dried fish. As the transaction concluded, Jae-wook appeared.

“It’s about time you came down, Sang-min. We need to talk.”

The two men ambled to the edge of town, arms behind their backs, chatting and nodding, down a path to the bank of the river. They peered across at American GI's in combat gear. They ambled back.

The Hwang family again. Jae-wook reviewed its current state, no sons, contentious nephews, sons-in-law who wanted a share of the wealth, Hyo-chu more and more the backbone of the household. Sang-min nodded, yes, he understood, had heard it before. Jae-wook previewed the state of the family once Hwang died. As his widow, Hyo-chu would be secure, in fact, rise to a position of semi-dominance. But Hyo-chu and the Hwang family would find the lack of a central male figure difficult. A marriage would be desirable but not a traditional one requiring Hyo-chu to leave the Hwang household with a dowry.

"Why are you telling me all this?" said Sang-min.

The men had stopped walking and were looking into each other's faces. Jae-wook laughed.

"Sang-min, we're looking for an upside-down marriage. Where the husband becomes part of the wife's household. We need a young man of small means but good ancestry, hard-working, amiable. It would help if he were handsome and literate, had some university. Knew some poetry."

Sang-min felt his face flush but regained composure and decided to join his friend's game. With flourishes of hand and voice, he told Jae-wook of a dream. Of the one dream that came every night to his cramped room on the impoverished farm. To some day take the hand of beautiful Hyo-chu and assume the role of patriarch of the mighty Hwang dynasty.

"I'm glad you're in good humor about this," said Jae-wook.

Upon return, Sang-min found Eun-mi in the kitchen. On the stove churned the stock pot letting off steam and a fragrance of knobby meat. A glance inside revealed Hye-su bereft of feathers and entrails. Eun-mi said, "I thought about it and you're right. That old hen was not pulling her weight."

At evening meal, Eun-mi asked about Sang-min's friend, the poet and philosopher Jae-wook, what plots was he hatching these days? How he had a toehold in the great Hwang family having arranged a match between its head and his cousin Hyo-chu. Had Sang-min heard the story?

With chopsticks halfway to her mouth, Hana said, "Mama, where did Hye-su go?" Kyung-wan chortled. Eun-mi raised a brow and bore its eye into Kyung-wan until he withdrew his smirk.

"Hye-su," Eun-mi said after a few seconds of thought, "has gone to the village to live with the great Hwang family."

Following supper, Sang-min crossed the road to the stream, removed his clothes, and washed everywhere despite the cold. The army had taught him hygiene. He could hear his squad leader exhorting him to cleanse all body parts including the covert. Sang-min thought back to the day he was wounded by mortar shrapnel and placed on a stretcher as Chinese bugles blared their advance. His squad leader squatted next to him and said, "Good luck, Sang-min. Maybe we'll get together in Seoul in better times." Two years later, discharged in Seoul, Sang-min found the residence of his former squad leader. His mother said he was still missing in action. Sang-min wanted to stay a while but the family didn't have enough to feed itself. That's when he decided to walk north and look up Jae-wook.

Sang-min recrossed the road and sat in the middle of the second room as the last daylight filtered through the small rear window. In front, the door slid open and Eun-mi entered carrying mat and blanket. She had decided to give over the first room to the children.

“The other rooms are cold. Do you mind if we sleep together?” Sang-min watched as Eun-mi squared her mat against his. He could smell the vigor of her body – she had given herself a good scrubbing too.

“This can’t be permanent,” said Sang-min.

“Nothing is permanent.”

Several nights later they lay under blankets side by side, bare shoulder to bare shoulder.

“The children like you,” said Eun-mi.

Sang-min was silent.

Eun-mi said, “Go ahead, say what you’re thinking.”

“I just wonder why you didn’t give them over to one of the orphanages supported by the Americans?”

“Ha! You think I’m mushy-headed, don’t you?”

“A bit. The children are a burden.”

“They’re not a burden. They’re easy to care for. A bowl of rice, a pat on the head, a pat on the behind. As they grow, they’ll help me on the farm. In my old age, they’ll take care of me.”

“So. You have it all worked out. And here I thought you were mushy-headed.”

“Far from it.” Eun-mi rolled toward Sang-min. She put a hand on his chest and her head on his shoulder. “I’m a practical woman.”

Sang-min planted radishes, leeks and turnips, cabbages and sweet potatoes, cucumbers and beans. Rice seedlings filled the paddies. Soon Eun-mi made summer kimchi, salty and sour with pungency to bring a tear. Sang-min sold Eun-mi’s kimchi at market. He sold eggs and bought chicks.

The hot months of summer passed.

Following the rainy season, the rice, cabbages, and turnips moved to maturity. Sang-min and Eun-mi spent their days bent over in the field and paddies. They stored cabbages and turnips for winter kimchi, keeping enough vegetables to cook fresh. The green rice stalks they cut by hand standing past their calves in the water of the paddies; by hand, they threshed and dried the stalks.

No news from the village.

One night during rainy season, Sang-min and Eun-mi had joined in intimacy and afterward lay talking as monsoon waters pummeled the roof.

“I must tell you something,” said Sang-min. “Jae-wook thinks he can make a match between me and Hyo-chu when Hwang is gone.”

Eun-mi said, “That’s Jae-wook, forever looking to the main chance.”

Sang-min sat up and scooted to the door. He slid it open, lit a cigarette and, sitting cross-legged, blew blue smoke toward the sheets of water. Eun-mi came up behind and laid an arm over his shoulder. A surge of fondness enveloped Sang-min for this wartime prostitute.

“A dilemma,” he said.

“No, it’s not complicated at all.” Eun-mi kissed the back of Sang-min’s neck. “You’d be a fool to pass up such good fortune.”

Before the time to start making winter kimchi, Jae-wook appeared on the path above the farm. He dropped from the road to where Sang-min and Eun-mi had unbent themselves in the field.

“Old Hwang has died.”

Jae-wook wanted Sang-min to accompany him for a change of clothes then to pay respects. Sang-min countered that his attendance would be inappropriate.

“To the contrary, it’s imperative.”

Sang-min turned to Eun-mi, but she was gone, her hoe upon the ground.

The Hwang compound lacked the size and elegance of many Sang-min had seen in his travels, but north of Seoul appeared as Shangri-La. The rooms formed three sides of a large square with kitchens at both ends and a gated wall to the front, the courtyard clean and well packed, the covered portico that ran in front of the rooms wide.

“The Hwang family enjoys a first-rate homestead don’t you think?” said Jae-wook. “They work all those paddies out back and have their hands in half the shops in town. See those two men in western suits?”

Jae-wook pointed to two men in the middle of the courtyard smoking cigarettes.

“Nephews. One owns a grocery and is always traveling to Seoul. The other is in the local government.”

Jae-wook guided Sang-min across the compound to a large room with many sliding doors. They sat on the portico to remove shoes. Jae-wook placed hwan notes in Sang-min’s hand. “So you can make an offering.”

They stood and Jae-wook opened a door. He put a hand in the small of Sang-min’s back and his mouth close to Sang-min’s ear. “You must be your most charming.”

Jae-wook and Sang-min went first to the closed coffin where they made bows and offerings. After a time, they turned to where on the floor in mourning dress of white hemp sat the three daughters from the first wife, nieces, nephews, sons-in-law, and Hwang’s widow, pulled back hair accentuating the delicacy of her face.

Hyo-chu stood and bowed. They sat, Sang-min facing Hyo-chu at two meters with Jae-wook between them back a little. Rice cakes, fresh autumn kimchi, and meat from a young dog appeared, along with tea. Hyo-chu thanked Sang-min for his presence. Sang-min extended condolences. There was talk of the weather, affairs of the village. Hyo-chu spoke in a low voice of moderate pitch.

“My cousin tells me you recite poetry.”

Sang-min felt his face warming.

Jae-wook said, “Don’t be bashful now. Give us some lines from Kim So-wol.”

“‘Azaleas’ is my favorite,” said Hyo-chu.

Sang-min put aside bowl and chopsticks. He knew the poem, everyone knew it. Jae-wook nodded. The words to the first verse came. “When you leave, / weary of me, / without a word I shall gently let you go.” Sang-min evoked the second verse. “From Mount Yak / in Yongbyon / I shall gather armfuls of azaleas / and scatter them on your way.”

“So melancholy,” said Hyo-chu. “So lovely.”

Jae-wook laughed. “Okay, Sang-min, we’ll let you off the hook for now.”

Afterward, in the courtyard, Sang-min and Jae-wook lit cigarettes.

“That went very well,” said Jae-wook. “They’re taken with you.”

“Yes,” said Sang-min, peering into the mountains.

Jae-wook followed his gaze. “Sang-min, there’s nothing up there. Your future is here.”

The nephew who owned a grocery and wore a western suit approached, bowed to Sang-min, and said, “Welcome, uncle.”

Jae-wook said, “Please, no bad jokes at this time.”

The grocer laughed addressing himself to Sang-min. “When Hyo-chu came here as Hwang’s wife, I called her aunt even though she was ten years younger. Now I’ll be calling you uncle. But you strike me as a man we can rally around. I’ll be happy to show you the ropes.”

When they were alone again, Jae-wook said, “See that. He’s a joker but he likes you. Inside, didn’t you see the faces of the nieces and nephews? Even Hwang’s daughters swooned as you recited from ‘Azaleas.’”

“‘Azaleas’ is beautiful,” said Sang-min. “Do you know the last two verses?”

“Of course,” said Jae-wook and recited the third verse. “Step by step / on the flowers placed before you / tread lightly, softly as you go.”

Sang-min recited the final verse. “When you leave / weary of me, / though I die, I’ll not let one tear fall.”

Days shortened and morning earth frosted. Eun-mi chased the communal spirit for making winter kimchi, enlisting Kyung-wan and Hana to join her and Sang-min in soaking and pasting the cabbage leaves with salt and red pepper, and layering them in earthen jars. The days closed with cold hands, red faces, runny noses, and broad smiles. Sang-min worked at other chores to prepare for the great cold. Numerous trips to the hills with the back carrier and Kyung-wan filled the outbuilding with firewood. The remaining root crops were dug out and secured in a small cellar.

One morning near the end of November, Sang-min rose early, crossed the road, and washed in the cold waters of the spring. He put on a clean shirt, brushed his padded jacket, and departed for the village. The mourning period for Hwang had passed; the nephews wanted a parley.

Sang-min sat in a room in the Hwang compound with Jae-wook and the two nephews he'd seen before. Jae-wook said, "There are some concerns and it's best to speak frankly." The nephews nodded. "The family worries you might barge in where you know nothing and start giving orders, try to take over."

Sang-min shook his head. "I see my position as a student in the household."

The nephew who was a grocer laughed. "Well said. But let's talk about the woman."

"Eun-mi," said Jae-wook. "You can't be going back to see her. They don't want you following in old Hwang's footsteps. They want someone responsive to the business and faithful to Hyo-chu."

"I understand that," said Sang-min.

The grocer put a hand on Sang-min's back. "Hey, we're getting too serious. Let's get some food in here. Some Soju."

Sang-min stayed until early evening. The children were asleep when he picked his way around the sharp corner, dropped down to the farm, and slid open the door to the second room. He sat in the dark feeling Eun-mi's eyes.

"I leave in the morning." There was much to do, he explained. Formal meetings. Tour the Hwang holdings. Learn their business ventures. Hyo-chu wanted a proper wedding with all preliminary ceremonies.

"Let's not talk about that now," said Eun-mi.

Sang-min shed his outer clothes, shed his long underwear, and slid under the blankets. Eun-mi touched his arm then his chest as she had so often. Sang-min turned to her and Eun-mi took him in coition with embraces and kisses. As the urgency increased and the point of withdrawal approached, Eun-mi said, "Ah, Sang-min, hold off. A little longer."

In the morning, Sang-min and Eun-mi sat on the floor of the first room with Kyung-wan and Hana. Eun-mi put aside her chopsticks and clapped her hands.

She had an announcement: Sang-min was moving to the village to live with Hyo-chu and the Hwang family.

She had a small speech: through three seasons, from planting to harvest to winter kimchi, Sang-min had been friend and benefactor. Thanks to him, their root cellar and wood bin were full, and they had no fear of winter.

Hana interrupted with excitement in her voice. "You're going to live with Hye-su and the great Hwang family?"

Eun-mi lost the thread of her speech then fell to laughter. Sang-min laughed too but Kyung-wan tumbled his rice bowl and crossed to the door, sliding it open and bolting before Eun-mi could intervene.

“Well,” she said, “that didn’t go as planned. One has a tantrum and the other thinks you’re marrying a chicken.”

Eun-mi gathered the remains of the meal and scooted to the portico. Slipping into rubber shoes, she stepped down to the kitchen. Sang-min repaired to the second room to gather his knapsack and few belongings. He sat on the portico tightening the laces of his old combat boots, then stood, shouldered the knapsack, and walked toward the kitchen.

He looked about but saw no sign of Kyung-wan. Hana was running in circles, outside arm raised, inside arm down.

In the dimness of the kitchen, back to the doorway, Eun-mi tended the stove. Her shoulders heaved once and Sang-min’s right hand tightened on the knapsack strap.

“Sang-min,” Eun-mi said without turning. “What? Are you still here? It’s time to run along.”

END

Robert Perron lives and works in New Hampshire and New York City with attendance at Gotham Writers’ Workshop and 92Y Creative Writing. Past life includes high-tech and military service (with a year on the Korean DMZ). Present life includes travel and hiking. His work appears in Prick of the Spindle.

Return

By Charles Montgomery

Yongho awoke as the plane sliced through the smog and descended towards Incheon airport. The flight from San Francisco to Seoul was a long one, even on an airline as dedicated to service as Koreana. In the San Francisco airport Yongho drank several beers in the lounge, had several more on the plane, with one of them washing down an Ambien. This was in a partly successful attempt to sleep through the flight. This sleep was interrupted by meal service. Yongho, who had lived in the United States for nearly fifteen years, was amused that the stewardess automatically addressed him in Korean and in semi-rebellion he made sure to order the western-style meal, and in English. He was vaguely disappointed to see the stewardess take this request without reaction.

As he ate he became aware that he was being watched, semi-furtively, by the man beside him. After a bit, the man's glances became more direct, and the man gathered up the nerve to talk,

"Going back to Korea," the man asked?

Yongho nodded ambivalently

The man continued in slightly accented English,

"My name is Kim, Mr. Kim Sang-eun." Mr. Kim Sang-eun paused expectantly.

A cloud of silence hung in the stale cabin air between the two. In the background conversations buzzed in competition with the roar outside the plane.

A beat late Yongho responded, “Park Yongho, I’m traveling to Korea.”

He immediately thought how stupid a statement that was, as if anyone on the plane did not intend to stop, at least temporarily, in Korea.

Mr. Kim seemed not to notice, happy to have a conversation begun.

Kim said, “Your English is excellent, have you lived overseas?”

“Actually, I am a citizen of the United States,” Yongho replied.

Mr. Kim’s eyes quickly looked over Yongho’s obviously Asian features. “Were you born in the United States,” he asked?

“No,” Yongho responded, “I was born in Busan.”

Kim continued scanning Yongho’s face, as if to decipher something.

Yongho, half cursing himself for doing it, continued.

“I left when I was about 10, I’ve lived in the US ever since.”

“Why are you coming back to Korea,” Kim asked?

“Family.” Yongho bit the word off, in hope that Mr. Kim would notice his reluctance to continue the conversation. It was odd enough for anyone to start a random conversation with a stranger, even weirder that it was a Korean man. However it was family that brought Yongho to Korea, but that simple word, “family” seemed insufficient to cover reality. As Mr. Kim mumbled some typical Korean platitudes about the importance of family, and enumerated his own, Yongho’s mind wandered back to the last time he had seen his father. It had been Jeju on a family vacation. The first night they had stayed in a pension with ondol heating, all four family members sharing the warm floor. On a three-day bus tour they saw many of the highlights of Jeju: The volcano, the basalt cliffs, Mt Hallasan, and the ubiquitous stone statues standing guard over each town, no matter how small. The next night they shared a one-bedroom loft, with Yongho sleeping on an ondol pad on the downstairs floor

The last day on the island was sunny, and Yongho’s father picked mandarin oranges in his sleeveless t-shirt, gathering them up in a pouch fashioned from his outer shirt. Later, the family sat on the seashore, on a metallic pad, and peeled and ate the sweet fruit as the sea-water lapped at the basaltic shores.

This kind of thing was no longer possible. Two years ago, Yongho’s father had been diagnosed. Cancer.

At first the old man fought it off. An operation had been deemed “successful” and follow-up radiation and chemotherapy had held the monster at bay for almost a year. Yongho’s mother attributed his initial recovery to Korean food and even more kimchi and seaweed soup (although traditionally for pregnant women) was apparent at every dinner table.

Yongho remembered something else about that trip. At almost every stop of the tour, the conclusion of the stop had featured a variety of sales pitches. But no matter what the potential product, if it was food or drink, the salesman had claimed that it had medicinal powers, often verging on the sexual. All the products claimed to increase “stamina”. Yongho’s family was not much moved by these arguments but another member of the tour, an unhealthy looking man of semi-determinate old age bought everything that was offered up. At some stops it was ludicrous, the old man tottering out with a pyramid of fungus, a beaker of some uncertain looking fluid, or fruit-based products unstable in his skinny arms.

Maybe, Yongho mused, his own family should have bought more “medicine” on that trip. The cancer returned, and the last pictures that had been emailed to Yongho showed his father at an alarmingly low weight.

Yongho made his airplane reservations right after he clicked those pictures off his laptop. In the two weeks between purchase and flight, Yongho’s father had been moved from a wheelchair to a bed.

Noting Yongho’s silence, Kim changed tack. “I hate these long flights, don’t you?”

Yongho nodded noncommittally

“I need a smoke now and then, you know?” Kim continued

Yongho shrugged, “I quit years ago, it makes flights a little easier.”

“I wish I could quit,” Kim mourned. “What was your secret?”

Yongho shrugged, “No secret. It was hard. And I gained twenty pounds. It took me a year to lose it back.” The memory of this arduous weight-loss process reminded Yongho of his father’s helpless weight loss.

“Cancer” he noted to himself – it could sell. “Lose 20 pounds in only 14 days!”

Slogans danced in his head.

Mr. Park pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and toyed with them nervously. A stewardess walked by and frowned. Park half-pulled a cigarette from the pack and placed its unfiltered end in his mouth, pulling the pack up and down so that the cigarette pumped in and out of the pack. “I just can’t wait to light up,” he muttered around the base of the thing. Withdrawing his mouth, he pulled the cigarette out and put it in the inside pocket of his coat. He looked at Yongho speculatively, pulled out another cigarette, and offered it to Yongho. “You sure you don’t want one,” he asked?

Yongho grunted, “No. I quit”

Mr. Park interpreted this as a weak affirmative ‘no’ or was undeterred, “you’ll be doing me a favor, one less for me.”

Mr. Park continued to proffer the cigarette.

Yongho wasn't in the mood to continue. He nodded his head slightly, palmed the cigarette, and slid it into the breast-pocket of his jacket.

Yongho's memory again slid back to the vacation on Jeju. As a son, he was not allowed to smoke in front of this father, and had to keep finding excuses to slip away. This was never easy, as a family on vacation in Korea was a *family* on vacation. Still, Yongho found his way, usually by claiming he had to use a bathroom and bolting for any nearby stairwell.

The thumping of landing gear jolted Yongho from his memories and as quickly as he could he gathered his overhead gear and began brawling his way to the exit.

Once inside the airport, Yongho picked up his baggage and disentangled himself from Mr. Park by exchanging business cards with a vague promise to "get in touch," later.

He sat, for a moment, on his luggage. Groups of people passed him in the background, but no one was close to him, and he imagined himself in a bubble, or as some kind of spy – embedded in Korea, but not a part of it. He could hear nothing of what others were saying, nor did he want to speak to them.

The spell was broken by the realization that he needed to rent a cell-phone before catching his bus to Gimpo. Yongho sighed, and walked over to the rental desk where, talking as little as possible, he rented a phone. His next stop was the ticket counter, to purchase a ticket for the Airport Limousine from Incheon to Gimpo.

With these necessary chores complete, Yongho walked out of the airport and slammed into the brutal heat and humidity of Korean summer. The air surrounding Incheon airport was dank and heavy with soot. Incheon was a semi-industrial city, and at this time of year, the early summer, yellow dust flowed over the seas in billows that landed and made everything seem slightly dusted in saffron. The modern lines of the airport were slightly blurred, sepia-toned by the thick air around them. Yongho saw that he was several hundred meters from the Airport Limousine that would take him to Gimpo airport. Several cabs slowed down speculatively, but Yongho ignored them. Dragging his luggage behind him, he navigated the slightly rough curb, reached the bus and exchanged his luggage and ticket for a seat on the bus. As he waited for the bus to leave, he pulled the cell phone from his pocket and, hand over mouth and cell phone, called his mother.

"Yoboseyo," his mother answered,

"Omma," Yongho replied, than slipping back into English, "I'm at Incheon Airport, waiting to go to Gimpo."

His mother laughed, "Yongo mal, eh? I try leave that in the hagwon and I hope I'm through with it," she paused, "but welcome home!"

"My Korean is rusty," Yongho said, "but it will come back. Anyway, I should be at Gimpo in about an hour, shall I call you when I get there?"

"Yes, son," she replied, "the traffic is likely to be bad. After you get home we can eat. Then we will see your father."

Yongho grunted assent, and flipped his cell phone closed.

Thankfully, the seat next to him stayed empty until the driver entered the bus, closed the door, and slid his bus into the crowded traffic. The bus pulled, in a long slow counter-clockwise arc, away from the airport and onto the broad and flat mix of bay and plains that lay between Incheon and Gimpo. The glassy water was grey, under grey skies, with low grey hills between. The tide was going out and receding waters revealed a slick ashy mud. Occasionally, towards the horizon, there were clusters of small industrial buildings, each sending a column of grey smoke into the air. As the columns rose, they spread and folded into the smudgy sky. As the bus hummed along the highway, a highway built even before there was anyplace for it to go, before Incheon Airport had even existed, a phrase from an old Korean novel floated into Yongho's mind. The phrase was from novelist Ch'oe In-hun, who described a "life in which the lungs are destroyed so that the feet can be comfortable." Yongho put the words out of his mind; they were uncomfortable reminders of his father's cancer. He stared out the dirty window and watched the seemingly endless grey unspool.

The factories reminded Yongho of his childhood. His father had worked in these industrial flats. He would leave home early in the morning, long before Yongho woke up. Father would return late at night, glimpsed occasionally as a vague shadow in a door, a shadow that smelt of soju and cigarettes, as he poked his head in to check on Yongho. Sometimes Yongho heard muffled words, sometimes sharp ones, through the wall, but the ondol floor usually lulled him back to sleep.

Weekends were spent together. In spring and summer the family would pack things up, and travel to the park or plaza, but normally the river. If it rained, they would picnic under the cover of a bridge. Yongho's father would fish, but the family would not eat anything he caught. Yongho's father would puff on a cigarette and explain that the river was too polluted; its fish could not be safely consumed.

Yongho's reminiscences were cut short by a burst of coughing behind him. The coughing concluded and was replaced by a loud honking noise as the man, for surely it was a sound that could not come from a woman, cleared his lungs into his mouth. Then came the muted sound of spitting, and Yongho imagined the man was spitting into his handkerchief. This thought conjured up, in Yongho's mind, images of his father, shrunken and wrinkled, lying in his hospital bed, his damaged lungs straining to expel the future that grew within them.

The bus ground down through its gears as it approached the edge of Gimpo. Traffic was thickening. Yongho, impatient to get to Gimpo airport, squirmed in his seat. Outside the bus, the heavy grey clouds began to disgorge their contents. The traffic got even thicker. Yongho idly played with the seat-back in front of him and checked his cell-phone, even though he knew there was nothing new on it. He dumped the phone back in his jacket.

After a bit, the bus pulled up in front of Gimpo Airport, where it met with one of the thick tentacles of the subway, bus, and taxi system of the greater Seoul area.

The driver got off the bus and Yongho followed him around until he stopped and unloaded the baggage compartment. When the driver was done unloading, he looked around, pulled a cigarette from his pocket, and with cupped hands, lit it. Yongho could see the flare of the lighter reflected on the driver's face, and watched the smoke curl up around the driver's face, and disappear into the grey above.

Yongho retrieved the cellphone from his pocket and called his mother. No answer. No problem, she would see the call and come to the airport. To be safe, he also texted her, "at exit one."

The rain lightened slightly.

Yongho pulled the cigarette from his pocket and gestured at the driver, waiting by the curb. The driver approached.

Yongho held the lone cigarette out to him. When the driver lit it, Yongho took it back and took a long deep drag.

He held the smoke deeply in his lungs, finally let it slide from his lungs, and spat in the gutter.

It was good to be home.

END



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What If?

By Angelee Deodhar

Payal and Ruchit had been in Korea for almost two years now. Ruchit, an IAS officer, had been posted to Seoul after his stint in Japan. They had been married for almost twelve years, and their wedding anniversary was fast approaching. They had no children, and it was painful for Payal to be asked by all her relatives whether she had decided not to have a child, and what the couple was doing about it? Payal wanted to scream, “What can I do?” Her mother-in-law was very kind and kept quiet but Payal could sense the frustration as other people kept asking whether there was any “good news”.

Ruchit had suggested adopting a baby, but Payal couldn't accept the idea of getting someone else's baby. Would she be able to love it enough? Would she mistreat it? What would people say? What if she got her own child after adoption? In a way she was happy she was away from India. Away from the probing, but she was terribly lonely. She loved to walk and explore the city, as Ruchit hardly had time to take her out. Once in a while they did go to the shops and arcades.

Payal had only one Korean acquaintance, Seo-yeon, who lived opposite her flat, and was a translator at the consulate. She had two small children, a four year old boy, Ye-jun, and a two year old girl, Chae-won. Their father, Sung-min, worked as a computer scientist. Seo-yeon often invited Payal to come over for a cup of tea. She shared many of her books on Korean mythology, culture and music, and watched dubbed Hindi movies with her.

Payal's other friend was an elderly Japanese lady, Kimiyo Tanaka, who lived with her husband two floors below Payal's flat. Both were very active in social work, haiku and golf. It was Kimiyo san who introduced Payal to haiku, and ever since Payal learnt about the form. She had begun to write haiku on her own now. Kimiyo san had three daughters who came over with their children, and each time Payal was invited for a cup of green tea and sometimes for lunch. Tanaka san played golf and was also a very good artist. He shared many of his paintings with Payal.

There was just one Indian family, the Singhs, who lived in that building. Mr. Singh was also an official at the consulate, who had recently moved to Korea after a ten year stint in Japan. Mr. Singh spoke fluent Korean and Japanese, but all Mrs. Singh could say was “Arigato” and “Dozo”. Their son, Ankit, was a student, and when he was not studying, he could be seen dancing down the corridor or nodding to his own beat on the iPod, which seemed to be a part of him. Whenever he saw Payal, he would smile and say ‘Yo’! The Singhs, Ruchit and Payal often spent the weekend together.

Payal was very attracted to the temples and went to explore them on her own. She would walk the narrow streets and didn't mind the jostling crowds, the vendors, the color or the noise. It reminded her of India.

Payal was a devout Hindu, a vegetarian and kept her many fasts, but she liked to go to the temple to pray to Mago, the Great Goddess. She prayed fervently to Mago to bless her with a child. Today, as she wandered around the temple complex, watching the koi under the bridge, tears pricked her eyes and she went to sit for a moment behind the temple. All at once she felt someone's presence behind her, but when she looked back there was no one. She got up and walked towards the main shrine last of all as she would be leaving for India the next day. Ruchit would join her later.

She went home and packed, met Seo-yeon and Tanaka san and Imiyo san, who all gave her little presents. Ye-jun and his sister Chae-won gave her a drawing they had made and on which he had laboriously written, "We love you, come back soon".

Next day, at the airport Payal went to explore some duty free shops after checking in her bags. She bought a few presents and a small jade statue of Goddess Mago to keep in the family shrine.

She was pleasantly surprised to find that her seat companion was a young lady from South India going home to her parents. They chatted and exchanged notes about Korea. This lady was a scientist and also had no children.

At the New Delhi Airport, Payal's parents were there to receive her and they gave a lift to Payal's new friend. At home she gave them their presents, and the statue of Mago was put in the family shrine.

The next day, Payal went shopping with her mother to the local mall. While they were in one of the shops, suddenly the whole structure rumbled, the glass windows trembled, and there was a loud explosion. There was panic in the mall, Payal and her mother got out somehow and saw that there had been a blast in the adjacent building. Many cars including theirs had been trapped in the rubble. A few people had been injured but the police was already clearing the site. Payal and her mother came home in a police van. Two hours later there was a phone call from the police who asked them to come down to the station headquarters immediately.

Payal and her father went to the police headquarters and after identifying their car papers, the police chief said, "Madam, while I understand the panic in which you fled the bomb scene, surely you should have given a thought to the infant you left behind!"

Payal said, "What infant?" The police chief said, "The infant in your car, who is now in the neonatal unit. It was lucky one of our staff heard the baby cry and took it to the hospital. One of my staff members will accompany you to claim the child." Payal was dumbstruck and tearful. Her father too, was silent but he quietly pressed her hand to prevent her from saying anything at all.

From the hospital, after signing a few papers, they picked up the little girl who was wrapped in a soft baby blanket. She couldn't have been more than two months old. She was adorable and had beautiful grey brown eyes. She yawned and Payal's heart turned over with love.

When they went home, she found Ruchit had also just arrived. She told him everything. He hugged her tightly and said, "This is wonderful! But according to the law we can't claim this child as our own, What if...?"

Payal put her finger gently to Ruchit's lips to quieten him and led him to the shrine to offer a prayer of thanks. After they had prayed, Payal showed Ruchit the statue of Goddess Mago she had bought and placed in the shrine.

Payal was shocked. This was not the statue she had bought! This Mago was carrying a child...

END

Dr. Ms Angelee Deodhar, an eye surgeon by profession as well as a haiku poet, translator, and artist lives and works in Chandigarh, India. Her haiku, haibun and haiga have been published internationally in various books and journals, and her work can be viewed online too.

To promote haiku in India, she has translated six books of haiku from English to Hindi. These include: If Someone Asks: Masaoka Shiki's Life and Haiku (2005), Classical Haiku: A Master's Selection, edited by Miura Yuzuru (2006), Ogura Hyakunin Isshu: 100 Poems by 100 Poets (2007), Children's Haiku from Around the World-A Haiku Primer (2007), Indian Haiku (2008), and The Distant Mountain: The Life and Haiku of Kobayashi Issa(2009).

She has edited both Journeys and Journeys 2015 an Anthology of International Haibun just released on Amazon has a total of 145 haibun, by 31 poets of international repute.

She is working on Journeys 2016, the third anthology of haibun from around the world.

SOCCER GIRLS

By Linda Black

Park SoDam and Park SooAh played soccer in high school. It's what they did, what they knew, what they were good at; it was who they were. Playing soccer meant leaving your family at a young age in Korea, to board at a school that had their own specialising sports programme for just a select few attendees. Therefore, the little contact they had with their family was through the school pay phones after lunch, for just five minutes; for they were always too tired in the evening after a long day's training. Their parents had sacrificed a lot for them to train at this school, so even though they couldn't show their love by being there in the little moments, SoDam and SooAh knew their parents loved them.

Park SoDam and Park SooAh were good friends. They had only met that year when they both arrived at this new high school, but they had a lot in common and a secret bond. For years both girls, along with other soccer players, had exercised day after day in hot, cold or iffy settings. They had followed the routine of exercise, drills, practice and the dreaded few minimal hours in classes that showed every soccer student just how little they knew compared to their peers.

Park SoDam and Park SooAh, however, both secretly liked these brief ventures into the world of regular students and took that interval to pretend that they were just the same as every other schoolgirl. This was the only period they had to mingle with other pupils or learn snapshots of information on the random subjects that happened to be scheduled that day. Most soccer girls never felt this way or thought these things. They were too preoccupied with the heavy lethargy that overcame them or the latest graphic novel they had borrowed from the library. It was difficult to study with a full-time sports regime, so students and instructors alike dismissed the idea.

Park SoDam and Park SooAh were also uniquely united because they had a natural ability at speaking English. Perhaps it was because so many terms they had to know for games were from that foreign speech, or because some of their favourite players and teams were from nations of that language. Whatever it was, this is what secretly set them apart. To work as a team and succeed, however, soccer students could not have differences such as this. These girls had worked hard all their schooling lives to hide their enjoyment at lessons and their higher ability in English. They had done this well, but still were able to recognise the unsaid passion in each other. It was important to support one another by keeping quiet and only silently acknowledging their shared enthusiasm.

Park SoDam and Park SooAh were soon to be given a new challenge in their schooling lives. For many years, the students specialising in sports did not need to worry about their academic abilities. They could still continue and move forward with their friends without the stress of grades. Of course, this meant that the many who couldn't follow a professional career, to earn money through their discipline, were at somewhat of a loose end when they had to find a job to support themselves or a family. This was not a major concern for SoDam or SooAh, who excelled in their footwork, but their country had noticed the disadvantage and, to many an active young boy and girl's dismay, amended the rules of what was expected of these athletes. They now needed a basic academic education, which worried their teammates.

Park SoDam and Park SooAh, however, had a plan. Almost without thinking, they both knew it was their duty to help everyone else bring their grades up to par. As they glanced at each other during game schedule announcements, they realised there would be little time to study between training, competing and sleeping (in or out of class) before the end of the semester. This is when they silently decided to rendezvous as soon as possible to discuss ideas to put into action. At lunch time, they scoffed their food and dashed out to the phone booths to beat the usual queues. Instead of calling their families, they used the handsets as props for their first incognito action meeting.

Park SoDam said to Park SooAh, "So, what are we going to do?" "Set up a study group," came the reply. "No, no, that won't do! We tried that before; no one will join and the few that come will fall asleep or give us those dazzled looks. We can't just study. We need to teach them. All of them!" exclaimed Park SoDam. "But how do we do that?" Park SooAh pleaded. To all other players, now waiting in line for their own calls to home, it looked like the two Park girls were having significant family discussions. Then swiftly, as the main school bell rang for the rest of the school's lunch, and the last soccer girls filtered by with quering looks, the girls simultaneously put their phones down and skipped off to their dorms for their post lunch snooze.

Park SoDam and Park SooAh tried to sleep on the problem, but no sleep was to be had. They both lay awake on their beds, listening to the snores and chattering of girls in their rooms. Each shared a room with another soccer girl and a plain old student, so no hidden meetings could be had in those locations. Then, Park SooAh had an idea! She always admired the student, Kim SeungHye, who shared a room with her, but was a grade above, making her an older sister to be respected. Park SooAh had always shown her respect by doing extra little chores in the room that should have been Kim SeungHye's responsibility. SeungHye in turn had been kind to SooAh and recognised her understanding of English, which happened to be SeungHye's best subject, so from time to time they would drop an English word into conversations or even pull out full sentences to make a joke about the room. "Thank you," and "You're welcome," were regularly put to use as SeungHye would recognise SooAh's kind actions. Perhaps sister SeungHye could offer advice or assistance for SooAh and SoDam's plan of action.

Park SooAh called Park SoDam into her room as soon as the other soccer girl she shared with went out for a shower that evening. SooAh quickly told SoDam her idea of pleading SeungHye for assistance and they sat on SeungHye's bed together to meet with their older dorm sister.

Kim SeungHye was more than a little surprised to find a different soccer girl in her room, and sitting on her bed. She could tell they were in desperate need, so Kim SeungHye listened carefully to the two Park girls as they explained their situation and sweetly pleaded for any ideas SeungHye would have. She nodded in understanding and scratched her head in contemplation. "The only way to help," SeungHye realised, "is to make it interesting and relevant. We must meet them where they are comfortable. The field!"

Kim SeungHye quickly developed and explained a plan to study while training. Since SoDam was the captain of the first grade quad, she could control the dynamics of practice to test students and teach them during every pass or drill. They would need to do some homework to prepare for each session, but there was a new incentive that made it worthwhile, exciting and interesting. For extra effectiveness, teaching and testing would be done in English. This also, SeungHye noted, would offer cover from any complaints their coach might have, since they could claim that the English was football terms they were practicing, to be just like the National squad. SooAh was impressed that SeungHye knew about National squad practices, and SeungHye took that as a compliment to her intelligent plan. If SooAh was fooled, their coach would be too.

Park SooAh and Park SoDam set about their task. SooAh prepared questions and small facts to call out and teach, while SoDam arranged how she would slot them into practice, with passes and penalty shot opportunities for rewards; then Kim SeungHye reviewed material for relevance and accuracy and all three helped each other with the English. The girls were prepared for their first trial the next day.

Park SoDam started soccer practice the next day by huddling her girls together to lay out their new routines. The girls were used to a quick pep talk at the start of training, so some did not even notice the different content of the talk until her command of ‘Only if you answer the English question correctly, will I pass the ball to you for a kick at the goal.’

The soccer girls took a moment to piece together all this new information. They were not completely happy about it. How were they supposed to answer questions if they had never learned the facts, and how on earth could they do it in English? Park SoDam was a respected captain, but the fear of this new idea far outweighed their love for her. However, with their coach approaching to start the day, they had no opportunity to complain. They got into their drills and attempted a vague repetition of all the phrases SoDam called out as they followed her running, dribbling and knee lift reps.

Park SoDam felt that everything was going fine, until penalty shots. The girls had repeated her chants of facts, which meant they must have the basic knowledge for the questions she would ask before she passed each ball. As the first girl ran up to her and approached her receiving position, Park SoDam called out ‘What is the capital of England?’ A worryingly black face looked at the ball in anticipation, then up to SoDam in frustration. ‘No answer, move along!’ After a few seconds of waving her off, the silent girl finally got the picture that she wasn’t going to get the ball and SoDam decided to recycle the question for the next girl. And then the next. And the next, until the time for penalty shoots was over and not one girl had spoken a word of English, or Korean, to SoDam or SooAh. The rest of the day went clumsily along much in the same way, causing their coach to pull SoDam to the side for a serious talk about the worrying decay in their abilities.

Park SoDam and Park SooAh collapsed in front of an upbeat Kim SeungHye. ‘Wow, I knew you would be tired, but you aren’t you pleased with yourselves?’ SeungHye watched as the girls rolled around on the floor and SoDam began to cry.

Park SooAh explained to Kim SeungHye how the girls kept silent, even though it meant they couldn’t practice what they loved best and, through Park SoDam’s sobs, she tried to whisper the horrible telling off their coach had given at the end of the terrible day.

Kim SeungHye asked exactly what had happened and listened to the detail of every part of practice hoping for some inspiration. Finally she knew the answer. ‘It was too much information in English!’

If they don't know the topics in Korean, how can they tell it to you in English? Tomorrow, teach them in Korean first, then repeat everything in English to show them the words they will already want to use, then they can answer your questions in English.' Park SoDam had calmed down somewhat and was able to sniffle out her reaction, 'But what about the girls who still speak in Korean? They were so upset that we didn't do anything today! I hated not passing the ball to anyone. I think it did more harm than good.'

Kim SeungHye just smiled. 'Then we keep positive. Today, they were surprised. It was a shock to change your usual routine, plus they had to try to listen and understand all this English. It was too much. If they answer anything at all, they should get the ball. But if they answer correctly, in Korean, they get points, and if they answer in English: bonus points!'

Park SoDam and Park SooAh wondered, 'Bonus points for what', but Kim SeungHye had a plan for that. 'Now get to bed girls, you need your rest for tomorrow!'

Park So Dam and Park SooAh woke up the next day and everything started as normal, apart from the sceptical looks on the other girls' faces. This time, everyone paid attention to Park SoDam's morning talk, but she felt nervous about their reaction as she said 'Only if you answer the question, will I pass the ball to you for a kick at the goal. SooAh will keep a note of scores, you get the ball for attempting an answer, if it's correct, however, you get points and if you answer in English you get bonus points. At the end of the week, the girl with the most points wins a special prize for her good attitude to our study regime.'

The soccer girls were still fearful after yesterday's disaster, but with the coach on his way to start and SooAh ready with her paper to note down their achievements, they had no choice but to follow their leaders. They were surprised as they heard information in Korean. At least they could understand what SoDam was calling out during drills today, and a whisper went through the team as one by one they realised that the English she started speaking was the same as what she had just taught them in Korean. Then the time came for penalties and the first girl ran up to her position and SoDam called out in English 'What is the capital of England?' 'London!' She knew it! It was in a rather strong Korean accent, but she knew the answer, got the ball and scored a goal. Success!

Park SooAh smiled at Park SoDam and they knew now that their plan had worked. All was going well. And it continued to go well for a few days, until one day it rained. On a rainy day the soccer girls had two options: clean the gym from one grimy corner to the other, or go to class. Most days their coach didn't even need to ask which the students preferred, as they would usually do anything to avoid the main school building, but on this day, led by the smiling Park SooAh and Park SoDam (positive, keep it positive), hands slowly rose up for the second option. Coach couldn't believe the results, but enjoyed the pride that built up inside him. His soccer girls were clearly more diligent than any others.

The soccer girls separated out into their classrooms for the day and for the first time in a long career as just soccer students, they paid attention to what the teacher said. At least for a little bit. As the day wore on, their attention dwindled, but they made a great effort at the start, and when Park SoDam asked them at lunch what they had learned that day, most were able to recall random pieces of trivia. And to their surprise, earn some more points.

Park SoDam wondered how she could encourage everyone for the last three hours of the day. They were doing so well she really wanted every student to make the most of this time in class, so that they could pass their tests at the end of the school year. Park SooAh, however, was the one to say 'We

need to think the same way in class as we do outside. Everyone get a piece of paper and when you learn a new fact from the teacher, write it down, tear it off and crumple it up like a ball. After class, we will meet and you have to say the fact and then throw the paper into a bucket and I'll keep the score, this will be a bonus prize just for today.' By this time, every girl was aiming hard for the weekly prize. Now they were excited to see what it might be earlier than anticipated.

The soccer girls paid more attention in class than they had ever done and had many other students and teachers marvelling at their new fervour for note taking. At the end of the day, after a rushed dinner, all the girls gathered in the gym and cheered each other on as they threw their notes into the bucket to calculate the winner. Although this time Park SoDam and Park SooAh were eligible to compete, since they had not written the questions themselves, they were much more content to cheer the others on and even hid some of their own notes so that they would not overshadow the outstanding achievements their teammates had made.

Park SoDam and Park SooAh were nervous to announce the prize that Kim SuengHye had invented for them. 'Congratulations, Cho SooBin! You are the winner today. Your prize,' never before had the whole squad been so interested all at the same time, 'is a wish that will last for thirty minutes. You can ask us to do anything you need or want, and we will all help for thirty minutes tonight.' Looks and whispers scattered through the team and the Park girls tried to smile (keep positive) through this terrifying moment. Maybe Kim SeungHye was too optimistic with this extravagant prize. 'Well, what do you want us to do for you?' The voice was one from the middle of the group, and supported by nods and nudges to Cho SooBin. It was a success. And SooBin's room had never looked so good.

The soccer girls went through days, weeks and months of their new study routine. Some girls chose 'clean my room', while others asked for 'a back massage', or 'write a letter to my mother', but each craved it and respected the kindness involved with every half hour at the end of a hard day's class or week of training. Each time there was a problem, Kim SeungHye was there to offer a fantastic solution, such as 'Well, if she keeps winning, ask her to make the questions and be quizmaster', or 'Change the prize to a dare, the winner choses a dare for one or all of the team'. But the best advice of all came a few months down the line. With all this hard work, the fear of failing had begun to worry each soccer girl and they needed some kind of evidence that all their efforts were worthwhile. Kim SeungHye was there to suggest, 'Why don't you ask a teacher to give you a practice test before the final exams?'

Park SooAh and Park SoDam ventured to the teacher's office, a place they usually only went to when they had a problem with their coach, an incident at home or wanted a treat from Mr Woo, such as ice cream. It was very odd to go in there to ask a favour about work, like all the other students. They stood outside the doors and stared at the pictured seating plan hoping that one teacher, they might know, looked friendly enough in their photo and would want to help. After some time, they decided to enter the office and looked around at the busy desks lined with other students anxious about the tests scheduled in four weeks' time. There was just one teacher's desk that did not have any waiting students: the native English teacher, Linda.

Park SooAh poked Park SoDam and pointed to the odd looking lady with curly, basically blonde hair, listening to something on her computer. Park SoDam nodded and while she had slight hopes because of her good rapport with this teacher in class, she was still exceedingly nervous.

Park SooAh and Park SoDam slinked up to the desk and leaned their heads on the partition surrounding it. For a second, Linda looked up at the students to see who was there, and when she realised it was her star soccer

students, she took off her headphones in surprise and delight. Linda always stopped what she was doing when the girls came to visit.

Park SooAh smiled at Park SoDam, so SoDam knew it would be her responsibility to take the lead and explain their request. 'Linda teacher, we have been studying very hard for the final tests.' Linda smiled and nodded. Park SoDam must have said the right words. 'Can you give us a test?'

Park SoDam was frightened at Linda's confused face. A smile took over as Linda asked, 'What kind of test? You already did a speaking test for my class.'

Park SooAh was very proud of her speaking test, so she nodded and suddenly felt confident to speak up, 'Yes, but we need another test. About everything.' Everything. This clearly baffled Linda as much as it had baffled the girls to learn it all. Thankfully, Mr Woo arrived and the girls quickly asked him to explain everything to Linda. He was always chatting to Linda in class, so SooAh knew he would be able to explain easily.

Park SooAh and Park SoDam watched the teachers talk to each other about the situation. Linda had a few questions like, 'Why do you want my help, I don't speak Korean?' and 'How have you learned all this?', but when the girls shared their secret of the bonus English scores, which really had boosted the competitions each day, Linda finally agreed to assist with the help of all their notes. 'Basically all I need to do is arrange your notes into test questions and spend some time with you girls to do the test. When do you need to do it?'

Park SooAh and Park SoDam alerted the soccer girls that they would have a practice test at the end of that very week. Every girl was shocked, but amazingly, each quickly went to work to try to write down everything they could remember from their studies.

The soccer girls read their notes, memorised and tested each other. Some even asked roommates or classmates for studying tips and tried different techniques out. Their favourite was listening to the notes as a recording while they slept, but all agreed that this was the least effective, even though one girl did dream that she was taking the test and passed.

On the day of the test, the soccer girls walked into the assigned classroom as the bell for afterschool classes rang. Each girl had her pen, pencil, eraser and whiteout ready on their desk. All were silent, except for the taps from their fingers and some from their toes. After a few moments, Linda walked in with a whole bunch of paper and a bright, encouraging smile. 'Are you ready girls?' They looked to one another, unsure if they should answer; this was not the normal teacher attitude from any other test they had taken. Linda actually looked confident that maybe these girls could achieve something, not sympathetic that they had to sit through some test time, and handed out a paper to each one of them, not missing one out in expectation of their lack of interest. This test was real. It was for them. Now they had to try something.

Park SooAh and Park SoDam were the first to finish their papers and walk them up to Linda's desk. They were excited by the smile they received upon submission and wished they could give something like that to their sisters still sitting, scribbling or reading away. Unfortunately, they were under strict instructions to leave, but that didn't stop them standing and pacing outside the room for the fifteen minutes left of test time.

Cho SooBin was the first to join them, but she was soon followed by many more and as the last girl exited, a cheer began, with all the girls hugging, high-fiving, dancing and clapping. The noise was so outrageous, that a few teachers popped their heads out of the classrooms nearby; angry that their student study had been disturbed. This did not dampen the girls' excitement, and though they had to be quiet, they still celebrated with huge smiles and hugs all through the hall, down the stairs, out the door and up to their dorms.

Linda was happy to hear their celebrations, but she had a massive task ahead of her; grading all those papers. It took a while, but as she scribbled the number on the final exam and circled it, she breathed a sigh of relief. 'They've done it.'

Park SooAh and Park SoDam came out from their lunch in the cafeteria a few days later to call their families. They were both nervous to call, since the recent phone calls were an eager plea from their parents to hear their practice grades. They both wished they had never explained to their parents what they had been up to all these weeks, even though they understood that each mother and father of every soccer girl was overly proud of all the extra studies they had all achieved. As they reached the pay phones, the first thing they noticed was the lack of a queue. They were sure they would have to push for a quick call among all the other players. Then they noticed a bustle of sports kits over by the dormitories, but closer to the teachers' office. Could it be? Were the grades posted already? Linda had told them she would check all grades with Mr Woo before the final approval. They were sure it would take at least a week, since all teachers were busy with making the school's final tests.

The soccer girls crowded by the doors near the staff room all turned at once and ran up to the two Park girls. 'You look first!', 'Tell us what happened!', 'We can't look, it's too scary!' came the cries from each and every girl, except Cho SooBin who was already in tears. Park SooAh looked at Park SoDam and they both ventured back to that office, possibly more nervous than the first time they went to ask for Linda's help. But ask they did, and now they had the results; quite varied, some only just passing, but they had! 'We've done it!' It is hard to compare the screams from the relief of finishing their test and those of elation from passing it all together, but perhaps, if you count the rejoicing from the hearts and minds of all the teachers in that room, you could hear a roar louder than any you've heard before.

END



Linda Black is a Scriptwriting MA graduate from the University of East Anglia, England. Originally from Northern Ireland, she now teaches English at a university in South Korea where she loves finding unique cafes to write in. Her novella can be found at <http://elsiebblog.blogspot.kr/p/free-novella-project.html>

Flight – By Dr. Bill De Armond

A misty silence shrouds my rice field

And I sit on my heels

comfortable in the slight morning breeze

a mute observer

The wind gently moves over the reeds

the faint sound of running water

the croak of a lonely frog

Time stands still

Then

Silently as a kite pulled into the sky

A large white crane

as if impervious to gravity

rises from its hidden resting place

Hovering against the green terrace

a picture painted for a tourist

a specter from a primordial past

The ancient coexisting with the present

And

In an ever-so-slow motion

of a rustling of wings unfolded

it ascends into the air

Flying off to the next paddy

bearing my spirit away

Dr. Bill DeArmond is Professor of Mass Communications and Film at Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas. He served as Program Director of AFKN-TV in Seoul, taught at Meongji University and directed two plays at the Korean National Theater.

The Joys of Summer

By Esthere Jean



This photograph shows the many locals and vacationers enjoying the sea at Jeju Island.



I shot the picture of the boy hula hooping at the Namyang traditional village in Suncheon. He was in his own world as he whirled those hoops.



The people running along the beach were enjoying the sun on a beach in Namhae last summer.



Esthere Jean is an African-American and has lived in Gwangyang, South Korea for two years teaching English in a public elementary school. She has always enjoyed capturing small pieces of real life on camera. Korea is an amazingly beautiful country and she loves capturing small moments of that beauty.

Visit her at <http://ebonyamazon.blogspot.kr/>

In the Glorious Calm – *By Manen*













Manen is a Chinese, foreign student at Chungnam National University, in Daejeon, South Korea. In her free time, she enjoys doing crafts. Manen recently discovered a love of photography, and captures all her images on the iphone6. In the future, Manen wants to learn more about photography and travel around the world. Manen speaks several languages, including English, Japanese, Chinese and Korean.

Visit her on [Instagram](#).



[Please Look After Mom](#) – By Kyung-Sook Shin

A review by Emily Slagel

Please Look After Mom, a novel by the popular South Korean author Kyung-Sook Shin, sold over a million copies within the first year of its release. Critically acclaimed internationally, it is the first of Kyung-Sook Shin's books to be published in English.

The novel tells the story of a family desperately searching for its missing mother, Park So-nyo, after she is separated from her husband in the crowded Seoul Subway Station. The story follows the shocked and devastated emotional responses of the husband and children as they deal with personal regrets and guilt caused by their treatment of the woman they called “wife” and “Mom.”

For those readers seeking a fast-paced and emergent plot, this is not the book for you. There is no heart-pounding action. The plot does not move forward quickly, if at all. It is, instead, a novel rooted in the world of self-reflection and internal character development which follows a single catastrophic event.

In reading this novel, one is given a look into the very real divide between an older generation who survived the Korean War, and the young, working generation of today. Many do not understand the troubling reality which was Korea when the war finally ended; poverty prevailed, people lived in fear, and had no means of survival except the use of their own hands. “Mom” is of this generation. This generation worked and toiled to educate their children, making their children's lives better than their own. Through hard work, this generation brought their third world country into a first world economy. Even today, when walking through the streets of Seoul, you will see the elderly working to clean their streets. You will see old men collecting cardboard boxes to be recycled and older women selling their vegetables in the market. Many forget that it is on the backs of these elders' efforts that a country torn by war is given new life.

Within the novel, Mom's children, like so many others, become consumed by the now fast-paced society. Their lives revolve around jobs, friends, and homes. They do not have to think of the struggles their mother experienced when making them strong.

In *Please Look After Mom*, Kyung-Sook Shin is giving us a cautionary tale of remembrance. She tells of the need to remember one's history and roots in an ever-shifting and changing society. It is not an anti-feminist and anti-modernist story, as a Western reader might believe, but instead a tale of a pleading demand for one to remember those toiling roots which brought their society so far.

Kyung-Sook Shin tackled this cautionary tale by writing in the much avoided second-person voice. This is an unusual directness in Korean speech and writing. This voice adds an extra edge to the story, causing the reader to feel as if they are being condescended and lectured to because this is not only a tale of a family, but also a reminder and lesson to the reader.

Though the story gives a truly heartbreaking and a fully fleshed depiction of a shifting Korean culture, it does leave much to be desired in logical believability. The novel begins with what seems to be a very human depiction, a family struggling with remorse and loss, but becomes befuddled and lost behind the absurdly saint-like character of “Mom.” It seems all of nature, including puppies, fields, orphans, babies, and the poor found her hands to be those of healing. In other words, “Mom” was too good. She becomes unrelatable as the novel progresses, making her character frustrating and a hindrance to the reader. Her extreme selflessness is a loving attribute, but as the novel continues, it becomes ridiculous, even more so because her family members are the only ones to be blind toward the value of this woman.

Overall, *Please Look After Mom* was a highly enjoyable, but saddening, novel because of its culturally educating intent and its endearingly thoughtful nature. As I read, I continuously thought of my own mother. I often would find myself questioning my own actions throughout childhood and wondering how happy my mother is. Much of the novel’s popularity stemmed from its thoughtful and cautionary lesson against forgetting the importance of love and remembering ones roots.



Emily Slagel holds a bachelor’s degree in the Liberal Arts from St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland. She also is certified to teach English as a second language. Currently, Emily lives and works in Daejeon, South Korea. Outside of her love of literature, Emily is an avid swing dancer and rower.

