

# THE LONELY FOREIGNER

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## *Inside the Jjimjjilbang*

The signs outside advertise them as 24-hour bath houses. Even if you can't read *hangeul* yet, you can identify them by the graphic: wavy lines rising from what looks like a bowl of soup. As you hand over 12,000 won to the *ajumma* receptionist, you wonder if you had just paid good money to get simmered in kimchi-flavored broth. You've been looking forward to a good Swedish massage but even basic *masaji* is probably beyond your budget. Maybe a body scrub. Only a month in Korea and already, this cold snap in the middle of spring has given you scales where skin used to be.

You are given a numbered locker key dangling from a springy plastic bracelet. It's too large for your wrist, so you slip it around your ankle. You take off your shoes, open the door to the women's wet room, and look around for an attendant to hand you a robe and towel. You find none. What welcomes you instead is a seven-foot phallus carved from driftwood and polished to a high gloss. The artist was faithful to the wood's original shape so that upon closer inspection, you realize that the sculpture is actually a gigantic penis with smaller penises of varying sizes sprouting all over it.

There are no attendants in this bath house. Walking in, you realize there are no robes or towels either. Everyone around you is either stark naked or in the process of getting there:

flat-chested teenage girls giggling behind their hands, wide-hipped *ajummas* with green eyebrows tattooed halfway up their foreheads, young women with perky yet strangely immobile boob jobs. You find it very hard not to stare.

Every one of them is bow-legged as a wrestler, with hair much bushier than you could have imagined. Every one of them is staring back at you, the only foreigner, and the only fully dressed person in the room. Your tiny locker reveals a sliver of waxy soap and a thin towel folded into a neat square. It is barely large enough to cover your face. You strip down quickly under the watchful gaze of no less than fifteen Korean women.

It is the *ajummas* you find most fascinating. You know them by their grim expressions, shapeless polyester clothing, and the plastic visors perched over the kinky perms they wear like a birthright. They shove and elbow their way into the subway, they ladle *mandoo* soup at the cafeteria. Here, they seem a different creature altogether. Some are toweling off vigorously, causing pale mountains of flesh to bounce and jiggle and judder and flap. Others squat on the floor, washing voluminous nylon underpants. Many are working lather and suds into the many gathers and folds of their wrinkled, quivering bodies. In the open shower stalls, row upon row of sagging breasts gleam moistly like overripe fruit, globes collapsing softly into themselves. Seems like an entire nation had pushed its way out of these wombs.

Your body scrub is presided over by yet another stone-faced *ajumma*, one of three women here permitted to wear a uniform of black lace bra and matching panties. She looks strangely familiar, as old people invariably do. She rubs a thick paste of medicinal herbs all over your body, avoiding the tattoo on your hip which she frowns at disapprovingly, and proceeds to skin you alive using a green scouring pad that looks exactly like the kind used on bathroom tiles.

Methodically, she moves from limb to torso to limb, removing as many layers of skin as humanly possible. She doesn't say a word during the entire procedure. Every so often, she stops and prods you with a stubby finger. It is a signal for you to open your teary eyes. Proudly, she offers you a peek at the scouring pad, showing just how much *libag* has been sloughed off your skin. It is the only time you ever see her smile, her gold tooth glinting in the half-light. Clearly, the woman loves her job. As she rubs your right calf raw, you realize she looks exactly like Edith Tiempo.

### *Queen of the Sky*

Walking up to her room on the fourth floor, you try to figure out what this summons could be about. After almost two months of picking up her fallen pencils in language class, breaking her *manwon* bills into *obekwon* coins for the laundry machines, getting her milky coffee from the vending machine downstairs, even ordering and tasting her food in restaurants to be absolutely sure no trace of *babi* sullies her halal way of life, you know by now that true to her name, Cinta has a way of getting what she wants.

Sometimes she plays the age card, where you do her a favor out of respect for someone older by two-and-a-half years. Other times, she half-apologizes for needing help yet again by reminding you that her gay personal assistant back in Jakarta always does this particular task for her. When she decides to make it an all-out campaign, she turns on the charm—the smiles, the little notes, the gifts, the compliments—a kind of cheerful psychic arm-twisting that lasts the better part of a week, eventually sapping you of any willpower to say no. But it's hard to stay mad at Cinta.

The key is to filter out the chatter. Though you find it pleasant in small doses, reminiscent of your Lola's garrulous Ilongga maids, it sometimes keeps you from seeing her as the sweet, kind, and generous person she probably is. But subtlety is not her

strongest suit. Always she introduces herself as a novelist with thirty books under the pen name Ratna Raja, working as CEO of her own publishing house, with thousands of readers all over Indonesia, including migrant workers abroad, to encourage ordinary people especially women to find their voice through writing novels, and establishing reading centers in *kampung*s all over Java, so that even children like her daughter Cantik who is only nine but already published a book when she was only eight could fulfill their dreams to become writers.

It's hard to get a word edgewise, even if you're just chatting on Instant Messenger. The spelling conventions of chat, Bahasa, *hangeul*, and romanized Korean often lead to some very mangled messaging. By the time you figure out what she's saying, she has fired off three other messages at you:

HELLO

⊙⊙⊙⊙⊙⊙⊙

:-p

KIPUNICUHAYO?

PLS COME TO MY RM OK?

I HAV BIGBIG FAVOR PLS.

TNX SIS!!

You knock on 405 and expect to see a small woman wearing a jilbab, the traditional headscarf worn by Indonesia's conservative Islamic women. In Cinta's case, the veil is often a bright pastel pink-and-yellow satiny affair held in place by long plastic-jewel-tipped pins. Today, however, the drapes in her room are drawn, and the lights switched off. Her laptop's LCD display glows quietly from her table, throwing flickering blobs

of color on the wall: as always her screensaver is a slideshow of her children's crinkly, gap-toothed smiles.

Through the gloom, you see her for the first time as nature intended, and it comes as a shock. You expect veiled women to have hair the same length as their veils; the mind fills in the negative space. Instead, you make out a small figure with a fuzzy, rumpled grown-out buzz cut and a pair of scissors waving you in the direction of the bed, the only place to seat guests in Cinta's dorm room. You barely recognize her.

Before you can sit down, she has handed you two packets of IndoMie instant noodles from the foreign food grocery in Itaewon, her de facto bribe-slash-peace offering, and tells you how happy-sad she is because she just finished chatting with her children on Skype and you know how that always makes her cry. But plenty good news: Her son got a perfect score in his math test today and little Cantik the nine-year-old novelist has decided to take on the veil, even without her mother's prodding, and that's a wonderful thing, yes? At a very young age, she is already very mature and serious about protecting her virtue and offering it to the God. But Cinta tells you how very sad it is also because Cantik has the most beautiful curls, nicer than yours, but of course yours is nice also.

And then she leans forward and asks if you can do her a big-big favor and cut her hair. It is almost summer and the weather is becoming hot, very itchy under the *jilbab* if her hair grows too long. It is so very important that a woman, someone she trusts, should cut it. Since the day Cinta took on the veil, no man except her husband and no women except her closest friends have ever seen her uncovered. She touches your hand. She hands you the scissors. She waits for your answer. In this crucial matter, there is no place for charm or wheedling.

You stand up quickly, shaking your head. You can't, sorry. It's too much, too big a responsibility. You place the scissors back

on her table. You leave the packets of instant noodles on her bed. She is so surprised, she sits down slowly in that darkened room and for once doesn't say anything. You turn, opening the door as quietly as you can, and leave. But even before the door closes behind you, you regret your decision. It will be four more months before Cinta sees her children again. And by then, Cantik's curls will be under the veil, hidden away from the world, unseen even by her own mother.

### *Panic Attacks*

It's the Fourth of July and as a proud American, Jon wants to buy all of you lunch at the Italian restaurant along Chamsarigil. He strides into the airconditioned coolness on his long Scandinavian legs and folds himself into the booth. At six-foot-four, one-fifty pounds, he is also the tallest, skinniest, blondest human being you've ever met. He is the youngest in your ragtag group of more-than-neighbors-sort-of-friends and the token white guy in a loose circle of browns and yellows. Unlike the semi-educated, overmedicated, beer-swilling Yanks pretending to teach English at *hagwons* all over Seoul, Jon is an anthropology major at U-Dub, prefers sake, and pops only one kind of happy pill.

He is late coming from the Western Union at Itaewon, where his parents wire him a weekly allowance. As always, he gripes about having to take the subway all the way to frickin' Itaewon just to get his money. Why can't Western Union have a branch that he can walk to? Like Anam Sagori or maybe even Jongno? He'd be willing to walk all the way to Jongno—anything but the subway to Itaewon, which is the total ass-crackin' pits with all those sleazy bars and old fat hairy-back white guys looking for jailbait Asian pussy.

You've heard most of it all before. The subway angle, however, is fairly new. Because he's so tall, Jon has to scrunch a little to get into the subway car. Once in, the scowling and the stares

begin. Foreigners are a prime target for dagger looks, especially foreigners who defy Korean expectations. In Jon's case, Korean guys feel compelled to express anti-American nationalism by glowering at white boys taller than they could ever be. Happens every single time, he tells you. It's like being under constant attack. It makes him kinda want to go home.

You're all hungry but you hold off ordering. Something is clearly wrong with Jon today: he fiddles with the amber prescription bottle which he usually keeps in his shirt pocket. The day you met, you ask him what's in the bottle. It's private, he says in that prissy tone young liberal-democrat American hipsters can sometimes have. You're not prying, you just like hearing the chemical names: tetrahydrozoline, diphenhydramine, phenolphthalein—they sound like alien lobotomy devices. So he tells you, and you Google it up to discover a new name for Prozac.

Fluoxetine: a treatment for depression, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or bulimia. Balances the levels of serotonin in the brain. Side effects: headache, insomnia, and nausea. Explains all those walks he takes around the neighborhood at two in the morning. Also explains Jon's panic over North Korea's botched missile launch into the Sea of Japan, and the obsessive watching of news banners flashing on CNN.com. He talks of nothing else these days. Seems almost silly to the rest of you. Except that the missiles from the north are real.

In the restaurant, while waiting for the risotto, the pasta, the two kinds of pizza, you bombard each other with the latest numbers divined from whatever news website you were looking at that morning. Tenzin meditates on the supposed bad aim of the Dear Leader's engineers. Kalinga is certain the civil war at home will be bloodier if the Tamils get their hands on similar weapons. You wonder which of the nine US army installations in Seoul will get attacked first, and how far away the bases could be from where you are.

Jon, who has calmed down a little from today's subway trauma, takes a deep breath and announces that if anything really, *really* bad happens, his folks can wire money for plane tickets out of there ASAP, for him and any of his friends who may need help. You all thank him, but you also silently hope it won't come to that.

When the food arrives, you all dig in. Only then does Jon bring up the fact that every Korean around you—in the other booths and tables, or those walking their dogs down the street—is acting like nothing's the matter. It's been bugging you too. You had talked to Mincheol, your *dowoomi* buddy-helper, about this the day before: Why is everyone in South Korea (except for you silly foreigners) behaving like it's normal to have missiles aimed at you?

Having just finished his mandatory two years of military service, Mincheol pointed out that, yessokay, it is true. Many missiles aimed at Seoul. Foreigners always forgetting Korea is still at war. Is normal. Missiles have been aiming at Seoul for past fifty years! If North Korea wants to destroy, they can do it in five minutes! North Korea will not bomb because North and South are same. All Korean. So: No problem. (None of this makes you feel any better.)

After lunch you go back to the dorm and make your way to the rooftop, the three guys lugging up several kilos of cold watermelon behind you. It's blazing hot, even under the tarp, and the concrete roof throws the sun's heat back up at it. You can see the heat rising in waves all around you. No wind. No cloud. The sky is a singular burning blue. No one says a word but you all look northward, at the mountains behind the university's Main Hall. You all remember just how close you are to the border, and to the half-country that lies beyond it, where the missiles are.

## *Dreaming Lhasa*

All Tibetan boys are named Tenzin. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso has decreed it. The name means 'upholder of teachings,' exactly what the government-in-exile at Dharamsala feels everyone needs to do if Tibet is to survive China's brutal occupation. This is what your filmmaker friend Tenzin tells you as you trudge downhill, crunching through an entire hillside of dry leaves, listening to birdsong, fleeing the choreographed insanity that is Korea University's Sports Day for the more civilized watering holes of Chamsari-gil. It being Tuesday, the forthcoming breakfast of coffee-and-donuts is on you.

It is a long walk from Astroturf football field to coffee shop through seemingly endless wooded hills but you don't mind. Neither of you has been in this part of the campus before, high above and set apart from the main KU complex by forested areas and woodland. Apart from the occasional twittering, some rustling of undergrowth, and the whoosh of leaves overhead, it is quiet. At 8 AM, the morning chill is gone but the sun's heat has yet to penetrate the thick canopy of trees surrounding you. This time of day, you decide, smells of young leaves and wildflowers. Like mornings in Sagada spent picking mulberries by the side of the road. A country away, an entire lifetime ago. But it is difficult to be sad here, now. The warm colors of summer are a welcome change from your usual gray dorm-room view of Jegi-dong's rooftops and narrow alleys.

He walks quite a distance ahead of you, clearly knowing what to do when the earth slopes under his feet. There is a bounce to his step: all of this reminds him of home. Which one? Tibet? No, Dharamsala. They lived near the Dalai Lama, and visited him often. There are woods exactly like this behind the house where he grew up. He would just take off by himself for hours at a time. He learned to be alone early on. Because we are always alone.

In Dharamsala, he tells you, he attended a school where teachers were expected to beat their students. Parents would say, please beat my son if he doesn't learn his lessons. He got beaten quite often. It was terrible. Things are better now, he hears.

He pairs his vintage Batman t-shirt and khaki cargos with a Patek Philippe watch, a gift from his dad. Gold, with diamonds on the face of it. It stopped working a while back and he can't be bothered getting it fixed. How is his dad? Oh, he's quite old, in his seventies. Used to be an architect before he retired. Followed the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959. He doesn't tell you what his father did back in Lhasa, perhaps he doesn't know. He remembers many things this morning: When he was twelve, he almost drowned in a lake in Switzerland while vacationing with his family in Vevey. His sister saved him from drowning.

You ask him what Tibet is like. He doesn't know. He's never been there. He thinks you should both hurry. It's getting hot. And he's hungry.

### *Terrorists*

The day Kalinga's girlfriend broke up with him, he stopped shaving. Hashini, a pretty enough candidate for being the chubbiest stewardess to fly with SriLankan Airlines, traded him up for a Tamil banker based in London. She didn't tell him immediately, of course. First, she had to break the news to her mother. Who then told his mother. Who in turn told his sister. Who finally told him. Of course, by the time the message reached Kalinga, Hashini had been living in the Tamil banker's townhouse for fifteen days and was therefore able to obtain a Mayor of London's permit to marry the guy. Needless to say, it broke poor Kalinga's heart.

At least that's what you think happened. You're not too sure because when upset, Kalinga speaks a mixture of English, Korean, and Sinhalese. Whatever it is that actually happened,

it's clear that the girlfriend dumps him, he stops shaving, and now his face is all bushy. It's not a good look for him. To cheer him up, and to celebrate his 26th birthday, the whole gang takes him clubbing one Friday night in August around Hongdae.

The night starts well enough with a fried-chicken-and-beer dinner at the Samsung Chicken House near KU. After that, a quick subway ride to the club district near Hongik University. The Hip Hop Club doesn't appeal to anyone, not even to the Kazakh museum curator who insists on doing the Roger Rabbit and the Running Man over and over again. After chugging down the complimentary beer, you all move to another club for some techno. An hour of billiards at Tin Pan leads to everyone sharing two pitchers of yogurt-flavored soju and gnawing on the biggest dried squid in Korea. At around midnight, you all make your way to Club M2.

Your city guidebook calls M2 an electronica club favored by the expat crowd, which translates to corpulent pimply army brats, young Caucasian English teachers on the prowl, hordes of loud Korean Americans, international students, and random *oeguk saram* like you. So you all stand in line and each hand over *manwon* after flashing your passports and alien IDs to the Korean-American bouncer. When he sees Kalinga, however, the bouncer retreats, hisses rapid Korean into a phone, and returns to make a special announcement.

Since your passports and IDs are in order, he says, y'all can enter and boogie with the best of 'em. All except that dark skinny guy over there, the one with the beard. Sorry, folks—manager's orders. Sure he's a nice guy and all but after 9/11 and terrorism, the folks inside might get upset, 'specially as there's a war in Eye-rack and everything.

When you protest, saying you're all artists and guests of the Korean government, the bouncer just shakes his head and gives back everyone's money. Even as you eye one another to

see who should translate this debacle for the birthday boy, it is clear Kalinga has gotten the message. He starts walking slowly toward the bus stop and doesn't say another word to anyone in the half hour it takes to get home.

You wake up the next day still queasy from the vile mix of dairy, dried squid and alcohol, but glad that Saturday involves nothing more pressing than breakfast at 2 PM. Staggering into the *sikdang* beside the dorm, you find a clean-shaven Kalinga brooding over a *budae jjigae*, the stomach-turning US army stew of noodles, sticky *tteok* rice cakes, mystery meat, fermented spice paste, sausage links, bright red hotdog slices, and big chunks of Spam floating in the murky broth. You fight a wave of nausea and slide onto the seat across him.

Without the scruffy beard, Kalinga looks ten years younger. He seems back to his normal self, except for the silence and the severe weight loss. You ask where everyone is. Still sleeping, he says. Everybody tired. He says nothing more so you order breakfast.

Looking down, you notice him meditatively turning the ring on his finger. A gift from his sister. There's a diamond set in deep yellow gold, a tiny chip maybe half a carat, but a diamond still. Finally, he starts talking. He tells you about a big tree, very old, in his hometown of Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka's first capital and most sacred city, the birthplace of Sinhala civilization. Beautiful, he says. Statues of the Buddha, many old temples, dating back to 380 BC. Growing up in that town, he has seen the beautiful destroyed by Tamil Tigers over the years. He tells you Tamil bad people, make civil war. *Nappeun saram*. Terrorist.

Before film school in Korea, he didn't go to college. He became famous quite young for winning a painting contest. His entire family, including his married sisters, moved to Colombo to be with him. Kalinga was apprenticed out of high school by a filmmaker, learning on the job.

One day, they are filming a pre-election rally in Colombo when the Tamils attack. The suicide bomber detonates a few meters away from where Kalinga stands. During the blast, the video camera flies out of his grip and smashes into an old woman. She lies twisted on the pavement, not moving. Everything is quiet.

He picks himself up and notices his hands are shaking. He is barefoot. He looks for his sandals, finds them. He picks away the pulpy remains of someone's eye from between his toes, puts on his shoes. There is so much blood, the street is like the floor of a slaughterhouse. But everything is so still, so quiet.

Kalinga walks the two-mile road back to his family's house, covered in blood. By the time he reaches home, some of it has dried and crusted the corners of his mouth. Some of it flakes from the tips of his eyelashes. His mother runs out, thinking he is hurt. There is so much blood. Her mouth is open. He cannot hear her screaming. He is deaf for three days after the blast. He is only eighteen.

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