

American English

A Teacher's Journey in Seoul, South Korea

Sample: Chapter 34

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One Friday night after work, Joe convinced me, against my better judgement, to go with a few of his students to the Pharaoh Club at the Hilton Hotel, which was Korea's hippest disco. I had heard that those hotel nightclubs were really expensive, and I hate the kind of pop dance music I knew they played. Still I went anyway. The reason? The students Joe was going with were all single women. He further enticed me by saying that one of the girls was very interested in me after seeing me talking with him in the hall.

To start things off, we went to a soju bang to get drunk cheaply. One of the two girls Joe introduced me to at the soju bang was gorgeous. Unfortunately, the other girl (the one who liked me) was only mildly cute, and I wasn't very attracted to her. Joe tried to be very manly and kept getting me to do "one shots" of soju, but the girls weren't drinking much.

We took a cab to the Pharaoh and met the other two girls from Joe's class there. The girl Joe was interested in was very pretty, and her English was remarkable. The doormen outside the Pharaoh scrutinized us before they let us in. I heard that sometimes the doormen are tough, and they especially don't like to admit soldiers because of the fights they tend to get into. The bouncers at "Rock Cafes" (discos for younger adults) typically don't let in anyone over the age of twenty-five. They make an exception for foreigners, though.

The nightclub's atmosphere was impressive. It was dark and done up like an Egyptian tomb. But I hated the pounding beat of disco music that made everyone shout at each other in order to have the simplest of conversations.

My apprehensions about the nightclub were realized when the girls said that, in order to sit at one of the tables (which they wanted to do), we had to buy at least one bottle of alcohol. The girls didn't care what it was, since they were only drinking a little. Joe insisted on a bottle of Jim Beam, which cost 140,000 won (\$175). I couldn't believe it. Knowing that we were in it for the long haul, Joe and I both started to drink up. Joe was busy seducing his former student, Raquel, and I started to come on to her beautiful friend with uncommonly big eyes and a tight, red sweater.

Her name was Haesoo, and she wanted nothing to do with me. Joe told me that both her parents had died in a car accident, that she lived with her brother, and that she had mental problems. Her English was terrible, so I had a good chance to practice my Korean on her. With my tongue nice and lubricated, I spoke well, and I know she understood everything I said because she answered me. However, unlike other Koreans, who almost always gushed and were amazed whenever I said a single word of their language, Haesoo couldn't have cared less.

I asked her to dance with me, and Haesoo agreed. But when a slow song started and I was about to wrap my arms around her, she trotted back to our table on her big, clopping shoes. Not taking a hint, I asked Haesoo for her phone number.

"I live with my brother and he won't like foreigners calling," she said.

"Okay. I'll give you my phone number."

"I don't call," she said in English.

Joe apparently was having some success with Raquel, but he was only laying the groundwork. Later he told me that within a year, the girl was planning to go to college in Seattle in order to become an opera singer.

The girls didn't give us much help with the Jim Beam, and thank god we didn't finish the whole bottle between the two of us; Joe carried it out of the club just before we took the cab home.

The next day, Joe and I had reservations for the USO tour of Panmunjom and the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Panmunjom is just a small town, but it's the site for the peace negotiations between North and South Korea.

Despite the late night, we met early in Joe's room to drink some breakfast beers. I drank the beer; Joe did shots of Jim Beam. I knew it would be much better to be drunk for the tour than horribly hung over.

The tour left the USO at eleven o'clock. Most of the forty or so tourists seemed to be older civilians, or related to the military somehow. Per the informational handout we all got when we signed up for the tour at the USO, nobody wore jeans. Women were not permitted to wear miniskirts or form-fitting stretch pants. The US military wanted everyone dressed conservatively because, they claimed, the North Koreans sometimes used pictures of decadent Westerners in their anti-American propaganda. Military personnel on the tour were required to wear civilian clothes, and everyone had to bring their passport. We were allowed to bring cameras and binoculars, but there were some areas in the military installation where no pictures were permitted. Also, we had to wear tourist identification badges clipped to our coats.

We had a charming tour guide who filled us in on some of the history of the demilitarized zone. She pointed out some boring things along the hour-long, forty-mile bus ride, but all I saw were a bunch of rice paddies. The name of the US Army camp nearby is Camp Bonifas, and their motto is "In front of them all!" The installation along the border that we went to is known as a NATO Joint Security Area.

The bus stopped at a bar in Panmunjom that also sold T-shirts and other gifts so tourists could prove they were there and a witness to the crux of the horrible situation that divided the country. Joe and I bought shot glasses. We drank a couple beers at the bar waiting for our army escort. Joe and I were in good spirits, always making tasteless jokes, but we kept ourselves under control. Unfortunately, the cute Korean tour guide couldn't come with us to the Joint Security Area; it was off-limits to Korean nationals. She had to wait for us at the bar.

When Joe and I got back on the bus, we had a new guide: a young, enthusiastic soldier. After the bus arrived at the base, he

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briefed us on the history of the demilitarized zone. We were required to sign an exciting form stating that we understood various things about the Joint Security Area. The form started out like this:

1. The visit to the Joint Security Area at Panmunjom will entail entry into a hostile area and possibility of injury or death as a direct result of enemy action. The Joint Security Area is a neutral but divided area guarded by United Nations Command military personnel on the one side (South), and Korean People's Army personnel on the other (North). Guests of the United Nations Command are not permitted to cross the Military Demarcation Line into the portion of the Joint Security Area under control of the Korean People's Army. Although incidents are not anticipated, the United Nations Command, the United States of America, and Republic of Korea cannot guarantee the safety of visitors and may not be held accountable in the event of a hostile enemy act.

The fact is that incidents have occurred over the years leading to deadly shoot-outs and skirmishes in the area, but tourists were never involved in any of these.

After the briefing and signing our lives away, we got back on the bus and drove through another checkpoint. A hulking American guard jumped on the bus and walked slowly up and down the aisle as he inspected us. The bus was absolutely quiet. When he got back to the front of the bus, the guard saluted us and unexpectedly yelled, "In front of them all!"

Joe and I looked at each other, wide-eyed, both thinking, "What the hell is this?" Then we laughed. Because of the alcohol and our morning hangover euphoria, we were excited, happy, and giddy. This was also caused by the tension in the DMZ atmosphere. While I was enjoying myself, my paranoid side expected some horrible incident to happen while we were there (and probably caused by Joe and me). I expected the bus to be bombed.

The international press was, at this time, talking about the severe famine in the North. The emaciated North Korean children in the news looked just like Ethiopian famine victims that everyone was talking about in the early 80s. There were rumors of

cannibalism, and new mothers being told to eat their afterbirth for nutrition. At the same time, there was a buildup of troops along the DMZ and great ceremonies in Pyongyang (the capital of North Korea) celebrating the end of mourning for their “great leader,” Kim Il-Sung, and the official succession of his son, Kim Jong-Il. Political scholars were trying to predict what was going to happen to the North, whether the nightmare regime would just collapse or they would make a desperation attack on the South, streaming over the mined DMZ, into South Korea, towards Seoul.

Meanwhile, the winter sky of our visit offered the typical weather for that time of year; clear, crisp, bright, and dry. This afforded us a good view of Propaganda Village, which we viewed from right near the border.

Nobody lives in Propaganda Village; all the buildings are empty, except for an extensive loudspeaker system that broadcasts anti-American, communist propaganda in Korean and sometimes English every night. We stood staring into North Korea near the Bridge of No Return, which links the two countries. Along the hills on the northern side were large billboards with “Yankee Go Home” written in Korean. In the midst of Propaganda Village stood a flagpole from which hung the largest flag in the world. On a windy day, we were told, one could hear the cracking sound of the flag flapping.

Around the area we were in stood unusually large Republic of Korea guards from the South who looked impressive and intimidating. They all stood with their feet shoulder width apart and their fisted hands near their hips, a Tae Kwon Do stance known as “ROK Ready.” I usually thought the most unfortunate thing about Koreans was their xenophobia, but that day I felt like we were on the same side.

The most intense part of the day, the one that really captured the hopelessness and sadness of the whole situation, was the time spent in the meeting room, exactly on the border between the North and South. We first climbed the spiral staircase of a tall pagoda so we could look down on the building where the armistice agreements had been signed. There were ROK soldiers patrolling near the building on the South side, and Korean People’s Army soldiers a few yards away from them on the North side. Our young soldier guide reminded us that when we went inside the armistice

agreement building we should not make any gestures to the KPA guards around the building, and that we should not, under any circumstances, start any conversations with them, or even sustain eye contact. We stood on the pagoda for awhile, talking and taking pictures, and I started talking with another American soldier of about my age. I asked him about the Propaganda Village, and whether he felt intimidated, being on the world's most dangerous border, facing off with the KPA guards all the time. He said they often heard the recordings at night, but most of the messages were in Korean, aimed at the ROK soldiers.

"I'm about 6'4", I think I can handle myself," he said with a smirk, as if his height would somehow protect him from a bullet. I didn't argue with him. I thought of all the mental conditioning, both the kind that would be drilled into you by the army and the kind you would have to develop for yourself, in order to *live* in that place.

We walked back down from the pagoda and into the small, ugly, light blue building that was the sight of the armistice agreement and other talks between NATO and North Korea. Walking in the sunshine on the open pavement to the building, I felt like a target for a sniper. We had to walk past the ROK soldiers who always stood silently around the building. The building itself is smack-dab on the border, and we could walk all around in it. So, technically, I visited North Korea. In the center of the room was a long table that held a UN flag on one side and a North Korean flag on the other. Our guide told us that the two adversaries childishly vied to have the tallest flag at the table, until they agreed to stop bringing new, taller flags every week. Though the North Korean flag was slightly taller than the UN flag, the UN flag had a fatter tip to it. We tourists snickered at the ridiculousness, but it was really sad.

The table had not been used for talks for a long time; contact between North and South Korea was almost completely severed. The North refused to have peace negotiations with the South because they claimed the South was a puppet government of the United States.

Joe and I both sat down at either side of the negotiating table. I pretended to be a North Korean ambassador, and he was from the United Nations. I gave my camera to one of the other

tourists, and we posed for a picture. Pounding my fist on the table, I said, "Give me more rice!" and the guide asked us both to get up from the table.

The chilling thing about being in this room was thinking of the brainwashed North Korean guards on the outside. I looked to the window and one of them was grinning at me. He had his face against the window, and one of his hands up over his eyes to block the reflection of the glass. I looked away.

I wouldn't say that the US and ROK guards weren't also brainwashed, but at least they were on my side. With the constant intimidation and propaganda coming from both sides, these poor soldiers were the pawns. I'm sure that, in some way, the tour itself was a form of propaganda. Why else would they allow civilians into such a hostile area?

We got back on the bus and left the base. As our soldier guide left us, we all said goodbye to him. The bus stopped back at the bar in Panmunjom, and our charming Korean guide joined us again, all smiles. The ride back from Seoul was uneventful. When we got back to Sam Chang Plaza, I took a long afternoon nap, then went out at about 1 AM with Mike for another night of debauchery in Itaewon.

I woke up on Sunday morning to the telephone ringing. There was a girl lying next to me in my officetel. As the phone was screaming in my ear, it came back to me that we had been drinking together at the East and West Club, barely saying a word to each other. Then, at about 4 AM, we got up from our table, walked down the hill, got into a taxi and went back to my place without discussion.

I picked up the phone. It was Mike.

"Andrew? The worst possible thing happened to me. I woke up in a bar in Itaewon with no money." Luckily, he bummed enough money for cab fare from a GI, so I didn't have to go help him. He just wanted me to commiserate with him.

I wanted to relax all day Sunday with the girl, and play with her. I knew I would never see her again, but I loved to spend hung-over Sundays lying around with a precocious woman, have dinner with her, say goodbye, and then just hang out and watch

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TV alone, or read until I fell asleep. But I had plans that Sunday evening to meet Dragon and Sue in Taehagno. I hadn't seen Dragon for over a month because I'd been hanging out with Mike too much.

Dragon was happy because he had finally found a job, and he had also patched things up with his father back on Cheju Island. Before Dragon had landed the job, his father had thought he'd raised a lazy bum. Dragon's goatee was gone now. Also, I saw that Sue and Dragon had become a couple. Since the last time the three of us had gotten together, Dragon called her and they had started dating. They were a good couple in that they were both eccentric Koreans. I was happy because I knew the two of them would never have met if not for me, and they knew it too.

We all drank Jinro soju, and our faces turned red, even mine for some reason. Sue said I must be turning into a Korean. Dragon was acting all poetic and erudite, and was trying to say profound things, since he had begun a new stage of his life and had a new romance.

"The first time you try soju you know about life and love," he said. "Because soju is bitter, like broken love. And soju is not perfectly clear, like life."

I always enjoyed meeting my two friends, but I had to pay for it with another hangover on Monday. I had justified drinking in college by thinking of "the real world." Whenever I felt guilty for drinking too much and neglecting my college studies, I reminded myself that college life was the last chance for me to live it up before settling down to a career and responsibilities. But in Korea, I was even less settled down than in college, and I had almost no responsibilities!

But going out on the piss with Mike plus hanging out with other friends as well as students started to take its toll on my body. On Monday, while teaching my last morning class, I started seeing spots in front of my eyes and almost passed out. I skipped my Korean class that day, rested, and tried to study at my desk. My left foot went numb. I put my head down and felt my heart thudding against the edge of the desk. Eventually I fell asleep and slept for a straight hour. When I woke up, I had no circulation in my hand (from the weight of my head), and there was a puddle of

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drool under my mouth. After walking upstairs to the other teachers' office and drinking some instant coffee, I felt a little better.

I got a shock in my last class of the evening. This was the first day of classes for the month, so I had all new students. To my embarrassment, Haesoo and all her friends (including the girl Joe started dating and her friend who used to like me) were students in my last class. Haesoo's rejection of me on Friday night was bad enough; now I had to teach her. Korean girls were notorious for their gossip. I was afraid that the story of my behavior that night would spread, but it didn't. Nothing was ever said about it.

That night's class turned out to be pretty good, in fact. One of the students talked about professional matchmakers. These guys make their living as marriage brokers. They have phone directories of single employees from big companies like Samsung and Hyundai, and call the guys to see if they would be interested in marriage to any of their eligible bachelorettes. The service is free to the men, who demand important social background information on the women, and the women pay 200,000 won (\$250). This is just one form of matchmaker, of course aimed at women eager to marry. Other forms existed, and there were matchmaker agencies all over the place.

An exercise in the book's first lesson had the students completing the sentence, "When I first saw my ECC teacher..." As I roved around talking to the groups, I heard a pretty Haesoo say, "When I first saw my ECC teacher, I thought of Narcissus." I rolled my eyes. No respect at all!