

## CHAPTER 3

What did I know about Korea? Absolutely nothing. I did however acknowledge that it was a country on its own and refrained from referring to the people, language and culture as Chinese, as half of my family and friends did. My mind was a running contradiction, realizing its reputation for all things high tech, but somehow believing that if I didn't bring enough deodorant for a year, I would run around stinky. Customs would have an interesting time pondering whether they should let me through with huge grins on their faces or book me for beginning the great Canadian Speed Stick smuggling ring.

When we finally landed in Seoul, my neck was cramped, my back was sore, my legs were a little wobbly, I was hot, sweaty and my heart was beating just a little too quickly. I felt like I was going through menopause, giving birth and recovering from running a 10-mile run all in one. I couldn't even imagine ever making that trip again, so I knew that I would not be heading home any time soon. In case of dwindling will power, that was a great motivator. As far as I was concerned, I was stuck. Now I only had to figure out where on earth to go from here.

45 minutes later, I was pleased to find myself in an air conditioned, comfy van on my way to a bed. I had walked out of the gate and some man had rushed over to me and told me he was from my school. For all I knew he preyed on innocent looking, lost girls, and sold them into a lifetime of slavery and prostitution in the Korean red-light district, but as long as he had a spacious place for me to sprawl out, he could have taken me anywhere. I was his prisoner, as long as he'd let me sleep.

I woke up about a half an hour later, completely disoriented and convinced that I was somehow still on a plane. I opened my eyes slowly, concentrating hard on the unidentifiable murmurs coming from the front seat and straining my ears and my brain to understand them. I

truly believed that if I focused enough on these strange words that I would suddenly have a 'Eureka' moment and understand Korean, as if the key to learning any new language is simply squeezing your eyes shut and forcing the words into your head. The resulting 'pop' however is less likely to be the disintegration of your language barrier and more likely to be a brain aneurism. Since all the blood was rushing to my head, my eyes were beginning to water and the words still sounded like gibberish to me, I decided to go back to sleep.

45 minutes later, I woke again, this time less confused but certainly groggier. The highways were a smooth hum underneath our wheels; nothing like the 'crash, bam, boom' effect we have perfected in Montreal, but somehow, I could still not be lulled back to sleep. I was at risk of becoming very cranky and tempted to start kicking and screaming like a toddler who wasn't being put down. I raised my head slightly, determined to block out the voices in the front seat lest I once again attempt to hurt myself into understanding them. I peeked out the window to get a better sense of my surroundings and was quite shocked and disturbed to see nothing but neon crosses and swastikas everywhere I turned. Of course, they were not swastikas but instead symbols of the Buddhist religion, but in my severely sleep deprived state, it took me a moment to fight the panic and rationalize my situation. I peered out again and was awed by the mesmerizing gaudiness of these religious symbols, much like a religious Vegas theme park. In Korea, Buddhism is still the predominant religion, but Christianity is pulling in a close second, and it seemed like they were competing on the streets for exposure and voltage.

I pulled my eyes away since the sheer brightness was beginning to give me a headache, and as soon as I began to stir, my kidnapper finally became aware of me and pounced on the opportunity to ask me all about myself and my reasons for coming to Korea, as if I even knew my name at that point. I dribbled out an answer, hoping that it sounded enough like English for me to

not lose my job. It came out something like ‘I am here, I want to be with kids. Do you have a bed?’ But before I could worry about the misinterpretation of my little introduction, we were stopped. I was ready to get down on my hands and knees and kiss the ground, when I looked up and saw nothing that resembled an apartment building, but instead had questionable looking foods on a sign. My composure broke and I sobbed quietly to myself.

I was running in a field. Everything was white, like big balls of cotton, and I was barefoot. I was rested and happy and looked around and realized that I was surrounded by beds and pillows and comforters. I knew instantly that this must be heaven: a place where you were not only allowed but encouraged to sleep your days away. I just wasn’t sure how I had died. As I was about to fall back and enjoy a lifetime of flat hair and morning breath, I was rudely shaken back from my daydream escape and dragged into a restaurant. Now whether my kidnappers just decided amongst themselves that they were hungry or if somehow my sleepy English sounded something like the Korean for ‘I am hungry’, I was being given my first taste of fine dining, Korean style.

The place was small; could have sat maybe 20 people, with a spotless wood floor and tables low enough for a newborn. With my shoes checked at the door, I took a seat, Indian style, on a cushion at the foot high table. It seemed outlandish to have my 24-hour airplane feet in such close proximity to my undesired dinner, but since I was apparently not offending anyone else at the table, I ignored the social taboo that I was committing.

Seated on the floor with these 2 other people who were mostly babbling away to each other in Korean, I took a moment to look around me. These people made minimalist look cluttered. There was nothing on the walls, floors or tables, and 1 plant standing in the corner. In the middle of each table was a round grill where you could cook your own dinner. I was exhausted and cranky, and while sitting in a restaurant, the least I hoped for was that my meal would already be cooked.

If I wanted to make my own dinner, I would be at home where I could do it naked if I pleased. Despite the acceptance of my feet practically hanging in my rice, I was pretty sure they'd frown at my discarding of anymore clothes.

My next challenge was the chopsticks placed neatly beside my glass. The waitress came and offered me a fork, trying to be courteous to my clumsy culture, but as stubborn as I was, even in my sleep, I refused the fork and decided to make a go of the sticks. At that very moment, in my dreamlike state, I would be lucky if I could find my mouth with a homing device, but I was determined not to be shown up on my first night. The scene from 'Pretty Woman' quickly entered my head: the one where she flings a snail across the restaurant into the waiter's hand, and I was sure that within minutes I would launch a rain shower of rice over everyone.

I picked up the chopsticks, ready to make a valiant attempt at using them to guide something edible to my mouth, and I noticed the immediate silence from the other end of the table as my 2 Korean hosts stopped talking and just watched me. I found the position I was taught to put my fingers in years ago when eating with chopsticks became trendy in Montreal, and once I was sure my fingers were locked into place, I moved towards the sizzling meat in the middle of the table. Attempting to secure sizzling hot meat with 2 little sticks after having traveled for 2 days is not exactly the wisest of first impressions you want to make. Nonetheless I went in for the kill, poised and ready to attack. I momentarily held up my victory meat with a look of triumph on my face, when all of a sudden, my dream faded, the prize slid from between my weapons and landed with a splat on the table in front of me. My face fell, and in one fleeting moment, my chopstick victory was destroyed. The only success of my attempt was that it incited what could have been categorized as a smile out of my 2 hosts.

I tried 2 more times to perfect my method and accomplish my goal, but in the end I simply

stabbed a piece with 1 stick, dipped it in the spicy bean sauce I was directed to, ate my bite, then put my chopsticks down in retirement. The truth was that I still wasn't very hungry, and aside from the meat which was hard enough to secure, I didn't dare touch any of the other 36 plates scattered around our table. Primarily this was because it all looked very questionable and scary, but it was also because I knew picking up any of the slimier foods would end up in disaster, especially if I dropped the heavily pickled food into the pit of fire. I was likely to burn down Korea on my first night. No, it was better that I finished while I was ahead and accepted my eating limitations. Well apparently, going on a diet here wouldn't be a problem.

After our entertaining dinner, at which I played the role of the bumbling court jester, my hosts finally took me to my apartment; only it wasn't my apartment since mine was still being occupied for another week, so I had to temporarily share with another teacher. Her name was Terry, and upon walking in, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I was happy to be somewhere warm and safe and with someone who would understand my disposition, and more importantly, my language, but I wasn't looking forward to spending the night on the sofa when every square inch of my body was aching.

I also became a little worried when I walked into her apartment and saw the layout. Admittedly it was bigger than I expected, which is not difficult when you expect a box the size of a bathroom, with a toilet off in the corner beside the stove. It was actually a nice sized 3 1/2, with a bedroom off the side, a narrow hall leading into the kitchen area and oriental doors closing off the large living room area. (Although I wasn't sure if they were called Oriental doors here.) Off the living room it even had a balcony with a washing machine. This I only discovered however a while later when I stumbled upon it by accident; literally stumbled. I wanted to take a look at the balcony and tripped out on to it over a pile of clothes that lay in front. My first impression of a Korean

apartment was dwarfed by the fact that it was sullied by a Canadian slob. At least I could find some mounds of garbage to lie on at bedtime.

As I was resigning myself to find a corner to settle into, my plan was once again shattered by being uprooted from my semi-comfortable haven and dragged on one final errand. I was being taken to see the school I would be teaching at the next day. Ok, admittedly it was kind of an important final stop, but couldn't they have thought of its importance before they opted on dinner being the first stop of the night? I didn't fly for 18 hours to have a meal with some foreigners. Oh wait a second, I was now the foreigner. How the world had turned upside down in one long day.

I followed my hosts in the dark down a path through a park that came out on the other end right across the street from the school. How ingenious, thanks guys, goodnight. But no, it wasn't enough to point out the building, give me the floor number and send me on my way. They had to now guide me upstairs so that I could see the darkened, locked, empty office that I would go to tomorrow, see once again in the daylight and probably not remember anything I saw tonight anyway. But it was especially important that I went on this shadowed tour of the photocopier in case the lights went out and I would have to make some emergency copies.

After my exciting tour which rivaled any I might want to take at a canning factory or to watch wet paint dry, my hosts put too much faith in my navigating skills, probably assuming that anyone from Canada was born with a compass around their neck in case they got lost on a snowy mountain somewhere. They parted my company outside the school, and I was left alone to find my way back to the apartment that wasn't even mine. I knew I could do this; it couldn't be that complicated or surely they wouldn't have left me. There was a path through a park and poof, on the other side was the building. Assuming that's all there was to it, I hurried down the path, a little less worried knowing that very shortly I would be wrapped up in a blanket left undisturbed to

sleep. There was of course no reason for me to look up and actually pay attention to my new environment. There would naturally be a neon arrow at the other end pointing to the apartment that wasn't mine.

Korea, being a land of about 25 people to every square foot, would obviously need to build a high rise on every blank patch of land they could find, so in fact there were about 18 buildings at the end of the path for me to choose from. Ok, this was ok, I remembered the address, but as I walked, I noticed that each address was divided into 3 buildings, with about 5 different exits off the path to choose from. And there was no light to be found! The moon had chosen this exact moment to go into a premature eclipse!

I stood there in the middle of the park, spinning in circles, which is of course the best method to get your bearings, when finally fatigue took me over and opened the passage for millions of tears of frustration. Lost in my own world of self-pity, I didn't hear someone come up behind me. This new stranger looked at me once and asked if I needed help. In English! 'Oh my god, I didn't know anybody here would speak English!' I told her what building I was staying in and to my embarrassment, I was facing it. I thanked her and scurried ahead, grateful for the dark that concealed my identity. I ran up to the apartment that was not mine and happily went to sleep fully dressed with laundry as my pillow.