

Praise for Island of Fantasy

“This is an easy book to recommend: a thoughtful, thorough memoir by a writer with a subtle sense of humor and an easygoing way of expressing himself, filled with interesting characters, amusing anecdotes...and some enlightening information on both Korea and on how ESL programs tend to work. It's a lot of fun.”

—*Trenchman.com*

“The interactions he describes between himself and his mother, grandfather, and the various Korean locals are priceless, and will make you laugh out loud. In addition to the humor, there is a sweetness and wonder to the author's point of view that makes you come to care for him and wish for his success.”

— *Stephanie Windham* (<http://steph-han.blogspot.com>)

“If you were dissatisfied with your life, would you answer an ad for mail-order English teachers in Asia and put yourself in the hands of strangers? Well, Shawn Matthews did! He writes with great presence. I couldn't put the book down as I suffered and laughed with him to the end. Now I'm hooked and waiting for the sequel.”

—*Trthornton*

“The description describes the book perfectly. This book has been one of the best books I've read in a while. Shawn accurately describes his experiences to the point where I can play a video of it in my head. Not only is the book VERY funny, but you'll want to jump in there and help him out at various points. Good job!”

—*Chris Garson*

“If anyone is considering traveling to Korea to teach, you should definitely order of copy of this book. I used to follow the story when parts of it were posted on the author's website. It's an interesting and humorous story and should provide you with a little insight of what it's like to find yourself in a strange country teaching English.”

—*Robert Spear* (<http://homepage.mac.com>)

“The book was really funny and things that happened to Shawn in the book are the same things you will be thinking to yourself, happened to you sometime during your time in Korea in one way or another. However, some of things such as the jock itch problem he had, I have never had to worry about here fortunately. The book is definitely worth checking out.”

—*GI Korea* (<http://jetiranger.tripod.com>)

Praise for Korea Life Blog

“Shawn has consistently provided some of the finest descriptions and commentary about everyday expatriate life in Korea that you’ll find anywhere. In fact, I’ve always felt that people who really wanted to learn about life in this country should be reading KLB.”

—*The Marmot* (www.blog.marmot.cc)

“I was just reading Korea Life Blog. One thing I admire about this blog is the author's upbeat nature and humor. It is easy to become pessimistic about Korea, but the author of the blog, Shawn Matthews, always maintains a positive attitude. It is good to see a blog such as this one.”

—*The Rathbone Press*

“This was one of the first blogs I found from abroad where I wanted to go originally. I learnt pretty much everything I needed to know about esl via his blog.”

—*Plark* (<http://plark.blogspot.com>)

“The man who launched a thousand blogs, your friend and mine, Mr. Shawn. He gets the thing that makes blogs interesting: one individual's perspective whether it be good, bad, happy, sad, weird, familiar, or a stray dog pooping all over his floor.”

—*Swiss James* (www.lostseouls.com)

“Korea Life Blog, created and run by Shawn Matthews, was voted as one of the best Korean weblogs by Flyingchair.net.”

—*From The Korea Times*

“I had never even heard of a Blog before, until I ran into KLB by chance, through a random Interent search. I have enjoyed reading and viewing the stories and photos that made his blog so popular. Thanks to the link off KLB, my blog has gone from something that was only meant for family and friends back in Canada, to a hobby that I keeps me busy throughout the week.”

—*Mike* (<http://gyopolife25.blogspot.com>)

“Yeah, sounds like a great website. I never heard of it before, but I’m sure it’s good. Can you give me the money now?”

—*Homeless Harry*

Actual Korea Life Blog Comments

“The time difference between Korea and here (here being San Francisco, CA) is great. When I am waking up and checking email and KLB, you are usually getting into bed after updating!! ahahah YAY!”

—*Jeff*

“I am sure a cellmate will teach him the joy of being on the receiving end of a proper *ddong-chim*.”

—*Don Park*

“Monkey isn't necessarily the ‘goofy’ animal that most people associate with. Monkey's are intelligent, versatile, resourceful, and come on, they like to eat a banana or two, just like us! I think I'll write an epic about that brave soul/monkey-man who fought to spread the English language to foreign lands...”

—*Haemi*

“Shawn, great blog! I've been reading for about a week now as i should be writing my thesis. i use it as my motivational treat. write a page of thesis, read a page of your blog. I've read the Koje-do stuff (my favorite so far) and I'm into December in the archives. keep it up!”

—*Dennis*

“Beer, cereal, soju and spam. Looks like you covered all the essential food/drink groups except kimchi.”

—*Jeremiah*

“Hahah, you kill me, man. How about this, "Come and get it. Fresh monkey tails and Elephant noses, hot off the grill”

—*master jester!*

“When I first stumbled on to your site last week, I read all your past posts and laughed like an idiot in my rather quiet office. I like your sometimes off-beat observations about your surrounding and people.”

—*Anna*

“Anyone who cannot put water, kimchi & meat into a pot (kimchi jigae) is retarded.”

—*mr milk*

Copyright © 2004 by Shawn Matthews
All Rights Reserved

No part of this publication can be reproduced in any form or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers and/or author.

Island of Fantasy –
A Memoir of an English Teacher in Korea

ISBN: 1-4116-1152-7

kojebook@gmail.com

Cover Photograph © Shawn Matthews

Korea Life Blog - Special Edition

Cover Photograph © Shawn Matthews
Cover design by Kevin Kim
(<http://bighominid.blogspot.com/>)

Printed in South Korea
First Edition

Dedicated to the readers of Korea Life Blog

<http://korealife.blogspot.com>



Korea Life Blog

Special Edition

Shawn Matthews

Disclaimer

This book describes the author's experience while living and teaching in South Korea. Some names and identifying details of individuals mentioned in the book have been changed to protect their privacy.

Island of Fantasy

A Memoir of an English Teacher in Korea

(a true story based on the original blog entries)

In this memoir, the author says goodbye to a mundane existence in America and, given a free air ticket and an apartment, ventures to teach English on a remote island off the coast of South Korea. Dubbed the Island of Fantasy, Koje-do is a mixture of charm and peaceful beauty, but in its city center sits Wonder School - a place of frantic chaos and disorganization. Treated like an English speaking slave by the school's owners, Shawn Matthews struggles to teach students unlike anything his unscrupulous (yet amusing) recruiter had depicted. Outside the job he meets a cast of memorable characters including the mysterious Choi and two-timing Natasha.

Chapter 1

“Hello, you have reached the Wong number.”

“Why do you want to be an English teacher?” asked one of the eight faculty members sitting around the interview table. It was a standard question, one I had answered several times including on the application and at the screening interview a few days beforehand.

“I love working with high school students,” I repeated mechanically. “They are so full of energy and enthusiasm. I want to harness that energy and channel it into creative outlets. Kids these days are so caught up in TV and computer games they don’t take an interest in literature anymore. All I have to do is find out exactly what they are interested in, what they’re passionate about. Once I make that connection, I know I can inspire kids to read and write about what they like—much in the same way my high school English teacher inspired me.”

Though most of my answers were contrived to sound professional, this one was partially the truth. Or at least it had been at one time. My high school English teacher really did inspire me; I had wanted to be just like him. That was until I practiced teaching in a real high school as part of the education

program at my university. There I realized firsthand the horrors of my mistake. High school students were not actually young, enthusiastic beings eager to learn. They were emotionally unsteady, disrespectful imbeciles and demons from the very core of hell—much as they were when I was a student myself.

How could I have forgotten so easily? How could I have been so idealistic?

Regrettably, by the time I came to this realization, it was too late; I was a senior in my last semester. At that point it would have been impossible to change majors and graduate on time. Having already amassed twenty grand in student loans, continuing my education was out of the question. With no other alternative, I graduated with the degree, worked for a stint as a substitute teacher—part time fill-in jobs which only re-enforced my resolve not to be a teacher—and then avoided the profession entirely for a few years by working a variety of unrelated jobs. Bills piled up. Not being able to make ends meet, I was forced to reconsider the teaching field.

The panel included several aged teachers, the head of the English Department, the vice-principal and the principal himself, all sitting at the end of a large table, all scrutinizing me silently.

“But how can you really inspire these kids?” asked one of the teachers skeptically. “Isn’t that being a little naive?”

“If you fail to inspire them,” asked another, “what then?”

“I can barely inspire my kids to stay awake,” joked a teacher whose nose was shaped like a carrot.

“All this inspiring is fine and dandy,” said the principal. “But what I want to know about is spelling. Is it really possible to teach spelling? And if so, how?” He lowered his glasses and watched me closely. The room was silent, my mouth dry.

“S-spelling?” I stuttered. “Oh, right, no problem. Well, I firmly believe it’s possible to teach spelling. For example, let’s

take the word 'spelling' itself. S-P-E-L-L-I-N-G. Spelling. It's easy, see? How did I know how to spell that? Well, because of my teachers, I guess." Frantically, I searched for a better answer, but my mind kept drawing blanks. There must be a way to teach spelling, but what was it? I remembered one of my education professors talking about it. What had she said? Unable to recall, I blurted out the only thing I could think of: "If hired, I'm going to consult with the other teachers about how they teach spelling and pick the method that's working best."

I cringed and sunk into the chair. "Well, I've heard all I have to hear," said the principal after an awkward amount of silence. Apparently, his only concern was that kids could spell. Even though I nailed most of the interview, it didn't matter; I failed the key question, and he was no longer interested.

Outside, I shook my head and sighed. A long-winded sigh. My father's sigh. In the car, I cursed and ripped off my tie and blasted Radiohead's *Let Down*. On the way home it dawned on me: *active reading*. That was it! The most effective way to improve spelling is to read regularly. Why couldn't I have remembered that? Damn! I punched the steering wheel, causing the horn to beep and the guy in front of me to turn around and give me the finger. Screw you, too, buddy!

A bunch of bills stuck out of the mailbox. I cursed and threw them on the floor. Clara, my cat, dashed to the back room. No messages on the answering machine either. Of course not. I didn't expect *she* would call. Off with her new boyfriend, I assumed, in his convertible. No doubt he had a convertible. No doubt he had everything I didn't have, the bastard!

Eventually, I felt guilty for scaring Clara. As if she had anything to do with the dismal world in which I lived. "Come here, girl," I called cheerily. Nothing. I tried patting my leg. Again, nothing. As a last resort, I grabbed a can of her favorite soft food, *Chicken & Liver Chunks in Gravy*. The very moment I

pulled open the lid, she sprinted so swiftly she slid across the kitchen floor and into the wall, bumping her head. Unfazed, she purred and gulped down the food as quickly as I dumped it in her dish.

Certain I had failed the interview, I got online and wearily browsed more teaching ads. A moment later, I came across something unusual: an ad announcing teaching jobs in Asia. I glanced at the link and moved on. Soon, though, I started to think. It was an idea I had flirted with before, living overseas, and I had even obtained a passport. Not long thereafter, I gave up on the idea because I had no money. The idea of *working* abroad never occurred to me, what with all the hurdles and hoops one must encounter and the cost of setting up. Then again, I really didn't know how it worked. I clicked back to the link.

I read about teaching in China and Japan and Korea. To my amazement, private Korean schools, called *hagwons*, were offering airfare in advance and a free apartment. What? It seemed almost too good to be true. I looked for a catch, but there was none—at least none that I could see, anyway. In fact, the perks got even better. The salary was similar to mine, yet the taxes and the cost of living were less. Much less. The deals included inexpensive national health insurance and a month's bonus pay upon contract completion. All they required of me was to be a native English speaker and hold a four-year degree. Any degree. That mine happened to be in English education, while unnecessary, could only be advantageous, I assumed. Fascinated, I made a fresh cup of coffee and continued to research. Clara purred in a ball on my lap; Radiohead rang out of the speakers.

I scoured an ESL forum where English teachers in Korea discuss their jobs. Many grumbled about poor conditions: too many classes, split shifts, disrespectful students, working on

Saturdays, little or no communication with the boss, short vacation time, and the like. A couple reported their passports had been held by their boss and not returned. I found a blacklist: a list of schools to be avoided. I read practically every entry. Fortunately, in addition to these complaints, I found that other teachers were having the times of their lives. Many were pleased with the opportunity to bank a lot of money while exploring the country. Some had a rough time of it initially, but had learned their way and moved on to greener pastures. Some were lucky from the get-go. Others had been there for two, three, even four or five years, even gotten married there. Surely it couldn't be all that bad, then.

Because I was so interested, so absorbed in the idea, I chose to ignore most of the downside.

I stayed awake half the night and the next night and the night after that. The exciting prospect of moving to Korea carried me through the banality of daily life. At the time I was working as a mental health counselor. As one of the program participants described the voices in his head, I fantasized the voices of beautiful Korean girls. I became so intent, so obsessed with the idea, that the thought of *not* going seemed ever more farfetched.

Now that I was fixated on the idea, I needed to decide where exactly to teach. Most of the stories I read, good or bad, were by teachers in large cities like Seoul. I wanted my experience to be unique. But where? Suddenly I had a brilliant idea. One of those recruiters, I thought, can help me avoid a bad situation and find the best possible job and location. I did a search online with overwhelming results. Everyone and his dog were trying to recruit English teachers for South Korea. Finally, I just picked one at random. His name was Mr. Wong, and he had an office in Toronto. Unfamiliar with Korean names, I

figured he must be Korean. Surely, then, he would be the most helpful. Prepared for a lengthy interview, I gave him a call.

"Hello, you have reached the *Wong* number," he answered, I guess with a joke.

"Hello, Sir. My name is Shawn. I'm from New York State, and I'm interested in teaching in South Korea."

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Shane, you come to right person. I'm recruiter! I can do for you. This is not problem. What is your e-mail? I send you many job on e-mail now."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Don't you want to know anything about me?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Shane. That's important. Please tell me about you."

"I'm American, 25 years old, and I have a BA degree in English education. I have some teaching exp—"

"Mr. Shane! This enough information. Job for you is not problem. I send you e-mail now with many job offer."

"But—"

"Please tell me your e-mail. Many job wait for you."

"Slow down, I have some questions first."

"Yah? I can answer question. This not problem."

"First of all, I don't want to teach in Seoul because—"

"Mr. Shane. You don't have to teach in Seoul if you don't want. This not problem. Just give—"

"And I'd like to know more about Korea. Can you tell me about it?"

"Sure, sure. Not problem. Korea great place, Mr. Shane. Very great place."

"That's it?"

"Korea very exciting place, too."

"How long did you live there?"

"What you say, Mr. Shane?"

"Aren't you from Korea?"

“Well, not exactly, Mr. Shane. I'm from China, but I live in Canada now.”

“So, how long did you stay in Korea?”

“Yah, well, I never been there.”

“Then how do you know—”

“Mr. Shane. Do not worry. You are foreigner. Korean think all foreigner movie-star. You be very popular, very happy there. Foreigner always happy in Korea. I know this. I'm recruiter.”

“And I can't speak Korean. Will this be a problem?”

“Not problem, Mr. Shane. You are English teacher, not Korean teacher. You just teach English and everybody happy.”

“Then how about the students? What are they like?”

“Student never problem.”

“Really? But I heard—”

“Mr. Shane, you are teacher. In Korea, teacher same as priest. You don't have to worry about student. Student always quiet and respect teacher.” While I knew he was exaggerating and would tell me anything to keep me hooked, I figured at least he could find me a decent school in a good location. I gave him my e-mail address and hung up amused and delighted. If only it were this easy here in my own country.

Later, Mr. Wong sent me an e-mail requesting a photo and copies of documents, including my passport and university degree. The photo, he said, was most important and to “send immediately.” I didn't have a professional digital photo. All I had on disk was an old picture with my eyes crossed. Nonetheless, I sent it and clarified I would send a better one as soon as possible.

During the time it took to drink a cup of coffee, Mr. Wong e-mailed back an eye-popping list of job offers. Every school in Korea was in need of a cross-eyed teacher, it seemed. To my bewilderment, however, most of them were in Seoul.

There were two others: one in a city called Kwang-ju and one more that really caught my attention: a new school on a small island called Koje-do. This job offer came with a curious note from the director himself, a Mr. Kim. Somehow, though I had never met him, he referred to me as an “outstanding teacher” and said he would like me to teach at his school “without further aduement.” He would have Mr. Wong send me a plane ticket shortly, provided I answered yes immediately. Otherwise, he said, he would have to choose another of “many highfully-qualify and expertly teachers” who have been “hoping and wanting patiently” for a chance to teach there. The end of the e-mail was from Mr. Wong:

Mr. Shane, this very urgent. Many teachers want these jobs. You have to be like race car. Reply with other documents and job you want APSA! Then school send you contract. You bring that and original diploma to Korea. Everything like magic. When you reply, next is watch mailbox for plane ticket.

Even though Mr. Kim's special note sounded unconvincing, the idea of living on a small island really got me. I scanned the internet and found a little information about Koje-do and several photos. Seductively dubbed the *Island of Fantasy*, it seemed beautiful, consisting of wooded mountains and surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. There, I thought, I could have a unique experience in an unspoiled part of Korea while being just 45 minutes by ferry to Busan, Korea's second most populous city. Additionally, because of its geographical location, the weather was supposed to be mild: cool winters and pleasantly warm summers.

After checking the blacklists, I decided to take that job and replied to Mr. Wong's e-mail. A couple of minutes later I received a contract. It was short and basically stated I would

teach 25 teaching hours a week for a certain sum of money. Seemed rather easy, I thought, imagining 25 hours a week as five classes a day with quiet students who thought of me as their priest. It was also five hours less than most other schools were offering. To me that meant they must be laid-back islanders, people that prefer sunshine and beaches to hard work and study. The contract was probably a formality, a required document to process my visa. The only downside I could see was the payment schedule: once per month. Then again, I supposed such a system would make it easier to save money. I would get my pay, wire home the bulk to pay down my bills, then budget the rest.

In addition to sending these documents, I requested at least a week to prepare. No one would be able to drop everything and leave for Korea in one day, and I needed time to wrap things up with work, friends and family. Later that night, at 3:00 in the morning, Mr. Kim's wife called, apparently unaware of the time difference, much less my need for sleep.

"Please, you must come now," she said.

"Hello? Who is this?" I mumbled, half asleep.

"I'm Mrs. Kim. Please come now."

"Mrs. Kim? Oh, hello there! I'm very sorry, but I can't come until next week. I have to leave notice at my job and say goodbye to my family."

"We need you now. Please come. We need the great teacher for student happy. All student wait for you."

"I am very sorry. I can't come now. I'm sleeping."

"Please come now," she repeated bluntly and firmly.

"I'm sorry, I need one week. I think that is pretty fair. I have to—"

"One week long time. We need you now. Students wait. Parents wait, too. Don't disappointing."

“Look,” I said, irritated. “I’m very sorry. You will have to find another teacher then.”

“No, no. I ask Mr. Kim to wait. Have a nice day. Goodbye.”

When I came around, I wondered if the call had been a dream. I felt apprehensive. That was until I got a phone call from the Human Resources Department of the high school where I had interviewed. The secretary thanked me heartily, but was sorry to say I didn’t get the job. “The principal decided to go with someone who has a little more experience teaching spelling.”

“That’s fine,” I replied smugly. “I’ve accepted another job anyway—at a *hagwon* in South Korea. Can you spell *hagwon*? Ha! I didn’t think so.” I hung up the phone triumphantly. Though the triumph was a bit unusual, it made me feel good nonetheless.

That same day I did some further research into teaching in Korea and discovered information about an E-2 visa which, unsurprisingly, Mr. Wong had failed to mention. This was the appropriate visa needed for a foreigner to teach legally in Korea, and was valid for one year or the duration of the work contract. According to the information, the visa could not be issued in Korea though. I called up Mr. Wong.

“This not problem.”

“That’s it?”

“Mr. Shane, you are about to embark on amazing trip. Don’t worry. School process all documents for you. Next is send you to Korean Embassy in Japan to pick up visa. School pay everything. Don’t worry—you’re American. E-2 visa not problem for you. You have good time in Japan, too. Japanese think all foreigner movie-star. I know this. I’m recruiter.”

“Well, why don’t they just issue it in Korea? I’m going to be working *there*, not Japan.”

“Mr. Shane. If they did like that, you not get the free trip to Japan. Think of it glass half full, not half empty.”

“I guess that’s true,” I said. “I always wanted to see Japan. But what do I do beforehand? According to this information, I should not work in Korea with a tourist visa.”

“This not problem, Mr. Shane.”

“Well, of course this not problem for you! This problem for me. And my name is not—”

“I call you back.”

Later: “Mr. Shane, I spoke with Mr. Kim. He say don't worry and no problem. He take care of everything. You just get ready to Korea. You like family now.”

“All right,” I sighed frustrated. “I’ll look into it a little more. Thanks.”

Back online, more research. It was called a “visa run” and did seem like standard procedure for schools that needed a teacher quickly. However, I still felt uneasy. Perhaps I was foolish to rush the whole thing. Maybe I should search around for a different school, get the visa arranged before leaving. There certainly are enough jobs to choose from. On the other hand, I really want to go and soon. If I put it off, I may never follow through, probably find more excuses and end up stuck in the same rut I’ve been in.

There was also the island to think about. If I turned down the offer, I may never find a job there again. And in my mind, I already inflated Koje-do into an ideal, a sort-of Korean Hawaii—magical, mysterious, extraordinary—far away from the depressing and ordinary life of Syracuse, New York. The teaching aspect seemed secondary anyway, only five classes a day with what I assumed to be studious, respectful and obedient students, completely unlike the horrid monsters I had taught before. Besides, I had just failed another interview, and the thought of filling out more applications made my head

pang. Going to Korea was a risk, but so was staying here depressed. Not only would I have an amazing experience, I would be able to save money and pay my bills.

Above all else, I was attracted to the idea of having an aura like a movie-star. A broad smile spread across my face as I imagined crowds of happy Koreans cheering for the English teacher, beautiful Korean girls in lingerie pampering me and feeding me grapes.

Chapter 2

“Asian chicks love white dudes.”

“What?” yelled my mother, swinging around, her eyes bright and round. “Are you crazy? Are you out of your mind?”

“It's just for a year, and I'll probably be back in six months.”

“No you won't! They're communists! You don't know communism. They'll kill you—don't think they won't. They'll accuse of being a spy and shoot you dead. They torture people there—you'd better believe it. Do you want bamboo shoots shoved under your fingernails? Do you want your head cut off? If you're lucky you'll rot in a cell somewhere. You don't know. If you're father was here he'd tell you.”

“Mom, I'm going to South Korea, not a war. You're thinking of North Korea, or somewhere in China. Actually, I don't know where you're thinking.”

“Yeah, well, your father fought all them in Vietnam. He'd shoot you himself if he could hear this lunacy.”

While my mom was usually a pessimist, she was educated and I knew her gambit. She said such absurd things to scare me, a mother's technique to keep her child safe and by her side. Now my research on Korea was paying off: “Yes, Mom,” I

replied. “Dad fought in the *Vietnam* War, not the *Korean* War. Some Koreans even fought in Vietnam alongside us. And our soldiers fought alongside the Koreans in the Korean War. They fought together against the communists of the north. After the war, South and North Korea retreated to their own sides of the 38th parallel. North Korea is communist. South Korea is a democracy, not unlike ours. “

“Yeah, well, any day now those North Koreans will fly down the mountains and start their killing again. They’ll kill you first—don’t think they won’t.”

“There’s little chance of that happening now. Not too long ago, Kim Dae Jung of South Korea received the Nobel Peace Prize for creating a positive relationship between the two Koreas and making advancements toward reunification. And just in case there is any danger, we have over 30,000 troops there now and an embassy that will arrange my departure in the event of an emergency, which, of course, is very unlikely.”

She was surprised that I knew that so much. Quickly, she changed tactics. “You’ll fall in love, I know you. You’ll meet some desperate Korean girl. Don’t think she really loves you. They’ll do anything to get out of that place. Are you kidding me? As soon as you get here, it’s goodbye to you, sucker.”

“Now you’re imagining the Philippines, Mom. South Korea is not poverty-stricken. They’re a modern, industrial society. They’re not desperate to get out. Not everyone wants to come to America either, you know. And thanks for your confidence in my ability to keep a girl.”

“The plane will crash. That’s the end. You’ll get somewhere over the Pacific Ocean and the plane will go down. Oh God, I can see it all now. They’ll run a memorial about you in the news. ‘He was a gifted man, but made a foolish decision.’ Are you ready for that? You know that will be the end of me, too. You’re my only son. And don’t think for a minute that life-

vest they give you will do any good. You'll be dead—don't worry. And if you're not, you'll drown. You don't want to drown—trust me. Those planes go down all the time.”

“They do not, and you know that's not true! More people die every day in car accidents than all plane crashes combined.”

“Now that I think about it, you've never even been on an airplane. Are you crazy? Your first time flying and to South Korea? What happens if you get up there and panic. Some people do, you know. You'll make a scene. They'll arrest you...”

The more this went on, the more outrageous her arguments became and the more she realized I was intent on going. Finally, as a last resort, she broke into tears. “Oh, Shawn,” she wailed, pulling me close. “Please, don't go. You're my child, my life. My only son. I don't want you to go. You promise you'll come back?”

“I promise.”

“Yeah, sure,” my boss said. “Now about the progress report—”

“I'm serious, George.”

He raised his eyebrow and looked me in the eye. I often made jokes at work, so I wasn't surprised he didn't believe me. This time I kept a straight face.

“You're serious?”

“Yes.”

Examining me carefully, he put his hands on his head and let out a long sigh. Because of the low pay for mental health counselors, people were constantly coming and going, and George was responsible for keeping the office fully staffed. “Last time you talked about going west to Colorado. Now it's Korea?”

"This time I'm sure. The plane ticket is paid for and on the way."

"Only one week's notice? You know we need two."

"I was lucky to get one. The job is urgent and I have to take it straight away. It's a great opportunity. I'll be on a small island just off the Korean peninsula. Supposed to be like Hawaii."

"That so?" he said, sighing again. "It's all planned out then?"

"I'm telling you now because I'm sure."

"All right," he relented. I had worked there over a year and had a good relationship with the program participants. I knew he hated to see me go.

My friends had different reactions. "No shit!" said Rick. "This is perfect for you, man. Asian chicks love white dudes. You'll get truckloads of action. Korea. No shit? If I didn't have the wife and kids I'd go with you myself, man. We'd tear the place up. Goddamn. I can't fucking believe it."

He was a good friend and always believed in my ideas—no matter how impractical or outlandish—and egged on my adventures as if living them vicariously. Since he was married, my life became a source of entertainment, an escape. "Wow," he continued. "Korean chicks—they're fucking hot. My university was swarming with them. A lot better than American chicks, too. They'll wait on you hand and foot. Way to go, man. I'll miss the shit out of you, but I'm proud of you. Hey, hold up. What about your cat?"

"I was wondering if you could—"

"I'd love to, but I got six of my own. You love your cat, man. Can you leave it with Randy?"

"I hope so," I said picking up the phone to call him. He came by after Rick went home. As he sat down on my recliner

and stroked his unshaven chin, Clara strategically jumped on his lap.

“So, why *Korea* of all places?”

“Basically, it came down to free airfare and a free apartment. It's also a good chance to explore Asia. Lots of pretty women on that side of the world, you know.”

“What about the food? Gonna eat some plump, juicy dog while your there?” He started laughing. Clara frowned and jumped to the floor.

“I heard some people eat dog soup, but it doesn't seem all that common from what I've read. Anyway, we eat pigs every other day—not that I'm going to try dog, but still. Some other thing called *kimchi*—spicy fermented cabbage, I guess. They eat it with everything. There are also some fast-food chains, just in case.”

“Where is Korea, anyway? I mean on a map. Is it near Japan or China?”

“It's near both, man,” I said as if anyone should know that, though I didn't know myself until a week ago. “And I get a free trip to Japan in the deal. Should make it over to China when I get a vacation. Maybe Thailand, too.”

“Their music's pretty awful in Asia.” He started to sing stereotypically: “*Hong kang-ing whoohey shu, don't do me wong, baby girl.*”

“I'm bringing my CDs, don't worry.”

“When you going?”

“Next week.”

“That soon, huh? When you coming back? *Hong foey wong tong*—”

“The contract's for a year, but I'll be back in six months probably.”

"Is that so?" he said perkily, as if interested for the first time. He walked around the living room and examined my possessions. "What are you going to do with all your stuff?"

"Storing most of it at my grandfather's. I'm giving him my computer so he and my mom can write me e-mail. Rick will hold some of my other things, like my guitar and amplifier."

"What about your Nintendo? I could watch it for you, free of charge, of course."

"Well, that reminds me. I was wondering if you could, um, watch my cat while I'm gone."

"Why don't you take her along?" he said with a face that told me a joke was coming. "You can make cat stew for the natives."

"Har, har. Very funny. There's not enough time to get her shots. I'd have to leave her in quarantine."

"I would, you know, but my girlfriend's allergic to them."

I had no idea it would be such trouble to unload my cat, but no one would take her, poor thing. I loved Clara, but there wasn't enough time to bring her abroad, not to mention other concerns. I had read that most Koreans disliked cats and their "scary eyes." As a last resort, I asked my neighbor, Mary.

"I'll be back in, um, three months to get her," I lied, desperately.

"Three months? No more?"

"That's it."

"All right. I really like cats, so it's not a big deal."

"Wow, thanks. I'll pick up some food and kitty litter and bring her over before I go."

Now that Clara had a home, I could get down to preparing for my voyage. Just as I started to pack, Mom called. "I just thought of something," she said. "Your car."

“I’m going to store it out at Aunt Izzy’s. She said I can leave it in her backyard.”

“That’ll be the end of it—don’t think it won’t. You can’t let a car just sit without being driven, are you kidding me? If your father was here, he’d tell you.”

“Mom, it’s only for six months. I’ll cover it and disconnect the battery.”

“It’ll rot.”

“Bye, Mom. I’ll call you back.”

As I continued to dump stuff in boxes, I noticed Clara staring at me from afar. She had been with me through several moves and probably figured this was just another one. She edged closer, sniffed around the boxes and meowed as if to say, “OK, so we’re moving again. I hope the new place has a balcony so I can sit outside and scare the birds and squirrels.”

A sharp pang of guilt filled my chest. I was going to leave her behind and she had no idea. I picked her up and stroked her head and back apologetically. She loved to ride in the car, so I brought her out for a ride in the country. Along the way I played her favorite Radiohead CD. I stopped at a store and bought several cans of *Liver and Tuna Chunks with Gravy*, milk and cheese, anchovies, a few plump shrimp, vanilla ice-cream, flower-scented kitty litter, a bag of various cat toys—and a cookie for myself.

On the way home, she lazily climbed down from the back window, jumped up on my lap and fell fast asleep. “I want to bring you with me, but I don’t think Korea’s a good place for you. You’ll be OK, and I’ll be back soon. Stop worrying so much, Clara.”

Chapter 3

"You're killing your grandfather with this computer, Shawn."

The days flew by, and I didn't get a lot done. Either the phone kept ringing, I had to meet friends and family, or I felt guilty about Clara and had to spend time playing with her. Also, Mom kept calling up with new reasons why I shouldn't go. I said goodbye to distant friends and relatives, put in my last day of work, set up online bill payment, and changed my home address to my grandfather's.

It was now Wednesday and my flight was Thursday night. I spent the entire day getting things in order. Rick stopped by to pick up some stuff and stoke my fantasies about Korean girls. Randy came over later to say goodbye and inquire about my Nintendo, which had long since been packed away.

Later, experiencing a brief moment of confidence, I decided to call my ex to let her know I was going to Korea. "That's right," I said, fiddling with the phone chord. "I'm all packed now."

"Is that so?"

"Yeap. I'm really going."

"Looks that way."

"You can't stop me now."

"I didn't plan to."

"I'll be pretty busy over there in Korea at the beach with all those Asian girls, so I won't have much time to write you."

"I understand."

"OK, well, goodbye."

"Yep."

She's still in shock, I thought. Tomorrow, in the heat of the moment, she'll rush to the airport and beg me to stay—at which time I'll laugh in her face. Unable to cope, she'll jump off a tall building. Hopeful thinking, but it was me who was hurting. I felt like a dope for having called.

I stayed up late with Clara, feeding her shrimp and ice-cream, playing with her and her toy mouse. I was feeling restless about the trip. It seemed unreal, unbelievable. As the night wore on I fantasized about my new life. To hell with my ex. She can go jump off that tall building.

The phone rang early. "Mr. Shane? This Mr. Wong. You get plane ticket?"

"Yes."

"You still going to Korea?"

"Yes."

"Oh, really?" he said as if surprised. "You made right choice come to me. Korea great place for you. You have safe trip now. Any problem you just call me. I'm here for you."

"OK, Mr. Wong," I said, chuckling.

"Bye, Mr. Shane."

Clara sat at the end of the bed and stared at me as if to say, "How about some more shrimp and ice-cream, and then another game of chase-the-mouse?"

I dragged myself to the kitchen, put on some coffee and despaired over the mess that engulfed the living room. The



Here's the kitten and her mother and father feasting on tuna and anchovies the other day. I've been seeing orange cats all over town lately. While I'm happy to feed this bunch, I hope more don't show up. If they do, I'll be broke.

It's been a mild winter for the most part so far, but I'm sure the worst has yet to come. I've stuck to feeding them dried dog food with occasional tuna or anchovies added in. They've taken to it and usually the dish is empty by the next day.

comments:

"I just wonder what goes through some people's minds before buying a pet. 'Excellent. I always needed something to go with my two foot chain.'"

—*Anonymous*



Chongak again hanging around out back. He just had a full dinner's worth of tuna and now he's relaxing. This poor guy's had a rough life, almost blind and missing half of his tail, yet he seems as happy as any other cat.

The other day I saw Chongak outside of my hagwon meowing at the Chinese food ajushi, who I am happy to say is kind to him, pets him, and gives him some scraps of food now and again. This time however, a group of middle school students was outside. Chongak meowed at them for attention, but the kids laughed and threw rocks and tried to kick him. That crushed me. I felt ashamed to be a human being. I saw red. I left my students and ran downstairs and outside, shaking my fist like a madman. I came inches from strangling one of the little laughing punks, who had no idea what I was angry about.

I yelled in English, "You ignorant little spoiled idiots picking on a helpless cat when he all he wants is a pat on the head and a scrap of food!" They all ran off without a clue as to what I was saying. Chongak remained howling in the bushes, hungry, pathetic. He waited there for an hour. When I finished work and went outside he meowed so loudly for my attention. It was like a scene from *Gone With the Wind*. Almost as if in slow motion, we ran to greet each other. "I understand you, little kitty," I said. Trotting by my side, he followed me all the way home.

comments:

"Poor Chongak! At least he has his tuna, since he's not getting any other action today. I wonder what happened to his tail? Maybe a was hungry and ate it for breakfast?"

—*thegirl*

"Dietary needs for dogs and cats are different. Feeding them dog food is not good. Of course, something is better than nothing I suppose."

—*Chris*

"The orange family looks so cute together. Very loveable bunch. Maybe you can put on an orange cat costume and they'll warm up to you a bit more. Maybe quit your job and go live with them in the forest."

—*Lisa*

"If you decide to free the chicken let me know, Korean chickens taste great!"

—*Peter Kim*

A wonderful photo of my dinner, kimchi chigae (Kimchi soup), and pan chan (Korean side dishes). All this food used to seem disgusting to me when I first came to Korea, now I can't live without it. For some, it is an acquired taste.



Here's the last meal I will eat off the floor before I buy a bap sang (rice table).

Dwenjang chigae. This particular restaurant delivers the food in the plastic bin you see there. It's a really good idea, if you ask me, and I'd like to see more restaurants do it. Instead of piling all the individual dishes outside your door, you just toss them all back in here. I even put a



thank you letter in the box once, thanking the ajumma for her delicious cooking. It paid off. Now the side dishes are much bigger.

comments:

“I met an ajushi once who told me he has eaten *dwenjang chigae* two times every day for the past 10 years. He plans on living forever.”

—KwangjuKen

Julie and I met up for dinner in Songnae and since the weather was perfect, we decided to eat *saeng kalbi* (strips of beef) outside. We chose a place that was crowded - a sure sign in Korea that the food is great. And it was.

Everything here was just fantastic and we really had a nice time. Julie can't believe Americans don't eat like this at restaurants back home.

I agreed; why don't we? I guess it's because Americans don't like to cook their own food at a restaurant and they don't like sharing their food with each other. (I still remember my mother's look of shock when I started eating off her plate when I



went home last time). I like that part. It's very sociable. Not once have I ever gotten sick off food in Korea at all, much less by just sharing a meal with my friends. I'd much rather eat like this than at a steak restaurant like Outback Steakhouse...but the again, maybe I've just lived here too long.



This is *sam gae tang*, which is Korean ginseng, whole chicken soup. It's one of the best Korean dishes, in my opinion, and very healthy. I could live on this for a year or more.

The Windy Times

(from the series that started a sub-blog)

"Hello everybody. I'm Windy. That's my English name. Why Windy you ask? Because I hope to be like windy tree. I also want to be a star. What kind of star you ask? I'm not sure yet. We will see."

Monday, February 10, 2004

I finish my last elementary kids classes at 6:40. My adult class starts at 7:10. During the 30 minute interim I sometimes eat fried rice at the Chinese restaurant below the hagwon. Sometimes I run across the street to my apartment and pace. Other times, like today, I hang out in the office, twiddle my thumbs, read the Korea Herald, use the computer, all the while hoping none of the adult students will show up. It happened once before, not a single one came. I wished it never did because ever since, I've waited for it to happen again. It hasn't.

The fact is, adults are inconsistent. They see a sign one day and suddenly feel excited about studying English again, just as they may get enthusiastic about exercising at a gym. At first they attend class every day. Then they start missing now and again. Eventually, sure enough, they quit altogether. It's understandable, though. They work long hours. They're busy. They're tired. I only have a few students who have lasted the past five months since the class began.

The consistent students: Windy and Stan. They work together at the city's agriculture office and they get free tuition. Windy is an *ajumma* - she's married and has two children both of whom I teach at the hagwon. Stan is her coworker. He's 32, handsome, single. He's very nice actually, and he drives a sports car. He can't find a date. If any girl is interested, let me know.

[Update: I got e-mails from 2 girls in the states interested in meeting him. Hey, what about me?]

Windy is in love with English. She has traveled many places and wants to see more. She's studied English for the past 3-4 years almost incessantly. She's studied with a private teacher, at various hagwons, with study groups, with me, and every night at home...she can't get enough. And that's the problem. In class she never shuts up with her sputtering, stuttering English. At first I found it annoying. But then I realized it has its benefits, two in particular. 1 - It takes a lot of

B-Sides

"Your friends wonder why you have a roll of toilet paper on your kitchen table and you wonder why they're asking."

The Proud Recruiter: An Email

“They said it was chosen ‘the good apt. to live of this year in 2003’ by some APT research.”

Recruiters. While often frustrating, you have to laugh at some of their desperate attempts to earn a recruitment fee. This is an actual e-mail sent to me by a newbie on the job. All I wanted to know was where the job would be, how many classes I would be teaching each day and the salary. Instead of answering these simple questions, he wrote a lengthy e-mail with a thoughtful yet peculiar description of my would-be apartment. This e-mail came after I spent 30 minutes on the phone listening to him tell me how much he already enjoys being a recruiter and how he takes tremendous pride in his job. It’s obvious that he was trying to be sincere, but he never answered the questions!

I drove to the apartment with the official worker from the hagwon as it took 3 minutes. The apartments are surrounded all nature and mountains. The air was so fresh. There was the nice hiking road on the mountain that people were enjoying with happiness. He said a path up a mountain is close took 10 minutes to the entrance. People were really busy. The parking section were full of cars even 4 in the afternoon. So I could imagined it would be hard to get parking space at late night.