

Island of Fantasy

A Memoir of an English Teacher in Korea

Shawn Matthews

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Disclaimer

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

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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

“Do you want your head cut off?”

“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.”

“Is that so?” he said, suddenly showing a genuine interest. 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."

"Wow."

"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

doorbell rang. It was Mom and Grandpa. They brought some gifts for my trip: deodorant, toothpaste, and a whopping \$20.

"Times are tough, but we hope this helps," Grandpa said.

"I understand and thank you."

"Your grandfather has something to tell you," said Mom, nudging him.

"Oh, yes," he said, clearing his throat. "They have many typhoons over in Asia, you know. You say you'll be on a small island. Well, typhoons have been known to blow away whole islands in minutes."

"That's right," Mom piped in. "You don't want to see a typhoon—trust me. Now start unpacking."

"Would you two stop it, please?"

"She put me up to it," said Grandpa shamefacedly.

"Just thought you should know," said Mom. "It's typhoon season there now, but I don't want to worry you. You should be fine. Hope the plane doesn't run into one, though. Oh, Lord."

She reached down and picked up Clara. "Oh, you poor cat. Cats never forget. Never. And they mourn, you know. When you don't come back for her after a day or two, she'll get depressed. She'll start howling and stop eating. She'll never be the same. Sometimes they die from sadness. You poor, poor kitty."

"Thanks, Mom. Since you're so concerned, why don't you and Grandpa take her."

"Not on your life," Grandpa said, coughing hard on his cigarette smoke. "I'm already stuck with your mother's."

"You love Booboo and you know it," she said.

"I wouldn't care if that damn cat jumps off the balcony and never comes back."

Mom and I rolled our eyes. Grandpa was always saying that, but we knew he really loved Booboo, always playing with

her and buying her expensive treats. One time she really did get outside. Grandpa said he didn't care—until it got dark. He went out with a flashlight and called her name until he found her stuck in a tree—whereupon he promptly climbed up to make the rescue.

“Well, I certainly don't want another one,” he said decisively.

“That's OK,” I said. “My neighbors are going to watch her for now.”

“Look at this mess,” said Mom, tossing the cat down. “You'll never be ready by tonight.”

“Not if I stand here talking to you all day.”

After lunch I set up my computer at their apartment and attempted to show Grandpa how to use e-mail, a rather frustrating task considering he had never used a computer before, much less the Internet. “When I was kid,” he said, “we used two cans and a piece of string to communicate with each other. To send a letter to Korea would have taken three years. Now all I have to do is push this button and you're telling me you'll get it in seconds? Ha! ha! I may be old, but I'm no fool.”

“It's not so different from using the phone, except the information is textual.”

“What's this thing called?” he asked.

“A mouse.”

“A what?” He laughed, coughed on his cigarette and said, “You'd better not tell that to Booboo.” She was sitting in her usual position: next to his feet.

“So anyway, first you have to dial. Click this button and it will dial up and connect you to the Internet.”

“Aha! It's going to dial you up in Korea using this phone line? I knew there was a catch. I can't afford that kind of bill.”

“It's a local call, Grandpa.”

“How can it be a local call to Korea?”

"You're not calling Korea. You call a local provider that I will pay for monthly with my credit card. E-mail is always free no matter where you send it. You don't have to worry. Now here we go; we're online. Type in the address up here."

"But I don't have your address in Korea."

"Not that address, Grandpa! The e-mail website address."

"What?"

"I knew it," said Mom. "That computer will be the death of him. He'll never figure it out. He'll die trying."

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks, I'm afraid," Grandpa said, sighing and shaking his head.

"Like this, see. Here is the e-mail site. Try to login with this username and password I made for you."

"Just saw on the news you're not supposed to give out that information."

"You're my grandfather and this is your own account. I made it for you."

"Says on the news, you can't trust anyone. Not even your own grandpa." He looked at me squarely in the eye and said, "Are sure you want to give that to me?"

"It's not my information anyway."

"Well, whose the hell is it?"

"The death of him," said Mom. "You're killing your grandfather with this computer, Shawn."

"I'm sorry, but two cans and a piece of string won't work to Korea, so one of you has to learn."

"You know I can't, not until I get new glasses anyway."

"Don't worry about it now," said Grandpa. "Andy downstairs can help me. I'll show him that paper. No use causing all this fuss before you go."

He stood up and Booboo stood up, too. He went out to the kitchen and Booboo followed. He came back to the living

room and she sat by his feet. He threw a toy mouse down the hallway. She chased it down, picked it up in her mouth, hurried back and dropped it. He threw it three more times, smiling.

"You really hate cats, huh, Grandpa?"

"Damn thing won't leave me alone."

"I wonder why," said Mom, rolling her eyes.

After dinner, we watched some of the news and the weather report. "Not showing any typhoons anyway," said Grandpa, eating a hot piece of homemade apple pie.

"Not on this side of the world anyway," Mom noted.

I stood up, irritated. "Well, I'd better go and finish."

Mom shook her head. "That poor, poor cat."

It was a long, guilty drive back to my place. Clara scampered to the door and meowed as if to say, "I thought you forgot me. Let's go." I went out to the kitchen and fixed her the rest of the shrimp and put a glob of vanilla ice-cream in her dish. I stared at her, smiling and reminiscing while she ate. She had been with me through many of the best and worst times of my life. After she finished I played with her and the toy mouse for a while, and then picked her up and gave her a big hug.

"You're a great cat, Clara. You've always been. You're a better cat than I am a person. You've been a good friend all these years and I'm so sorry." With a heavy sigh I brought her to my neighbor.

"Well, would you look at this," said Mary, taking her from me. "Oh, you beautiful cat. Yes, you cutie-wooty little sweetie kitty pooh. Oh my, not so little after all. Somebody's been feeding you too much."

"She really likes to eat."

"I'd say so."

"Here's her stuff," I said. "I hope it's enough to hold you over."

“Oh, it's not a problem. Like I said, I really like cats and will take good care of her. She'll be fine.”

I tried to hold back but couldn't. My eyes were full of tears. “You hear that? You'll be fine. You be a good cat and I'll be back soon.” She jumped to the floor to sniff around, captivated by the new environment.

“Thank you, Mary,” I said, wiping my eyes on my sleeve. “I'll write you an e-mail soon.”

After check-in at Hancock Airport, Mom broke into tears.

“I can't believe my baby is leaving me,” she wailed. “My son, my life, my joy!”

“He'll be just fine,” said Grandpa.

“Don't worry, Mom. This is a great opportunity for me.”

“You better call us as soon as you get there.”

“I don't know if I'll be able to. I'll send an e-mail.”

“Hope I can figure out how to get it,” said Grandpa.

The small commuter airplane was docked at the terminal. I had never been on an airplane and I was a little jittery. “How long to New York City?” I asked.

“Oh, about an hour,” said Grandpa.

“I hope I can figure out JFK airport during the layover.”

“Just go to the information desk.”

“Oh, my baby. It's not too late to change your mind. You don't have to go.”

“Knock it off,” Grandpa and I said in perfect harmony.

Glancing around, hoping to spot my ex, I noticed Rick ambling down the corridor. “Jesus Christ, man—you're really here,” he said. “I had to verify it with my own eyes. Rumor had it you were playing a big joke. George had it 3:1 you'd show up for work Monday.”

“Thanks for coming,” I said, and introduced him to Mom and Grandpa.

“You look normal,” said Mom. “Tell him how absolutely crazy he is.”

Rick laughed. “Nah. It’s something he’ll never forget. Everyone’s really excited for him.”

“I am, too,” said Grandpa. “Never expected it to be *Korea*, but what the hay?”

Boarding time arrived and I panicked. Am I really going to Korea? I must be totally out of my mind! Sensing my sudden distress, Rick patted me on the back. “Think about those Korean chicks,” he whispered. “Lucky bastard.”

“Oh, Shawn,” wailed Mom, sobbing heavily now. “You can still change your mind. Make sure you wear your seatbelt on the plane—not that it’ll do you any good if it goes down, but do it for me anyway.”

“Watch out for those typhoons,” said Grandpa, winking.

“I love you both very much,” I said, hugged them, waved goodbye and boarded the cramped commuter jet. I had a window seat and could still see my mother wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. I felt nervous, anxious, doubtful – yet incredibly excited. The plane rolled away and the stewardess began to demonstrate how to wear a life-vest. We slowed to a standstill, the engines kicked in grating and harsh, the propellers spun into a blur and the plane dashed down the runway.

My stomach squirmed as we left the ground. The small airplane wobbled in the wind, and the thump of the wheels retracting startled me. I had my eyes glued to the window and stared down as Syracuse, New York shrunk away into memories.