

STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

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PREVIEW 9

This was easily my favorite class of the day, the school's only level 109. Alice had told me that nobody wanted to teach this class, because they were bored with the book and, as graduates of Korean high schools, they already knew English grammar better than most Americans. I jumped at the opportunity to teach it because I saw that these students wanted to practice, to be engaged in actual, meaningful discourse, and to learn about more than just pronunciation and the assembly of sentences. After nearly a month here, this two-hour block was the one time of the day when my brain felt alive.

This class was the event horizon for the three men and three women comprising it, halfway between the colleges they had just graduated from and the uncompromising world of full-fledged Korean adulthood. They clung to it. I had come

STEALING CINDERELLA

to think of the group as the Deadbeat Club, like the name of a song on my former roommate's B-52s tape.

On the board, I'd written each of their nicknames and asked them what their major had been.

"Okay," I said. "Now, why did you choose these majors?"

"Nobody chose," Paul said. "The Korean college system is different than the U.S. system."

"Oh, really? How so?"

"In America, you apply to many different colleges and choose one that admits you," Sarah said. "In Korea, you may only apply to one college."

"Not just college," Groundhog said. A former SNM Academy class had so named him because he had the same face and vacant puppy-dog expression as comedian Bill Murray. "Major. One major at one college."

"So, Koreans apply just to one major at one college, and that's it?" I asked. "What if you're not accepted?"

"If you're not accepted, you don't go to college," Sarah said.

"You can study and take the test again the next year," Paul said.

"Wow. So, you apply to one major at one college, out of all the majors and colleges in Korea. How do you know where to apply?"

"Practice tests," Groundhog said. "And parents."

"We take a lot of practice tests, and we know around what our official score will be," Sarah said. "Then in that range there are different majors and schools that accept students with scores like that. Past scores that were accepted for each major at each school show what it will probably be again this year. Every major is a separate competition."

"It's on the news," Groundhog said. "Not every school, but when there is a big change. Like the stock market. They say,

STEALING CINDERELLA

“The chemistry major at Seoul National University is seeing more competition this year. They will accept this many and already have one-third.” he shrugged. “I don’t know how many. Whatever number.”

“Wow,” I said. “So, do any of you know what you’ll do, what your jobs will be, with those majors?”

“Housewife,” Strawberry and Sarah said, almost simultaneously. Strawberry had majored in home economics and Sarah in English.

“You know this already?” I asked.

“There’s nothing else,” Sarah said.

“I’d be doomed,” I said. “I can cook a few things, I guess, but I’m not good at cleaning. What about the rest of you?”

“Banker,” Groundhog said.

I gestured to the board, where it showed he’d been a business major. “That makes sense. You are trained in business, and you choose to apply that education to a career in banking.”

“I didn’t choose it,” Groundhog said. “I don’t want to be a banker. It will be very boring. I want to work for a small company, have more control. My father says I should be a banker because it is more secure.”

“And so, you have to be a banker, because your father says so?” I asked. “Is that common in Korea, that your parents choose your career?”

“Very common,” Paul said. Everyone agreed.

“Maybe everybody,” Strawberry said.

“I’m sorry you have to be a banker, Groundhog,” I said.