

STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

MARK D. DIEHL

PREVIEW 3

It was a little after 5:30 on my first morning in Korea, and I was already walking to work, dressed in a suit and tie. Leo, who was to be my roommate here as soon as the current occupants of the company housing unit moved out, walked with me. For now, we'd both been put up at a local *yogwan*, which my guidebook described as a traditional Korean hotel. Judging from its construction and décor, it was apparent that Korean tradition was big on poured concrete and yellow linoleum.

"Did Mr. Shin speak to you at all when he picked you up at the airport yesterday?" I asked.

"No," Leo said. "Korean Lurch didn't say a word.

"Heh. Korean Lurch. Perfect." Mr. Shin's appearance was dour and deadpan, and he had the personality to match. "Did he do the thing where he just held up the brochure?"

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“Yes!” Leo said. “The same one they sent to us in the mail, where it’s all in Korean with the logo and the English letters spelling SNM ACADEMY. I had to get right up in front of him to see what it was.”

“And he knew what we looked like!” I said. “Remember, we had to send pictures? Why have us do that if they’re not even going to wave to us at the airport?”

“To make sure we’re white, maybe” Leo said. “They don’t seem very interested in diversity, here. You’re the only white guy I’ve seen in Korea, and there’s nobody from any other race at all.”

Together we followed the dark sidewalk toward the building Korean Lurch had pointed to the day before as he’d driven me to the *yogwan*. The only things that distinguished the school from the other boxes of concrete and glass were the two small red and yellow signs, in English, at its upper corner: *SNM Academy* and *SNM Junior*. It was about ten blocks from the *yogwan*, on the same side of the six-lane street.

“This is going to be challenging, starting to teach at six-thirty every morning,” Leo said.

“And working until nine at night,” I added.

“I think that’s a pretty typical Korean schedule, he said. “At least we have time off in the middle of the day.”

“Maybe enough time to sleep an hour,” I said, “if we end up living close by.”

The building was six stories tall, and occupied exclusively by our company, though the first two floors were empty. We rode a torturously slow elevator to the reception area on the fourth floor, where everything was a muted bluish-gray. The floor had been divided into small rooms by the installation of inch-thick panels that ran from floor to ceiling, which

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seemed to be made of the same stuff used in construction of office cubicles.

In the lobby was a black-and-white portrait of the founder, Moon Seung Nam, an expressionless and glassy-eyed old Korean man with age spots on his mostly bald head. “He looks embalmed,” Leo whispered.

An American man came in. He was probably at the tail end of middle age, and he would have been a little over six feet tall, except for the fact that he seemed permanently hunched over. He had tangled, matted, graying hair around a mostly bald pate. The stubble on his face might have been two or three days of growth, and his lips were chapped and cracked. As required by company policy, he was wearing a jacket and tie. They were rumpled and didn’t seem to fit quite right, but to Koreans he might have passed for the “exhausted businessman” type. To me, he seemed more like the “shopping cart full of empty cans” type.

He smiled and reached for my hand. “You guys are Mark and Leo, I’ll bet,” he said. He spoke too slowly and too softly, like Mister Rogers in an opium den.

“I’m Richard,” he said.

“I’m Mark,” I said, shaking his limp, leathery hand.

“So you’re the boss, huh?” Leo asked.

“I’m *a* boss, I suppose,” Richard said. “Just promoted when Jason left.”

Jason had been the one who had offered me the job on the phone. Nobody had informed me that he’d be leaving before I arrived.

“Mr. Pock and I have the same rank,” Richard said, “but I work with the expat teachers and he’s in charge of the Korean staff. You’ll meet him sometime, I’m sure.”

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“Have you been teaching long, Richard?” Leo asked.

“I worked in Taiwan before this,” Richard said. “Before that I was tutoring foreign students back in the Baltimore area, where I’m from.”

“How long have you been in Korea?” Leo asked.

“Four years.” White and Korean teachers began passing by on their way to class. “This is James Lawson, from Atlanta,” Richard said. “These are our two Canadians, Big Joe and Canada Katherine, and the ones coming in now are Roberta, Liz, David, Sue, Ryan, and Jennifer.”

Jennifer was a beautiful, petite Asian woman in her early twenties, but mostly she looked like money. Everything was top of the line, from her pearl earrings and flawless makeup, to her imported (probably Italian) leather handbag and shoes. The brown silk designer suit she wore had to have set her back some serious cash, especially in a country with so many trade restrictions, and the suit had pants instead of a skirt, which I could already tell was unusual for dressed-up women in Korea. Her hairstyle, a straight perm with some shimmer coating stuff I’d seen a Japanese friend get once, was one of the priciest hairstyles I’d ever heard of. Even when compared to the obviously upper-class students I’d seen filing into the building, Jennifer seemed to be one of the elites. She was nice to look at, but the parading of wealth was off-putting. She was probably a rich Korean-American doctor’s kid or something.

Richard mentioned a few people’s credentials. David and Sue had certificates in teaching English as a second language, and James Lawson had taught in Japan. I wasn’t listening all that closely, but I heard enough to realize that I was the least experienced teacher in the place.

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“Our adult classrooms are up on floors five and six,” Richard explained. “Offices and reception are here on four. The third floor, below our offices, has classrooms for SNM Junior, the kids’ school, but you’re both here to teach adult classes so you probably won’t be down there much. There is a room at the back of the sixth floor that serves as a lab with cassette tape machines, and one at the front of the fifth floor that’s more of a lounge where students and teachers can wait for classes, practice conversation, and watch AFKN.”

“What’s AFKN?” Leo asked.

“The military channel,” Richard said. “Korea’s still at war, you know. There are thirty thousand American troops here, but you won’t see them because they never leave the bases. The American military has a TV station for its people, which they broadcast all over South Korea, with American shows like Good Morning America, Sesame Street, and news. Watching it is good practice for our students, but the lounge usually is mostly populated with foreign teachers.”

He opened the door to a room which could barely accommodate the three small desks it contained. “Mark, you’ll be in here.”

Canada Katherine was sitting at one of the desks. She was Asian, and a bit heavy, with glasses and unstyled hair that hung limply to her shoulders. She wore a frumpy polyester skirt suit in navy blue. Standing at the other desk was an older white woman in a long beige dress with embroidered flowers whose gray hair hung down to the middle of her back. She was wearing a lot of beads, and big, round eyeglasses halfway down her nose. “I’m Alice,” she said. “You’re going to observe my class this morning. Are you ready?” She gestured at the clock. It was 6:25.

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Richard continued down the hall with Leo.

“This class is a 101,” Alice said as we climbed the stairs to the fifth floor. “It’s our first adult level. We start at 101 and go all the way to 109, but there’s only one class of 109 right now. I like the lower levels because they’re easier to teach.”

She opened the door to the room directly above the office I shared with her, revealing fifteen college-aged students in small desks squeezed in around three sides. Next to the door was a whiteboard and a larger, rectangular teacher’s desk.

“Good morning, class!” Alice said.

“Good morning, Alice,” they said back, flatly, in unison.

“This is Mark. He’s going to be a new English teacher here. Mark, there’s an empty seat there next to Petunia. Why don’t you take that one?”

I sat down in the last available seat.

“Each of us teaches around a hundred students a day, in eight classes like this. Four classes in the morning, and four classes at night,” Alice said. “The students have all chosen an English nickname to use. That makes it easier for us to interact on a more personal level. In Korea there’s such a strong hierarchy that everyone has to change how they address each other depending on age; it would make conversation practice a nightmare. Nicknames free everyone up a little, let them escape all the roles they play, all the rigid structure of Korean life. Anyway, this is the class.”

One by one, she called on each of the students and had them introduce themselves by nickname. Some used real names like Kate, a few used professions like Musician, and some just chose random words, like the guy who called himself Spoon. She followed each introduction by asking them, “How are you this morning?” Every student gave the same indifferent, mechanical

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response: “Fine-thank-you-and-you?” Alice responded to each, modeling other variations like “I’m doing well today, thanks for asking,” or “I’m feeling good,” but nobody gave anything but the canned answer on his or her turn.

“Okay, class, let’s turn to page 54.”

Page 54 had one large cartoon at the top, with a tall, smiling woman standing next to a short one. “Everyone together,” Alice said. “Is Julie tall or short?”

“Julie is tall,” they said, in unison, flatly.

“Is Sarah short or tall?”

“Sarah is short.”

Smaller cartoons showed other opposites, like old and young, rich and poor, heavy and thin, pretty and ugly, expensive and cheap, quiet and noisy, and more. Alice went through each one the same way, and then broke them into pairs so they could practice on their own.

I got paired with Petunia, a short, serious young woman with thick glasses. When everyone had run through the whole series, Alice took over again and had them turn the page.

The next set of cartoons had one person assuming something, and the other person correcting them. “Tell me about your car. Is it new?” “No. It is old.” “Tell me about your sister. Is she ugly?” “No. She is pretty.”

When the class finished doing the exercises in unison, we all paired off again to practice. Then Alice pulled us all back together and started another page.

After an hour of this, there was a fifteen-minute break. I followed Alice back down to the office. “Some teachers stay in the room for break,” she said, “but I need to get away.”

“And that’s the class? You just go through the book like that?”

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“That’s it.”

Above Alice’s desk was a poster, all in Korean. It had a black and white photo of a somber young woman. Alice saw me looking at it. “They push kids so hard in Korea,” she said. “That was for a violin concert. You’ll see music is a big thing here. It’s another tool for teaching discipline, and the competition is brutal. She looks more like she’s going to war than about to play the violin, don’t you think?”

“If you hadn’t told me, I might’ve thought it was a *Korea’s Most Wanted* poster,” I said. “I’ve learned from Koreans back at school that competition is fierce here, though.”

Canada Katherine came in. “Did I hear you discussing music?” she asked. “Talking about *Revolution*?”

“Oh,” Alice said. “We weren’t, but that’s a good example of life here.” She turned to me. “The Beatles song *Revolution* was legalized last month. It’d been banned since it came out, twenty-five years ago.”

“How did you even hear about that?” I asked. “Was that AFKN?”

“No,” Katherine said. “AFKN is American. They just have news from the United States. There’s a newspaper we get, here, called the Korea Herald. It’s the only English newspaper in the country, so pretty much every foreigner here reads it. The school subscribes.”

“I’m sure I’ll check it out,” I said.

Then we were back upstairs, slogging through the material again. The cartoons showed a sunny day and the students said “It is sunny.” The cartoons showed a phone call where someone assumed the weather and got corrected. The class broke into groups. Petunia said nothing beyond what was in the book. I calculated that my contract obligated me to spend 2,496 hours doing this.

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The next class I observed was Karen's. Karen looked to be about my age, a white girl from California with curly, blonde, shoulder-length hair.

This class was a 103. Karen had the students introduce themselves. There was another woman calling herself Musician, and a man who called himself Carmen. They were all college students except for a middle-aged guy who'd chosen to be called Old Man and an *ajuma* who called herself Polly.

This class also had the habit of answering "How are you?" with a robotic "fine-thank-you-and-you?" I started saying "It's nice to meet you," instead.

"Attention, everyone," Karen said. "I'm going to do a magic trick today. This is Mark. He's a new teacher here. You can ask him questions. Now, Mark, for this magic trick, I need you to hold this paper, but don't unfold it."

"Okay," I said.

Karen sat down in one of two empty desks. "Go ahead, class, ask Mark some questions."

"Where are you from?" a businessman who called himself Robot asked.

"I'm from Iowa City, Iowa," I said.

"How old are you?" Old Man asked.

"I'm twenty-three," I answered.

"Are you married?" Old Man asked.

"I am not married," I said.

"Do you have girlfriend?" Robot asked.

"Do you have *a* girlfriend," Karen corrected.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Robot asked.

"No, I do not have a girlfriend," I said.

"What is your school?" a man named Charles asked.

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At this, Karen interrupted. "He's not still a student, right Charles? He went to school in the past, so use past tense."

Charles tried again. "What was your school?"

"Better," Karen said. "Or we would probably say something like 'What school did you attend?'"

"What school . . . did you attend?"

"I went to the University of Iowa," I said.

"Why did you come to Korea?" asked Betty, a perky young woman with short hair. Her pronunciation was perfect.

"I want to learn about Korea," I said. "I want to make friends, and maybe someday I can do business here."

In this sea of somber, expressionless faces, Betty's warm and genuine smile was rather striking. "I like that you came here to make friends," she said.

"Okay," Karen said. "It's time for my magic trick. Mark, please open the paper and read what is there."

I opened the paper to find a numbered list. I read it out loud. "Number one: Where are you from? Number two: How old are you? Number three: Are you married? Number four: Do you have a girlfriend? Number five: What school did you attend? Number six: Why did you come to Korea?"

I clapped softly in Karen's direction with my fingertips, an approving audience for her trick. The class remained expressionless. Even Betty's face looked serious again.

"Now, yes, I do know this class very well," Karen said. "But it's more than that. Korean society is hierarchical, and most of these questions help people figure out where you fit. Where you're from is something everyone wants to know about foreigners, but the other questions are more important here than most Americans would realize."

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“Okay,” I said. “I understand. My Japanese friends and roommates were like that.”

“Yes, okay,” Karen said. “I’ve known some Japanese people, too. The cultures do share some characteristics, though Koreans will often tell you that they hate Japan. I would say that Koreans tend to be ... let’s just say they’re blunter, here. Koreans are also ... just ... very intense about everything. You’ll see what I mean, soon enough.

“Okay, class,” she said. “Turn to page ninety-six.”

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