

Portraits

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The sun set on Seoul. As the night fell upon the skyscrapers and the bustling crowds between them, fluorescent lights crackled to life on every street corner. The blur of headlights far below him showed the tiny progress of cars. At the edge of his sight, the Han River painted a brushstroke of indigo across the horizon. The sun slipped into the river's depths, sending beams of orange light across the water's surface and into the city.

The American stood with his arms crossed over his chest, fighting the slight chill. He had been in Korea for the first three weeks of his month long visit, and in that time winter had reached the city. He grasped the rim of his mug, warm tea heating his palm.

In the stillness of the sunset he could hear the sound of running water splashing across the sink's bowl in the bathroom. His companion was freshening up. The faucet's elegant silver neck was one of their favorite things about this hotel room. It looked to him like a bowing swan – she told him it looked more like the arched back of an *Imoogi*, the great water serpents she stitched on her tapestries.

He took a slow sip from his mug, savoring the warmth against his lips more than the flavor. The mint fragrance of tealeaves hung in the stagnant air and mingled with the incense burning on the table before him. His gaze was focused out the window. As the city's lights pushed back at the shadows, the river on the horizon took on a silver sheen.

The sound of the faucet stopped, and after a moment he heard the door close. His companion walked up behind him and stepped into his embrace. Her lithe fingers trailed over his hands and took the mug from him.

Her hair was still damp from the shower. At his request, she had cut the traditional black locks that had reached halfway down her back. Now, they stopped short of her shoulders. He preferred her this way. She shivered back against him and giggled as he kissed the top of her head, then moved his lips down to her ear. Her black sweater was much too large, with sleeves that reached to her painted nails.

While she held the mug, he let his hands glide over her. He lined the curve of her jaw, then the neckline of her sweater. He traced lines down her forearms, then pulled her back against his chest and pressed his face against her neck. She turned her head to the side and pulled the mug tight against her chest, cradling it against her breastbone.

Only a golden point of the swallowed sun remained on the edge of the Han, and now light came only from the humans below them. As day was cast aside, the mug was forgotten on the table. Her hands streamed into his shirt and along his chest. She dug her painted nails into his back and whispered Korean in his ear. He growled responses in his classroom dialect, and although his grammar was imperfect their communication was quite clear. She pushed him back onto the bed and they flowed into each other.

He had first seen her in the English class he was helping to teach at the University as part of his foreign exchange. It took three days for his piercing blue eyes and tanned skin to get her alone at a tutoring session. That had been two weeks ago. Now they spoke little, their palms twisting against each other and gripping in the blind night.

As he shifted position, he felt her drift away from him and into her thoughts; this was not new to him. He knew that she was thinking of the other man. After their first time, she had been overpowered by her regret. It was her first infidelity. She had told him about her earnest boyfriend Jung-

Hwa, the dull and portly student that he knew from their class. Whatever she saw in Jung-Hwa was a mystery to him. He felt little pity for the impotent boy who was so unable to satisfy his woman. He only had a month in Seoul, and he intended to take whatever and whomever he could in that time.

The violet-scented incense by the window burned low as they exhausted themselves. Outside, the Han had wed itself to the dark horizon, reflecting the lights of the city as though they were stars. They kept coming back to this room, since his parents' bank account could afford the view, yet every night they were too entangled to watch the weave of stars kissing the tops of distant skyscrapers.

Afterwards, she lay breathless against his chest, with one of his heavy arms slung over her back. The steady rise and fall of her breasts pressing against him was as measured as the waves. It calmed him. He was almost asleep when she slid out of his arms and walked towards the window with slow steps. He rolled onto his side to watch her move, gathering the blankets around him as he leaned his head on one folded arm.

He could hardly see until she turned her phone on, the glow cast by her backlit screen lighting her face. She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth, her thin eyebrows raised. Her empty hand hung at her side as she flicked the screen repeatedly. After a moment she lifted the phone to her ear and took a step closer to the window.

Sleep dragged down on his eyelids, but he continued watching. For several minutes she held the device to her ear. He decided that she must have been listening to voicemails; periodically, the phone's screen brightened without her touching it, as one message ended and the next began. In one moment of light, he saw that her eyes were tightly closed. In the next, she was leaning her chin on a fist.

After what seemed to him like ten minutes, she lowered the phone into her lap. Her fingers flew over the keyboard for several moments, then froze. The screen had time to dim before she sighed and pushed the send button.

When she returned to bed, she lay with her back facing him.

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Jung-Hwa lay in bed alone with his phone resting against the bare skin of his breastbone. He held his head between his hands, staring at the bunk above him and listening to his roommate Chin Ho snore.

Their dorm room's small window faced into a narrow footpath, from which passing students could see in— not that there was anything to see. Just matching sets of furniture, crooked posters of pop stars, and two third-years with downcast and dark eyes. Beyond the sidewalk was only the grey wall of the building next to them. They always kept their blinds closed, but tonight Jung-Hwa had opened them to see outside. He gazed at the bland wall as though it would come alive, envisioning serpents swimming across the block of dreary stone. His imaginings occupied his sleepless night.

When his phone shook against his chest, Jung-Hwa felt the vibration in his heart. He lifted the device and stared at the screen, reading the message.

Jung-Hwa you are being ridiculous! I told you I was tutoring and that I couldn't come to see you after. I need my sleep now, please don't call any more. I'll see you tomorrow darling. Don't worry about anything.

He pressed one corner of the phone against his navel, turning it in slow rotations with his long fingers. The plastic shell ground across his hairless skin. It was cold.

With a weary sigh, Jung-Hwa rose from the bed to look out the window. Distant streetlights cast an orange glow over his little section of the footpath. It was a dingy path taken only by students cutting across campus. No one would choose to walk between his dormitory and the adjacent administrative building unless they were in a hurry.

Chin Ho let out a particularly loud grunt before rolling over, his naked torso emerging from the sheets like a whale thrusting into the air. *She* hated Chin Ho, hated how late into the night he crouched over his manga. She said that Chin Ho's intruding presence was why she never visited anymore, but that had only started to bother her two weeks ago. Jung-Hwa still lay on the left half of his twin mattress by instinct, although now he had only black air crowding him for space. He never slept soundly anymore.

As Jung-Hwa watched the gray wall, he fought with his instinct to go to her. He imagined riding the subway to her apartment, kicking down the door as a sudden wind tossed his hair, and stepping inside with the majesty of a rock star to confront her in a voice stern and strong. He did not know what he would say to her, but the details were trivialized by his imagination. He wanted to see her with a desire deep in his bones, but she never visited anymore. When he invested time into their relationship it seemed to only upset her. She had cut her lovely flowing hair despite his pleadings. He had never been able to satisfy her in the bedroom, but now she wouldn't even let him try.

Jung-Hwa lifted his phone, flicking backwards through the last month of messages between them. He had already read through them this night, five separate times.

He closed his eyes, letting his mind wander. Jung-Hwa tried to imagine an explanation for why she was pulling away from him. He imagined her wearing a black mask and carrying a long-bladed knife, slinking across rooftops with a band of thieves. When that image faded from his mind, he envisioned her confronting a fat mobster, her straw hat pulled low over her eyes and a sword on her hip.

It was easy to imagine any number of fanciful scenarios to explain the changes Jung-Hwa had noticed in the woman he loved. But it was easiest of all to imagine her enfolded in the strong American arms he saw twice a week in English class.

Shaking his head forcibly, he resolved to forget this image. It would do their relationship no good for him to fixate on an impossibility. She had spoken words of love to him a thousand times, and he would only spoil things by accusing her of such an absurdity. The problem, Jung-Hwa decided, was within himself. He returned to his bed.

Jung-Hwa busied his mind with counting the tidal rhythm of his breathing, watching the rising and receding of his chest. Despite his efforts, it was impossible to keep his thoughts away from her. He held his arms in an awkward ring beside him, as if curling around her tiny ribcage. He hugged this illusion and tried to reassure himself.

The night was long and cold to the lonely man. Every time he checked the time his guilt swelled inside him. Any true man, he knew, would be confident enough in himself that he wouldn't need to question his love's fidelity. In only a week, they would be celebrating their anniversary. Jung-Hwa

had booked a swan-necked paddleboat that traveled along the Han and set aside some money to buy chocolates. He had planned to have a picnic with her and watch the stars kiss the tops of the buildings as the sun set on Seoul. As that day grew nearer, his plan seemed only less likely to occur.

After three hours of shallow sleep, the window had brightened enough to force Jung-Hwa awake. The sun was cresting the top of Mt. Bukhan, baking the bare stone summit and reaching down into Seoul with wakeful arms. Jung-Hwa stared at the grey stone, blinking his tired eyes.

The sun rose on Seoul.