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University of Alberta

Canada San Sang Nim

by

Sarah Cooke

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Canada San Sang Nim* submitted by Sarah Cooke in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This thesis is a combination of text and image. A body of Creative Non-Fictional texts is paired with visual images to unfold a narrative about a young Canadian woman teaching English in South Korea. This thesis highlights issues of intercultural communication and Western cultural colonization; it is concerned with the politics of teaching English overseas. Tracing the role of the narrator—in her classroom and daily life—these stories examine the spaces and roles occupied and appropriated by a Western female body in an Eastern space. The form of this thesis—the tension created by placing visual work alongside written texts—explores the relationship between visual and textual information; it insists the two forms belong together.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would have been impossible without the support of my family. Thank you Mike, for grinning through it all. Mom and Dad, I've appreciated every ounce of your long-distance pride and have thrived on your enthusiasm.

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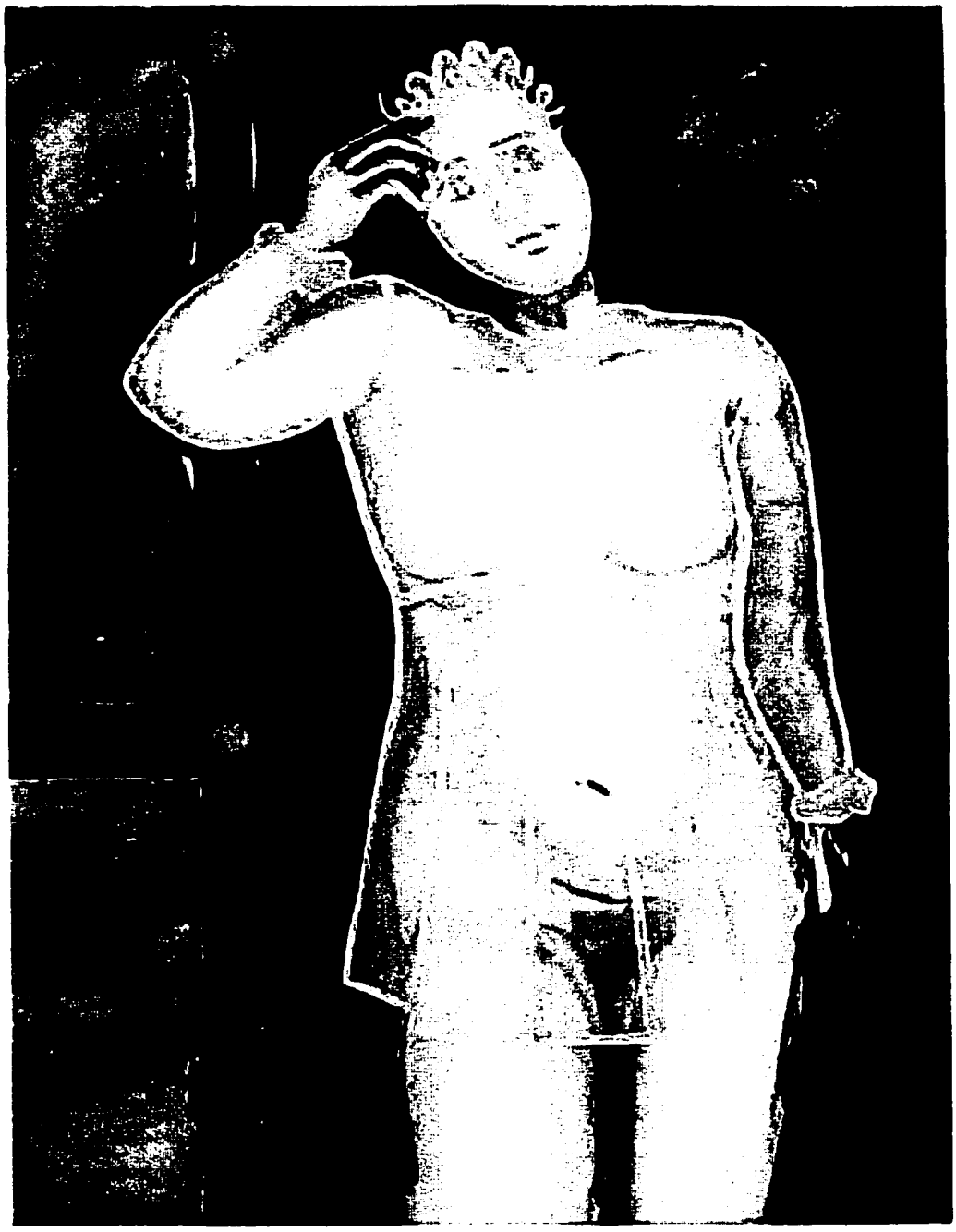

Finding Home

I stepped through a set of automatic glass doors and faced a crowd of strangers holding up signs. *This must be the right spot* I thought, and glanced shyly at the white papers marked with black letters. Most were hand written, in English, but none read Sarah Cooke. The men I'd anticipated on the other side of the doors had either not arrived, or had not bothered with a sign. I dragged my bag past anxious faces and stood in the middle of the room. Slightly taller than most of those around me, I was able to see the room clearly. Between strangers' hugs and handshakes, I looked over the crowd, straining to see a big friendly face. As people met and quickly departed, the room started to empty. I searched urgently, looking for a face I did not know. Still no sign. I wandered back and forth over the cold hexagon tiles. My shadow, dark orange, followed.

I was scared. As passengers and welcomers met then departed, I had a clear view of synchronised footfalls and long rifles. The military was on hand, men with baby faces patrolling the airport. Young bodies made old by the seriousness of green uniforms and huge guns. The stern men in big boots walked confident circles around the building as I stood still, insecure. I wondered just what kind of place I'd come to. I wondered if I could somehow return through the glass doors and catch the next flight back to Toronto. I thought about trying to make a long-distance call home. I decided that this was the biggest mistake of my life, and wished desperately for ruby slippers or a magic potion, anything that would take me back through those doors, back to my life on the other side of the world. Then I spied a big man scanning the room.

A month earlier, over the phone, I told my dad that I'd had it with Toronto, with my life, that I was headed for Korea, to teach English for a year.

"I'm going alone, Dad. Mike won't be coming with me."

"For Chrissakes, Sarah. You're just going to walk out on Michael? On five years?"

"He doesn't want to come with me, and this is something I have to do."

"Is there something wrong with your head? Women. What the fuck is wrong with you women?"

"Dad. I need to do this. I love Mike, yes, and I still care about him, but I have to leave. It's not a woman-thing. It's a me-thing."

Then I called my mom in Edmonton, worried she would be as upset as my dad had been. I spoke quickly into the phone, and after a moment of stunned silence, she replied, "I know you want to do this all by yourself, Sarah, but I know a man who can help you."

K.C. Lee worked for my mom at Alberta College. He was the head of the International Music Academy, and most of his students came to Edmonton from Korea. As I made contacts and finalized my plans in Toronto, my mom was busy networking in Edmonton. When it came time to decide, I spent two sleepless nights making list after list of pros and cons. Do I choose the school my mom helped me to find, or do I branch out on my own and go with the contact I'd made in Toronto? Fear closed the deal. If I went with the man my mom suggested, someone would be accountable for me. It would be harder to get lost, stolen or killed if K.C. Lee was responsible for my well being. So I agreed to go to Inchon, to the C.N.N. Language Institute. And that is how I ended up in

Seoul, South Korea, standing uncertainly at the Arrivals Gate of Kimpo International Airport, searching for a man I had never met.

A day or so before I left, my mom chirped into the phone, "K.C. Lee is a big guy like your dad—and nice like your dad. You'll recognize him because he's not puny like other Korean men. He has a big, friendly face." So when I saw that man who could be my dad, I slapped a smile on my sad face and made my way through the remaining crowd towards him. Dressed in a green golf shirt and khaki pants, K.C. looked just a little bit different than most of the men in the airport. He looked more casual, a lot less rushed. He must have been close to six feet tall, much bigger than I'd expected, much bigger than most of the men I'd seen so far. He didn't look gentle, but he looked kind. Dark eyes, hinting at laughter, sat deep in his face. Those eyes, peering over the tops of his large round cheeks, looked passionate. I imagined K.C. would be quick to smile, quick to yell. I trusted those brown eyes, and was surprised to find that K.C. did somehow remind me of my blue-eyed father back in Winnipeg. I straightened my long skirt and approached slowly.

"K.C. Lee?"

Through full lips, a cheerful voice replied, "Sarah?" His eyes and mine almost level. He looked directly into my eyes and continued, "You are big. Don't look like mom. Must look like dad, eh?" I smiled, genuinely this time, and nodded again.

K.C. called over to another man, small, wearing a rumpled white suit. The small man bobbed his head self-importantly behind dark glasses and made his way slowly toward us.

"This is the Vice Principal, Mr. Richard Park."

From Toronto, I had had several midnight conversations with Mr. Park. He looked older and smaller than the Mr. Park of my imagination.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Park," I said and held out my hand. He gripped it softly, not shaking it, just holding on, squeezing my fingers and making no attempt to let go. I finally squirmed free, astonished to find that his eyes were not looking at my face, but were focused instead on my body, my chest. I shivered and took a step back.

The two men had a brief conversation in Korean, Mr. Park giving me the once-over as they spoke. Abruptly, Mr. Park waved, said, "See you then," and checked me out one last time before he limped back in the direction from which he had come. Richard Park walked with a cane, and I learned later that his students had all heard different stories as to why: polio, a car accident.

As Mr. Park headed slowly away, I turned to K.C. Lee. "Can I smoke?" A nod and a grin. If my mom hadn't told me, I would not have noticed that K.C. Lee also walked with a limp, that the left side of his body trailed slightly behind the right. With his good hand, he reached for my cart and pushed my bag through the doors, his limp almost imperceptible.

Outside, my first view of Korea was of a large parking lot, packed full. My eyes contemplated an impossible mass of concrete and chrome, metal and tires. K.C. offered me one of his, a This cigarette, and we smoked and talked. I trusted K.C. Lee implicitly and hoped I would see him often.

K.C. was well known in Seoul. He'd attended Seoul University and, before his stroke, had been a famous opera singer. He came to Korea once a month, on recruiting trips to find new students for the Music Academy in Edmonton. When home, he was

surrounded by old friends, colleagues, and assistants. As we smoked, me wondering over the cars—so many, so shiny, so close together— a young man approached. K.C. introduced him simply as, "My Assistant." This man, a former student of K.C.'s, helped me and my hockey bag into his car. Luggage and bodies stowed safely, K.C.'s Assistant took the wheel and the three of us headed for Inchon, an hour North-West of Seoul. On the highway, K.C. pulled out a tiny cell phone and made a call to my mom, back in Canada. I was able to tell her without tears that I'd arrived, that I was safe, and that I would talk to her soon. That was the last time I spoke to her for over a month.

K.C.'s Assistant somehow managed to gain—and keep—momentum, confidently and magically weaving the small white car through the gridlock As I stared out my window, K.C. asked for my impressions.

"What do you think of Korea?"

He was the first person to ask me this question, and I figured out quickly that a complimentary response is the only response. As the year wore on, I answered that question hundreds of times, and my answer never varied.

"I like Korea," became my standard answer, and as time went on, I would add, "I love the food, and people are very kind to me."

Our trip had taken us from Seoul, a city of twelve million, to Inchon, a city of three million, but I hadn't been able to identify where one city ended and the other began. I didn't even notice the smog as I stared in disbelief at the view from the car window. Orange and blue roofs. Traffic and buildings. No green spaces or mountains. Just cars and buildings. Beyond the sound-barriers that lined the freeway I spied apartment buildings and houses. Lots of them. And they all looked the same. Never mind cities, I

wasn't able to differentiate between neighbourhoods. All the buildings looked tall and old. After about an hour, we pulled into another parking lot, small and empty.

The building in front of us had an English sign: Hotel Nice. I didn't know it, but we had arrived in Inchon. The Hotel Nice was a large square building, white and sparse. (It was actually very close to the place I would end up living a few months later, though I had no way of knowing that at the time). It wasn't until I got out of K.C.'s Assistant's car that I realized two things: Korea was damn hot, and I was damn tired.

K.C. and his assistant escorted me into the nearly empty dining room, where we sat on overstuffed chairs at a table done up in white linen. Mr. Park, no longer wearing his sunglasses, arrived a few minutes after we did. As he overlooked me, I noticed his eyes: small and dark, no trace of laughter. He joined us at the large round table. K.C. Lee did most of the talking.

"What kind of food do you like, Sarah?"

"I like everything."

"Korean? American?"

"How about Korean?"

Some chuckles and conversation between the three Korean men, and then, "We will have Korean Barbeque."

"I think I tried Korean Barbeque one time at a restaurant in Toronto."

My comment was met with silence.

When the waiter arrived with our food—tray upon tray of small brightly coloured dishes—I picked up the chopsticks sitting beside my plate.

"You use chopsticks."

I wasn't sure if this was a question or an accusation, but smiled through gritted teeth and replied to Mr. Park, "I use chopsticks sometimes. We eat a lot of Chinese Food in Canada. The chopsticks at home are thicker, made of wood. These chopsticks are beautiful, but a little difficult for me." Instantly in love with the combination of sesame oil, garlic and chilli peppers, I wrestled with the thin metal chopsticks and delighted over the food.

Compliments delivered and accepted, the conversation changed topics, changed languages. I was happy to sit and eat and listen—K.C. dominated the conversation and spoke with such passion that several times I had to make a conscious effort to close my mouth and avert my eyes. (Over the course of the year, I would spend many meals like this, surrounded by Korean hosts speaking to each other in a language I could not understand, paying attention only to K.C., fascinated by the emotion ever-present in his voice). All too soon, the conversation ended. Lunch at the Hotel Nice was over. K.C. Lee and I were going to part ways, and I was to continue my journey alone with Mr. Park.

As we prepared to leave, Mr. Park checked to see that K.C. was listening, turned grandly to me and joked, "I am your brother, Richard." I mustered up a smile I didn't feel.

"Ha. Ha. Ha. Hello, brother."

"This is my sister, Sarah."

Satisfied, K.C. Lee got back into his assistant's car, and the two men headed back to Seoul. I climbed in beside Mr. Park, and balked as he patted my knee and put the car into drive.

As we pulled to a stop in the third parking lot that day, I looked up at what would be my temporary new home: a large apartment complex. I stared up at four identical buildings looking down on me. Each building, about twenty stories high, overlooked a concrete landscape. I got out and stood in front of Mr. Park's car, feeling ugly and wrinkled and hot. As I inwardly bemoaned my dishevelled appearance, a beautiful woman, black hair cut short, lips painted Coke-can-red, appeared at the entrance to the building. Mr. Park had explained that we were going to the home of my new boss, Mrs. Gu. The woman in front of us, dressed in a knee-length black skirt, wearing little black and white socks adorned with the smiling face of Mickey Mouse, looked young; I mistook her for the President's daughter. I didn't figure out until later that the woman in the short skirt and red shoes was in fact my new boss—the President of CNN and Mr. Park's superior. She smiled and waved hello. I did the same. No words were exchanged between us, and Mr. Park did not offer an introduction, at least not one in English, one meant for me, one to which I could respond.

The young woman and I dragged my bag down a dark hall, guided only by a dim light coming from a small elevator at the end of the corridor. I didn't think our three bodies and my large hockey bag would actually fit, but we stood close; the door shut and we began our ascent. Standing too close in a space that was too small, we had no choice but to smile as we breathed each other in. She smelled clean and pretty—freshly showered and perfumed. Mr. Park smelled rotten. Teacher Smell (coffee, stale, and lots of it) is one thing, but Mr. Park smelled of decay—the cologne he wore didn't mask the smell, but somehow accentuated it. I found muscles in my nose I'd never been aware of as my nasal passages, acting independently from the rest of my body, contracted; a futile

attempt to protect me from his foul breath. When we reached our floor, sixteen or seventeen stories up, I gratefully lunged out of the elevator. I was free from the forced proximity, but only for a moment. One step and I had to stop; I didn't know where to go.

The hallway I'd anticipated, one leading to the doors of various apartments, didn't exist. I was in a small alcove, unlit. A door to my left, and one to my right, and not much room for negotiation. If I took six steps forward I would be at the stairwell, heading back down to the lobby where we'd begun. As I followed the Mickey Mouse socks through the door on my left, I anticipated a small dim apartment that matched the dark of the hall and the fading walls of the stairwell.

In the foyer of the apartment, I looked to my right and saw what looked like hundreds of pairs of shoes. There were a few that belonged to a young girl: dainty patent leather with bows, little pink sneakers. Some belonged to a boy: runners with Velcro straps, flip flops. Some belonged to a man: black leather, plain. But mostly they were women's shoes. Cute women's shoes, as if made for a Barbie. I rolled my eyes at the bows and buckles, at the Mickey Mouse socks. Feet freed from my sandals, I stepped up and entered a luxurious apartment with marble floors and leather couches. The kitchen table was a glass topped Victorian thing, its carved chairs covered in leather that matched the sofa. This was not the modest, slightly worn apartment I'd been expecting.

I was instructed to sit on the couch and did so obediently. Mr. Park on my left and Mrs. Gu on my right. Conversation happened around me, through me, and definitely over my head. I could not understand, but still felt safe. *Looks like everything will be fine,* I thought. And then Mr. Park turned to me and said, in English,

"Let me see your plane ticket."

"My plane ticket?"

"Yes, yes. Let me see. Give it to me."

It was a stupid thing to do, but I was scared of offending my hosts, so I dug it hesitantly out of my purse. My hand trembled slightly as I passed this small rectangular lifeline reluctantly to Mr. Park. He pretended to look at it with interest, and then, placing it on the table in front of him—well out of my reach— he continued talking casually to Mrs. Gu, acting as though he'd forgotten it. By this point I knew I'd made a mistake. As he pretended to talk of other things, as I stared blankly at the opposite wall, not really noticing the lavishness of the wall unit and stereo equipment across the room, he passed my plane ticket slyly to her. Their hands met briefly somewhere between the small of my back and the back of the couch. Pass successful, she hopped up and nearly ran to a back bedroom. Touchdown.

She came back out to the living room, and the three of us pretended nothing had happened. We acted as though the ticket, my only contact with home, had magically made its way back into my purse. I don't know how I held back tears, or why I was so certain it would be wrong to question their actions. I sat and stewed, and choked back the apple that had been offered in friendship. I did not understand. That shaky security I had felt with the smiling woman in Mickey Mouse socks, with my Brother, had completely dissolved.

"Sarah."

I looked questioningly at Mr. Park.

"Sarah. You are tired. You take a nap now. Take some rest."

Seeing no other course of action, I nodded consent, and Mrs. Gu led me to her son's bedroom, mint green, miniature. She smiled—with her mouth—and closed the door. I sat on her son's bed, wondering briefly where Thomas would sleep, and then the tears came. Anger. Fear. Confusion. Each tear that slid down my cheek brought with it another emotion. *Why did they take my ticket? Why so sneakily?*

Mrs. Gu had paid for my ticket, return airfare from Toronto. I had heard of teachers signing contracts and then staying for only a week, a month, before they used their tickets to return home, leaving their employers without a teacher and without two thousand dollars in airfare. But I was indignant about being so suspiciously judged. I had agreed to come for a year and I wanted the chance to show them that I was honourable, that I would do my job. I wanted to be trusted, not held in suspicion. That night, I slept with my purse under my pillow, strap wrapped around my arm.

The next day was Saturday. I woke, purse still in my possession, to the sound of a woman talking angrily. When I opened the door to Thomas's room, I saw an old woman struggling with a little girl. The girl, half-dressed and doing her best to avoid clothes entirely, was pushing the old woman away. Struggling with the fussy child, the old woman finally gave her three harsh smacks on the behind. I was sure the spanking had been hard, sure that I would have tears in my eyes if someone were to hit me with such force, but the child looked unconcerned, unaffected, and continued fussing.

I coughed to announce my presence, and the tiny woman, birchbark curls framing her face, looked up. As she turned to face me, the little girl, eyes still half-shut with sleep, clung ferociously to the old woman's shirt, terrified. I presumed the two to be family: a

grandmother and her young granddaughter. As the little girl shrunk away from me, the old woman approached and smiled.

She had eyes like K.C.'s, full of kindness, suggesting laughter. I somehow understood that she was not a mean old witch, that she had not been abusing the little girl, and realized once again that I was in a strange place, where my rules, my codes of conduct did not apply. My alarm quickly turned to interest, and as the old woman smiled, I felt immediate comfort. I trusted that smiling face and instantly stopped questioning her approach to discipline.

She approached me and said something that sounded like, "banka banka?"

I stared blankly.

She waved her hand back and forth in the air and then made the gesture of lifting a fork to her mouth. I nodded and smiled. She left the small girl with me and went into the kitchen. By the time breakfast was ready, Ji Soo and I were friends—we'd played a game of hide and seek and I stopped being Stranger and started being Friend.

The woman improvised a breakfast of toast and eggs. She cooked some bread in a frying pan full of butter, and then fried two eggs, over easy. She served the whole thing to me on a plastic tray, hand painted roses peering up from behind the plate. As I ate she brought me a spoon, some jam, and a cup of strong coffee. I ate the soggy bread happily as the old woman finished putting Ji Soo's hair into pigtails held in place by shiny yellow plastic ducks. After breakfast, after I'd gone outside for a cigarette, staring with anxiety at the security guard staring at me with curiosity, the old woman and I sat and talked for several hours. We used hand gestures, made sounds that were not words, and understood just about nothing the other said. We knew nothing of one another, but we were friends.

I eventually showered and went back to nap again. When I woke the next time, it was Sunday. A man was sitting on the couch in the living room. The glasses on his face, delicate silver wire around small rectangular lenses, would have looked wonderful with a suit. He wore grey sweat pants and a white tank top, and I thought his glasses looked curious—so out of tune with his casual clothes. His balding head suggested an older man, but his face was free of wrinkles, and he was solid. I stared at his muscular arms and broad chest: a build like a swimmer's. This was not the meek Minister of Culture I'd been expecting. Except for the glasses and bald head, he looked like a young man about to head to the gym. Startled by the sound of the door opening, he stood up quickly and contemplated my face for several long seconds.

"Ahh...such a pale face. You surprise me. I am Mr. Ahn. My wife, Mrs. Gu, is your boss. It is a pleasure to meet you," he smiled and offered a handshake so firm I thought my fingers would break.

Mr. Ahn spent the afternoon talking to me, helping me to understand where I was, and what I was expected to do. He told me his wife was at work, that she would be home later, that I would start teaching the next day. He showed me the way to school, less than a block away, and taught me to say hello. I drew a smiling face on a piece of paper to match Mr. Ahn's demonstration: a high female voice cheerily saying to her imaginary class, "annyong hasseo." He told me his wife, as the president, was to be called, "Wan Jang Nim," and he taught me how to say "come here."

"My wife will be very happy when she comes home. She will be happy you can say Wan Jang Nim."

When Mrs. Gu came home later that night, I quietly said, "Wang Jang Nim, iri oseyo." Those strange sounds, uncomfortable and strange in my mouth, made sense to her. I stared in disbelief as she followed me into Thomas's room, where I offered her a box of chocolates. We sat together, Thomas, Ji Soo, Mr. Ahn, Mrs. Gu and I, watching Korean television and eating Ferrero Rochers. Mr. Ahn translated occasionally, but insisted that I not rely on his explanations: "Even if you can't understand the words, you can follow the pictures." I nodded and sat quietly for a few minutes before heading back to Thomas's room. I'd completely forgotten about the plane ticket and was caught up in nervousness over my new job. I wrote in my dairy, "I am scared—terrified—to start work tomorrow, but I am comforted by that fear, because it is a fear I have known before."

That first day, as I came through the front door of CNN, a young boy with a perfectly round face and large dark eyes happened to be running around the corner towards me. He looked up suddenly, put his hands on his cheeks, let out a startled yell, turned quickly and ran back from where he'd come. I was laughing as I made my way to the Councilor's Office. Mr. Park was on hand to greet me, to introduce me to the other two English teachers, Marilyn and John, both Korean, both of whom had studied English in the States. From across the room, I smiled at Mr. Park through gritted teeth and followed John into the communal teachers' office, where we filled the time with small talk.

"So you are from Canada."

"Yes. What about you?"

"I come from Inchon. I studied English in New York."

"Wow, New York must be pretty exciting."

"Yes, it is. But many people in America don't like Koreans. I saw a lot of racism."

"That's so sad."

"So what about you, do you know anyone in Inchon?"

"No."

"Here. This is the phone number of my friend. Her name is Dawn. She is a foreign teacher like you. You could be friends. She is fat, but she has a pretty face."

For half an hour we carried on like this, filling the air with whatever words we could think of, straining to understand each other, searching for common ground. Minutes before I was scheduled to stroll confidently into the classroom and start teaching, John frowned, cut our chit-chat short. He leaned across his desk, eyebrows wrinkled in a frown, and stared at me. I could tell he was reading my face, and I was sure he was reading my thoughts.

Without the slightest trace of a smile, he said quietly, "You look very nervous."

I blushed, chastising my readable face, and replied, "That's because I am nervous."

John accompanied me into a room where we were met by seven young faces, seven uncertain smiles. We sat down at either end of the long table and he stared at me as I faltered my way through a round of introductions.

"My name is Sarah. Hello." I turned to the student closest to me and asked, "How are you today?"

A curious face peered back, blinking shyly and quickly.

I tried another student, "And how are you?"

A non-committal nod was thrown my way, but no verbal response was given. *Keep your head up, Sarah, and your shoulders back,* my dad's perennial advice crept into my consciousness. *Take a deep breath. You can do this. Just move on to the next student.*

"And how are you?" After about fifteen failed attempts, John let out a loud and annoyed sigh.

"You are talking too fast. Slow down. They can't understand you."
My face burned at the criticism. I fumbled miserably for the next half-hour, trying—and failing— to elicit responses from the kids.

By the second class of the day, I was making better progress, and John felt secure enough to leave me alone. I was much more competent when his stare wasn't shaking my confidence, and although it was humiliating and confusing, I did manage to get through that first day on the job.

To get home, all I had to do was cross a street (usually free from traffic and filled instead with young boys watching men from the toy store race remote control cars up and down the block), go down a short path, turn right and cross the parking lot/courtyard to my boss's apartment. But I walked too far and ended up walking circles in the courtyard of a completely different apartment complex a few blocks down the road. I breathed deeply, tried not to panic and eventually made it back to Mr. Gu's apartment. When I arrived, some half hour later, I was met by the anxious face of Mr. Ahn.

"Sarah. Where were you? What happened? I was so worried."

"I am sorry to worry you. I got lost a little bit. Don't worry. I found my way."
As we ate dinner, I caught myself smiling.

Life quickly became routine, less scary. I went to work everyday and came to the boss's home every night. I didn't get lost going to the corner store, coming home from school. My fear subsided, but I wasn't happy. I was tired and angry. Tired of being hot and sticky, tired of waking daily in Thomas's cartoon bed to puddles of sweat gathering between my breasts. I was angry that I couldn't contact my family—I didn't yet know how to use the phone, hadn't found a way to use the internet, hadn't been given my own apartment, which had been part of my initial contract. I was powerless, and with K.C. back in Canada, I thought I had no one to help me.

One day, Mr. Ahn said, "My wife and I would like you to live here with us. We think of you like my wife's younger sister. We want you to be our family. Will you live with us?"

I replied honestly, trying to be polite, but not wanting to give the wrong impression. "Mr. Ahn, I am very thankful. You have a very nice family and I like you very much, but I would like to have my own apartment. I would still like to visit you, but I need some privacy."

"Ahhh. How can you manage? Cooking? Cleaning? I don't know how you can manage. But we will respect your decision. My wife will find you a nice place to live."

One Sunday morning, quite unexpectedly, that day arrived.

"Sarah, my wife has found you a home, but she is worried because there is no security guard."

As I said, "That's OK. I've never lived in an apartment with a security guard. I think I can manage," I was thinking, *is this a dangerous city? Will I need a security guard on the grounds? Is it a bad neighbourhood?* But I was so excited about having my

own place that I didn't voice any of those concerns. So far, Inchon seemed like the safest place on earth. Toddlers wandered feely in this city of three million, their parents confident that strangers would keep them safe. With that thought in mind, and with a fear that Mr. Ahn would make the apartment disappear if I seemed nervous, I stretched a grin across my face, strained to keep it there, steady. "I have been living by myself for a long time, Mr. Ahn." Smile. "I have not lived in the same city as my parents since I was eighteen." Smile. "I know how to cook, and I know I can do it." The look on his face suggested disbelief, but the matter was settled: I would be moving to a security-free apartment of my own.

That afternoon, Mr. Ahn and Mrs. Gu packed Ji Soo, Thomas and me into their car. We drove to the local Han Wha Mart, which looked to me like an enormous upscale Costco, a store selling everything from groceries to diamonds. HWM was to become my local grocery store, though I first believed it to be miles away, in another neighbourhood. I had no idea why we were going shopping, but I was happy to trail along with my adopted family, staring at the unexpected familiarity of the store, which had a Mc Donald's at its entrance. As we pushed our cart through the grocery aisles, I lagged behind, stopping to wonder over the food I recognized: Snickers, Oreos, Froot Loops. My favourite section was Imported Foods—most of which came from Germany. Mayonnaise and salad dressing could be purchased—for a price. I loved to try to decipher snippets of the German instructions and labels, was thrilled to see characters I recognized.

Mr. Ahn and Mrs. Gu treated me to lunch, asking if I'd ever had pig intestines. With a serious smile, I said no, and watched as the woman behind the counter cut something that looked like boiled sausage into bite-sized bits. Lunch in hand, we carried

on to the checkout line. Mrs. Gu paid for her family's groceries while I tried to ignore the curious stares and bought a carton of American cigarettes. Mr. Ahn and Mrs. Gu smiled at the onlookers as I tried to blend in with the wall.

We took the escalator up to the cafeteria, where Mrs. Gu quickly took control. She dumped a packet of small red crystals onto the slices of meat (salt, I soon discovered), and we ate the intestines with toothpicks. I ate a few pieces cautiously, and watched as Thomas and Ji Soo happily devoured the meal. Hunger more sidetracked than satisfied, we continued up a few levels to the parking garage, where we piled into the car. We drove for a few unrecognizable blocks, through some narrow back streets suited more to bicycles than to cars, and suddenly we stopped in a small parking lot I didn't recognize.

The building, red brick and squat, was squished between an abandoned playground (littered with candy wrappers and a dirty pair of white high heels) and a few taller apartments. As we entered the small building, I examined everything: the main door—glass—that didn't seem to lock; the twelve small mailboxes in the foyer; the barred windows of the apartments that looked out into the hall; the heavy steel doors. We walked to the second floor, and Mrs. Gu pulled out two keys. She unlocked the door, and I briefly closed my eyes, fearing the horror-stories I'd heard (rats, dirt, bugs, no toilet) were about to become my home. When I opened my eyes, a smile crept immediately to my lips.

It was adorable. Tiny, like a doll's house. Clean and feminine. It was a small room, maybe twelve feet by twenty. A small bed sat in the back corner, in front of a door that led to the bathroom (complete with a foam green Western toilet). The floor, pale-

green linoleum, was heated; the walls, papered in pink and green stripes, were topped with a floral border. In another life, this place would have made me cringe: so tiny, so suffocatingly cute. But in that instant, cute became synonymous with free, and I was overjoyed. I turned to Mrs. Gu, tears and disbelief in my eyes, gratitude in my voice, and whispered, "It's beautiful. Thank you."

Mrs. Gu smiled gently and pulled out her tiny hand phone, adorned with stickers and ribbon. She spoke quickly, in Korean. Conversation finished, she returned the phone to her purse and turned her attention to the room. She had brought one of the bags of groceries into the apartment and now rifled through it. She opened a box of cookies and sat her children on the bed. As the kids ate and bounced, we began to clean. I tried to convince Mrs. Gu that she needn't bother cleaning, that I could do it later, but she was determined to help. So we scrubbed the floors, the counter, the sink, making this room my home. Not ten minutes after Mrs. Gu's mysterious phone call, there was a knock at the door. In came the math teacher from CNN. He and another man were carrying a full-sized refrigerator, which seemed impossibly large in such a small space, and I gasped as the two men, shaking and sweating beneath the weight of the huge appliance, stopped at the entrance—refrigerator teetering dangerously—to remove their shoes. In bare feet, they carried that fridge to the back of the room, and I prayed they could keep their toes safe as they put the big white fridge in its place. Amazingly, no toes were lost, and I now had a bed, a fridge, a phone and a hotplate to call my own. Mrs. Gu put the remaining cookies and a bottle of juice in the fridge, then told me she would pick me up for work in the morning. She gave me one of the keys, waved and closed the door.

Alone, I emptied my suitcase gleefully, organizing my things into little piles on the floor. I turned the tap on and off, opened and closed the fridge door. I stared at the new key on my key ring, and locked and unlocked the door. I flushed the toilet and opened the window. I picked up the phone and listened to the dial tone. I danced happily around the perfect small space, happy to be in a place I could call home.

"Hello, everybody."

"Hi, Teacher."

I glanced down at my attendance sheet, then looked up at my young students, who were no longer afraid of me, who could finally understand me when I said hello. I turned to my most enthusiastic student, Jenny, who sat straight in her chair, wide smile gracing her attentive face.

"Jenny. How are you today?"

"I'm-fine-thank-you-and-you."

"I'm great, thank you."

"William, how are you today?"

"I fine."

Every day—for almost a month—my classes had been starting in the same way. Never any change. Everyone was fine, all the time. I'd practically given up. I couldn't get anyone to venture forth with a new reply. September threatened to become October, and I stopped noticing my students' answers, comfortable with our routine. As I worked my way down my list one afternoon, barely listening to my students' rote replies, I came to Thomas's name. I asked my boss's eight year old son, "Thomas, how are you?"

"No fine." I stopped and stared. Sure enough, the playful smirk I'd come to associate with Thomas had been replaced by a frown. He was definitely not fine.

"No fine? Why? Why no fine?"

He searched for words, without success. In defeat, shook his head and said grimly, "I'm fine."

The rest of the class, curious, was determined to get details. For several minutes they spoke to each other in Korean—the room full of questions and answers that I couldn't understand. As they talked, I looked nervously through the window—just to make sure Mr. Park wasn't watching me let the kids take control. For the time being at least, we were free from busy eyes. I smiled anxiously as I waited for the verdict.

Soun, an outcast because her body—and vocabulary—were both bigger than those of her classmates, often took charge in the classroom. She possessed what Mr. Ahn would have called a Strong Character and always jumped at the chance to help. Raised in the United States, Soun had recently been brought back to Korea. At seven years old, she was struggling. Struggling with language—her reading and writing weak, her verbal skills exceptional. Struggling with her culture—the other kids didn't think of her as Korean, and she lived in a painful between-space, not fitting into either culture she'd come to know. But Soun knew she could help the other kids, could prove her usefulness. Frequently, my attempts at teaching failed. When miming and pictures drawn on the board didn't work, Soun would jump out of her seat and offer explanations in Korean.

The class spent several minutes on Thomas's problem, happily absorbed. I stood at the front of the room, a smile on my face as I listened to the frenzied conversation and shy giggles. I stared in disbelief at how quickly they had arranged themselves into an efficient information-seeking group, some students getting the information from Thomas, others searching through dictionaries and textbooks, looking for English words. It was Soun who finally volunteered an explanation.

"Teacher, Thomas is not happy because his mom is mad at him."

I smiled sympathetically and nodded.

Secretly, I was thrilled. This was the first time a student had made an effort to communicate. I wanted to capitalize on this happy accident, on Thomas's unhappiness. I addressed the class, "Who is happy?"

Four hands, including mine, went up. "OK. Good." "Who is no happy?" One or two hands ventured bravely into the air.

From that day on, we talked in terms of "happy" and "no happy," and we started to talk about why. Through invented sign language and a slew of simple adjectives, we were soon on our way to actual communication.

Usually, I would begin by drawing a smiley face in the air with my fingers. I'd follow this gesture with, "Are you happy?" When a student looked sullen, I would put my index fingers at either side of my forehead like a bull ready to charge (a Korean gesture for anger the kids had shown me) and ask, "Are you angry?" When no one was looking, we would ignore our books, ignore the antics of Mockey the Monkey, and concentrate instead on talking. The class had started to be a lot of fun. I was relieved, and I was proud.

Just as the comfort level in the classroom began to settle, the unthinkable happened: new students began to enroll at the school. Instead of "Are you happy today?" our classes now began with, "What is your name?"

I would ask each new face this question, and never once did I manage to reiterate the name with the correct pronunciation. A new language can be very scary.

"Ji Soo."

"G-Sue?"

"Won He Jung."

"Wawn Hee Young?"

I wondered where all the Jinnies, Jennies, Leos, Bobs, Williams and Amies had gone.

As my tongue wrestled to spit out the new sounds, my kids would try to coax the correct pronunciation from my reluctant mouth.

"No, teacher, not HeeYoung, He-Jung. Won He-Jung. He-Jung name is first name," Jenny explained.

"He-Jung, Sarah: same-same," William offered.

I tried again, "He Jung."

"So-so, teacher, so-so," William said, as the other kids laughed encouragingly at my attempts.

When I took attendance I'd confidently sing out, "JENNY. THOMAS. WILLIAM. KEVIN. BOB. JENNY. AMY," and then speak quietly as I stumbled over the new name, "wanjung. LEO. JENNIFER. soun." I sounded like an idiot, quieting down and getting nervous when I knew I was approaching a Korean name on my list. I hoped that I would soon be comfortable enough to yell out the Korean names with as much confidence as I did the English ones.

That hope died quickly. One day, Marilyn followed a new student into my class. I stared at her, confused. *I always teach my classes alone. What is she doing here?* Marilyn looked at me to make sure I was watching and turned to the new student.

"Hyun Jung, what name would you like?"

A blank stare the only reply.

"Hyun Jung, you need an American name now."

A switch flipped in my head and it all made sense: my students had not been given names like Bob and Doug and Sammy at birth; they had been given new names as they enrolled at the Language Institute. As the new student peered up at Marilyn through shy eyes, I realized that Marilyn had been sent to set an example, to show me the ropes. She was here to tell me I could no longer get away with using my kids' Korean names. She glanced at me as if to say, *this is how it's done, do you get it?* The new student and I both stared at Marilyn, neither of us entirely clear on what to do next.

Marilyn continued, undaunted. "What name do you like? Susan? How about Jenny? Amy? Jennifer!" They conversed briefly in Korean, and Marilyn said, "Oh, you have friends called Amy and Jamy? Why don't we call you Kamy then?" Hyun Jung smiled with relief. Satisfied, Marilyn left as the rest of the class and I tried out the new name.

"Hi, Kamy, my name is Sarah. It is nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too, teacher."

I never knew her as Hyun Jung, and from that day on, I dutifully—and grumpily—accepted renaming as part of my job. I tried my best to find names the students liked, but always seemed to come back to the same small batch of names, resurrected from childhood friends at home.

One day, after the school had two new Michaels and several Jennies, I stumbled across a solution to my naming dilemma. Between classes, bored out of my skull, I tried to repair the torn spine of the dictionary that had come with me all the way from Canada. Fingers splayed and covered with little bits of scotch tape, I fumbled with the back cover.

I grunted in frustration as one of the pieces of tape clung fiercely to a yellowed page. Looking down, my frustration changed quickly to elation: there, at the back of my mom's old dictionary, was the answer I'd needed: an *Appendix of Christian Names*. From that point on, every time a new student came into the room, I would cart out the old dictionary and encourage the new student to choose a name. The process took a little longer, but it also freed me from the responsibility of making the final decision.

Sitting at my desk before class one day, trying my best to avoid Mr. Park, who'd stopped being annoying and had started being creepy, I was thrilled to hear the shy knock of one of my students at the door. William, a smart and easily distracted little guy, came in and grabbed my arm. He looked up at me with concern in his gentle brown eyes and whispered, "Teacher is happy?"

"Yes, teacher is very happy. William makes me happy."

In class that afternoon, I turned fondly to William and said, "William, your turn. Page eighteen, please." William looked at me, but said nothing. "William, it is your turn to read." An impish smile his only reply. "William!"

He smiled again and replied, "I not William. I Kevin."

I flashed him an impish grin of my own and said, "OK. Kevin, please read page eighteen." The class's giggles died down as Kevin started to tell us about Mockey the Monkey who was taking a bus to the Amusement Park.

Eventually, Mrs. Gu found out that Kevin had changed his name, and firmly, she said, "Sarah, this student....name is William, not Kevin."

I was annoyed and hurt, reminded once more that I was the most powerless person at CNN. I was there to impress parents, not to teach, not to make decisions.

When the teachers gave potential students placement exams, I was called in to ask questions. Without fail, I would blush and stumble my way through these exams, knowing I was there for the benefit of the parent, not of the child. I had been given a list of questions to ask the students, and I would cling to the list desperately, the paper wilting from the sweat of my hands. I would ask, "How many books do you see there? What is your favourite colour? How many are there in your family? What does your father do?" As I spoke, I would keep one eye on Mr. Park: I would watch him watching the parents watching me talk to their children. Mr. Park would get a too-big grin on his face when he determined that I'd satisfied the parents' curiosity, and then he would turn to me, often cutting me off mid-sentence—"OK, Sarah. That's enough. Thank you."

The other teachers and my bosses often interfered with my classes, telling me to stick to the textbooks, to spend the majority of my class time on nauseating repeat-after-me exercises, to help my kids with their pronunciation. I became resentful and angry at the constant interference and wished someone actually believed that I cared about teaching, that I had more to offer than the virtue of having been born into an English-speaking family.

In the classroom, I felt happy, safe. But the time between classes was, for a long time, an exercise in finding new ways to avoid the searching eyes and grasping hands of Mr. Park. Everything about him made me shiver and shrink: the greasy sheen to his thick hair, the pastel Miami-Vice colours of his suits, his tiny rat eyes, the constant stream of sexual innuendos, the way he yelled at his students, the bottle of Aqua Velva on the passenger seat of his car. Though he walked with a cane and was almost a foot shorter

than I, I was terrified of Mr. Park. He always wanted me at his side, always wanted something from me.

"Sarah! Sarah! Saaa-rah!"

I ignored his voice for as long as I could, but as his impatient calling turned to angry yelling, I left the safety of my office and walked slowly down the hall, cringing as his nasal braying got louder.

"Do you need something, Mr. Park?"

"Yes. I need it to talk to you—come in, come in."

"Sarah, this is my friend, Mr. Park."

A demure man wearing a fuzzy grey and red striped sweater stood up, shook my hand, and said, "Your boss and I have the same name, maybe the same bloodline. My name is also Mr. Park. It is nice to meet you."

The two men stared at me and talked to each other in Korean. Finally, the second Mr. Park nodded, and my Mr. Park turned to me and said, "My friend needs a teacher for three weeks. His teacher is going on a holiday. You will teach a Business English class in the morning." I panicked. *Business English? With growmps?* But I knew I did not have a choice, that my role as a teacher was similar to that of a trained monkey: I belonged to the school, and I would teach wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted. There was no escape.

"Will there be a textbook?"

My Mr. Park dismissed the question and sent me back to the hall by saying, "Tomorrow I pick it up at 7:00. I come to your house and drive you to the company. See you then."

I was near tears—frustration and fear threatening to overwhelm me—as I headed back to my desk.

Sure enough, the next morning, Mr. Park arrived in the gravel lot outside my window, and I was spurred from nervousness to annoyance by the sound of Mr. Park's horn impatiently demanding my presence. My anger towards Mr. Park freshly renewed, I got unhappily into his car and scowled as he talked.

"Sarah. Mr. Park is my friend. You must make a good impression." When we arrived at a large industrial building, Mr. Park waved me out of the car and said, "See you then."

I turned, not sure where to go, and saw Mr. Park number two heading across the parking lot towards me. He introduced me to the security guard at the gate and led me past large churning buildings to our destination. We walked up some stairs—Mr. Park talked and I ignored him, my mind racing instead to memorize the route: which stairwell to take, how many flights to climb. We reached the classroom—first door on the right on the fourth floor, across the hall from the water fountain—and Mr. Park told me this was where I would be teaching—the following morning.

There was no teaching that day. We looked at the room and then Mr. Park number two drove me back to CNN. We entered the office, met by Mr. Park number one and Mrs. Gu, both wearing anxious expressions. The three of them conversed in Korean, and after passing a large money-filled envelope to Mrs. Gu, Mr. Park number two was gone. My Mr. Park turned curtly to me, "You will start teaching tomorrow. I pick it up at 7:30."

"Great. See you then." I scurried off to my office at the back of the building.

For the first two days of my foray into teaching Business English, Mr. Park drove me to my early morning class at Korea Carbon Black. After that, I was given a taxi allowance and small lifeline: the phonetic spelling of a Korean phrase written on a tiny scrap of paper. In the mornings, instead of climbing in beside Mr. Park, I would head out to the main street and wave my arms at the taxis that passed. Usually five or six would cruise by before one would stop. I'd climb in and read slowly from a paper marked with Mr. Park's scraggly handwriting, "Gal San Dong E-Mart Gayo." I was relived to be free of Mr. Park's insistent honking every morning and enjoyed the challenge of taking a taxi. Mostly, the drivers were talkative—and curious. I knew how to tell them I was a Canadian and that I was a teacher. I would thump my chest and say, "Canada Saram. Canada San Sang Nim," and then shrug my shoulders at the rest of the questions, none of which I could understand. Though the taxis got me to work, I'd yet to find a way to stop Mr. Park from picking me up after the class.

Every morning at nine o'clock, Mr. Park would be waiting in his car at the main gate of Korea Carbon Black. He would drive us back, not to CNN, but to my apartment, where he'd invite himself in. He'd decided that the two of us should have coffee—in my apartment—before heading back to the school. I didn't like this arrangement, but wasn't sure how to fix it.

One morning after my business class, Mr. Park, sitting comfortably on my bed as I sat on the floor hoping his smell wouldn't permeate the thin cotton bedspread, turned to me and asked, "Sarah. Do you have any cookies?"

"No."

"I want some cookies."

"There is a little store right across the parking lot," I sighed. "You really want some cookies?"

"Yes. You get cookies. I wait here."

I started running as soon as the door shut behind me, panic taking over. The store was less than thirty feet away, on the other side of the gravel parking lot at the back of my building. Small and crammed full, it was sometimes difficult to navigate the two aisles. The cookies were easy to find, though, and I smiled impatiently as the Grandmother who lived and worked in the store slowly counted my change. I lunged back across the parking lot, almost losing one of the shoes I'd slipped loosely on my feet, and tripped on the fourth step as I tried to get back to my apartment where Mr. Park, I was sure, was up to no good.

It could not have taken me more than two minutes—probably less, in fact—to get the cookies and be back in my room, but it was two minutes too many. When I came back, panting, my suspicions were confirmed: I threw the door open and looked with disbelief at Mr. Park, who was not where he should have been. When I left him, he'd been sitting on my bed. When I returned, he was shuffling as quickly as he could back toward the bed—away from the shelf where I kept my dairy. (The latest entry, I recalled with dread, read something along the lines of, "Mr. Park is a mean sneaky controlling asshole and I hate him.") I gave him a questioning glance and threw the cookies at him. Once again I was filled with rage that I did not know how to deal with. This morning coffee had to stop. Had to.

In the car, on the way back to CNN, I spoke firmly.

"Mr. Park. I don't need a ride tomorrow. I can take a taxi or a bus to CNN after the business class."

"No. No. I pick it up."

I breathed deeply, despite the cloying mixture of cheap cologne and sweat that hung dead in the air. Slowly, to be sure he understood, I insisted: "No, Mr. Park. I want to do it alone. I am fine. I can go to CNN by myself."

"It's better if I pick it up."

"No. I can take a bus to CNN. I know the way now."

"No, Sarah."

"Mr. Park, I want to take the bus."

We'd arrived at CNN. I thanked him for the ride, not bothering to clarify my point: tomorrow, I would be making my own way back to CNN.

I ended class five minutes early the next morning, figuring that I would need the extra few minutes to make my escape. Not caring that my feet fell loudly in the stairwell, that my pace was manic, I sprinted down the stairs and out the door. I ran past the two buildings spitting steam into the cool Inchon morning and slowed only as I approached the security gate. I smiled and waved, as I had done every morning, and walked through the main gates, trying to look casual as my eyes searched desperately for any hint of Mr. Park. Satisfied that he'd not yet arrived, I crept slowly away from the main gate, forcing myself to walk slowly until the Security Guard could no longer see me. As soon as I was out of sight, I picked up the pace and flew down the street, buttoning my coat as I went.

I knew Mr. Park would soon be pulling up to the gates of Korea Carbon Black, and I hoped to be in a different neighbourhood by the time he arrived. I was sick at the

thought of getting into his car. I kept my furious pace, running for several blocks. When I was far enough away, certain he'd not yet arrived, that he hadn't seen me careening down the street, I stopped to catch my breath.

As my lungs thanked me for the air, I panted and contemplated the best way to get back to the school. If I could properly negotiate the confusing five-way intersection, the rest of my walk back to CNN would be a breeze. Once I got on the right street, all I had to do was follow the sidewalk for ten or twelve blocks, straight ahead. I worked on instinct and blind luck and, miraculously, made the right choice. When I began to recognize my surroundings, when I knew I was only a few blocks from the school, I started chuckling aloud. I walked confidently and happily down the street: finally, I'd won a battle with Mr. Park.

I arrived back at CNN, humming with feigned innocence as I strolled through the door. Mr. Park and Mrs. Gu rushed towards me, and I armed myself with an expression of innocent shock, as if asking, *what's the problem? Why does everyone look so upset?* Mr. Park was angry and yelling.

"Sarah! Where were you? I came to pick it up. Where were you? You did not wait."

I smiled sweetly at Mrs. Gu and played the language card.

"I thought we agreed that I would come by myself. Don't you remember? We agreed to it yesterday. Maybe we had a miscommunication." I smiled again at Mrs. Gu, who wasn't upset, just relieved to know that I had arrived safely, with plenty of time to spare before my classes began. I looked at both of my bosses and said clearly, "I can go by myself." I nodded in their direction and left Mr. Park to explain.

Not long after my services as a substitute teacher at Korea Carbon Black came to an end, Mr. Park had come up with another scheme. I heard the now-familiar screech from down the hall.

"Sarah. Sarah. Saarahhh."

Gritting my teeth, I stood up and stuck my head out of the office door. At the end of the hall, I could see Mr. Park, leaning out of his office, fingers wiggling impatiently. I walked towards him, but slowly (extremely pleased that my slow pace was annoying the man I'd come to hate).

"Are you calling me, Mr. Park?"

Mr. Park patted the chair next to his, and I sat reluctantly at another, across the table, beyond his reach.

"What is it, Mr. Park?"

"Sarah. I want you to teach a mommies' class. English conversation."

"Mommies' Class?"

"Yes. Mommies. A housewife class."

"I see. When?"

"Two days a week, in the morning. I will teach it the grammar and spelling, you will teach English Conversation."

"Will we have a textbook?"

"I have this book. It's a good book. But you don't need the book. You are Native Speaker. You will teach conversation. Every day you have a topic, and you talk about something interesting. Start is tomorrow. I give you topic. You talk about the weekend. It is very interesting to talk about the weekend."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Yes. Ten o'clock, come here."

"I guess I better go and plan my lesson for tomorrow."

"See you then."

Thankfully, the class went smoothly. A few of the women could speak English quite well, and they were patient with the students who weren't so strong. Perhaps comforted to be in a class led by another woman, my students warmed to me quickly, curiously asking questions about my country, my family. Stella turned to me towards the end of class one day, textbook open, and asked me to clarify something Mr. Park had taught them.

"In Canada, we say 'kitty corner,' not 'catty corner'."

"Sarah, we need you to help with this book. Will you help?"

"I will ask Mr. Park. I will do my best." When class ended, I braced myself and walked into the office.

"Mr. Park, I would like to use the textbook. Just to review. I won't teach anything new. I will review what you teach and I will have Conversation."

He didn't put up much of a fight and, pleasantly enough, he said, "Tomorrow you use the book. You review page twenty-seven and twenty-eight. But I will teach page twenty-nine."

"Great. Thank you."

My battles with Mr. Park were small. My anger towards him was not. He acted as though he owned me, as though I was a prize poodle to be shown off. Mrs. Gu, unable to speak English, trusted Mr. Park. When he boasted of being able to speak English as well

as a Native Speaker, she had no choice but to believe him. When he told her I spent my evenings crying, that I called him every night moaning that I was homesick and lonely, she believed him.

When K.C. Lee came to visit, as he did every month, he, Mr. Park, Mrs. Gu and I would sit together at the round table in the office. K.C. spoke kindly to Mrs. Gu, but seemed suspicious of Mr. Park. K.C. was careful to ask how I was surviving.

"Sarah. How are you? You are OK? Mom is worried about you."

I would smile and say, "Yes, I am OK." But K.C. could sense something was wrong, and he arranged to meet me privately, away from the anxious stares of Mrs. Gu and Mr. Park.

Alone in the coffee shop of the Hotel Nice, a few months into my stay in Korea, K.C. asked me about the school.

"Sarah. Are you happy? Your mom says you are unhappy. You have no friends. You are having trouble with Mr. Park."

I silently cursed my mother, who'd promised not to tell K.C. about my problems, and replied, "I don't mind being alone. I've been reading and painting a lot, so I am not bored. I like the teachers at CNN. Mr. Ahn and Mrs. Gu are very kind people. They are nice to me. But I do not trust Mr. Park."

"Maybe Mr. Park is a bad man. But you don't worry about him. I will make sure you are OK."

"KC, you have been very kind to me and I am grateful. Thank you."

Over the next few months, behind the scenes, Mr. Park caused trouble for Mrs. Gu. I didn't know any details of what was happening, but I often heard them arguing, and

I gathered that Mrs. Gu had finally stopped trusting Mr. Park. They would yell at each other in the main office, and I would look questioningly at Marilyn, wishing I, like she, could understand the content of their fights. She would avoid my curious glances and carry on as though nothing was happening down the hall. For a long time the air at CNN was leaden, angry. I did my best to stay out of the way and was grateful for my classes, which carried on as usual, free from the venom of the Councilor's Office.

It may have been April—it was sometime after the winter had passed and summer was on its way—that I arrived at CNN one morning to find that Mr. Park's chair was vacant. Marilyn, at the school unusually early, greeted me at the door. "I have some news. Mr. Park got fired." I tried not to smile, but failed. A huge sigh escaped my upturned lips as I headed as casually as I could down the hall, towards my desk. That afternoon, I told my class, "I am in a wonderful mood. I am very happy today."

Chosok: Thanks-Giving

Once I'd been given my own apartment, I avoided my boss's husband—and his entire family. Though I'd enjoyed spending time with them and had a friendly relationship with Mr. Ahn, I wanted freedom—free space, free time. I relished the opportunity to be alone in my apartment, solitary, myself. I spent eight hours a day with Mrs. Gu. Her son, Thomas, was in one of my classes. Although I didn't see that much of Mr. Ahn or the couple's young daughter, Ji Soo, I still felt connected to my adoptive family. Mr. Ahn disagreed.

Whenever I saw him, he asked why I never stopped by for dinner, why I didn't drop in on weekends. He said Ji Soo and the Grandmother missed me. Occasionally, he would be waiting for me after work, with offers of friendship, invitations to dinner. I would join him happily enough, asking questions about his job, about Korean history. Though our meetings were innocent—about as scandalous as having a cup of coffee with my brother in a Salisbury House in Winnipeg—I had begun to worry.

Marilyn turned to me one afternoon and told me she thought Mr. Ahn was a handsome man.

"Don't you think he is beautiful?"

"Mr. Ahn?" I was genuinely taken aback at her question. I hadn't though of him in terms of attractiveness; I'd been surprised that he was so muscular, expecting him to be thin, expecting him to smoke—expecting him, in fact, to fit the stereotype I'd developed of Korean men. But attractive? The boss's husband? The gentle man who'd only ever treated me as a naïve younger sister? Attractive?

"Yes. Everyone always tells Mrs. Gu that her husband is handsome. We all think they are a beautiful couple. Very attractive."

"I never thought of that before—I just think of them as older cousins or something."

With Marilyn's help as a selective translator Mrs. Gu joined the conversation.

"I'm jealous," she said, blushing.

"Of me? Marilyn, can you ask her why? What does she have to be jealous about?"

"She says yesterday you and her husband went for dinner after work."

"Yes. We did. He came to pick me up after work. He says we never get to talk anymore. He wanted a chance to talk."

"Mrs. Gu says that she doesn't have any time to spend with her husband or with her children. She wishes she went for dinner with Mr. Ahn."

I looked over at Mrs. Gu for confirmation. She was smiling, sadly. I understood that her comment about jealousy was not meant as an insult, was not meant to hurt my feelings; she was trying to communicate with me, trying to form a relationship. She was telling me a secret, as girls do. But I was hurt. I was ashamed.

"Mr. Ahn took me to dinner to invite me to join his family for Chosok. He wants me to spend time with his family—with all of them. I said yes. I am happy to spend time with Mrs. Gu," I said to Marilyn. Turning to my boss, I said, "I like your family. I like you."

When I had come out of my last class the previous night, Mr. Ahn had been waiting for me in the office. We walked to a restaurant three blocks from the school. I sat, legs crossed, on a small plastic stool, looking at Mr. Ahn across a tiny metal table.

"Sarah, I would like to invite you to join our family for Chosok. Have you heard about Chosok?"

"One of the teachers at school told me Chosok is like Thanksgiving."

"Yes. Chosok is a very important Korean holiday, and I would like you to join my family the day after tomorrow. We will drive to the country to take a meal with my relatives."

"Thank you very much for thinking of me. I would be honoured to come with you."

When the day arrived, I waited nervously in front of my apartment building, worried that the dress I wore—above the knee—might be too short. I hoped I hadn't worn too much makeup, hoped I looked presentable. When their car pulled around the corner, through the windshield, I could see Mrs. Gu grab excitedly at her husband's arm, pointing at me and smiling. They both got out of the car to greet me, and they were both smiling, with pride. Mrs. Gu offered her opinion, "Beautiful," and I blushed as I walked towards their car.

Shiny and black, always perfectly clean—inside and out— Mr. Ahn's car was adorned with all the gizmos of affluent modern life (a CD player, automatic windows and a fancy console that lit up in fluorescent greens and oranges). The car always smelled of garlic—or sweat, I'd never been sure—when the air conditioning came on.

The first time I rode in Mr. Ahn's car with his family, I made a big mistake. "I'll sit in the back," I offered.

"No. No. No. No," countered Mrs. Gu, a horrified expression on her face as she thrust me through the front passenger door. Mrs. Gu—my employer and my elder—sat

in the back with the couple's two young children. She always took the back seat. From then on, whenever we travelled together, I knew to head for the front seat. I would approach hesitantly, guiltily, unable to explain that back home, as the guest, as the youngest, I would sit in the back.

Another time, on our way to a Japanese restaurant in Seoul, I had been startled by the Western-sounding voice slipping subtly from the speakers. "I have to use the bathroom," followed by what I assumed to be a Korean translation.

"I have to use the ladies' room."

"I have to take a dump"

I looked in disbelief at the speaker, and sure enough, after a translation I wasn't able to grasp, the soft female voice repeated, "I have to take a dump." I smiled at Mr. Ahn and turned to Mrs. Gu, unable to talk for all my laughter.

"What?" she asked.

Somehow, between fits of laughter, I was able to tell them: "That expression is not polite. It's a little bit rude. Usually, women do not say that. Sometimes young men—friends—use that expression, but only sometimes. It is a rude expression."

Mr. Ahn, in reply to his wife's questioning glance, explained what I had been telling them. We all laughed for a while, and the CD went on telling us various ways to express the need to pee.

This time, though, on our way to The Country, I had it all figured out. I knew my place, and headed directly for the seat next to Mr. Ahn, next to the air vents. This time, as we left the city I would call home for a year, the voice from the speakers didn't alarm me. It had become part of my surroundings, and I had come to expect that cheery female

voice whenever I got in, a useless co-pilot, and sat beside Mr. Ahn. Comfortable with the inner workings of the car, I was now free to turn my attention outward. My nostrils braced themselves as we left Inchon and headed for The Country.

I have no idea what town we went to, what roads we travelled to get there, or what direction we followed. All I had been told was that we were off to visit Mr. Ahn's cousin. And his wife. So we headed for the highway and I looked forward to actually seeing some of this country I'd been living in for over a month. As we headed out of Inchon, through the window I spied tall green fields—lush and vibrant— and said I would love to see how rice is grown.

"That is rice," Mr. Ahn told me, casually.

"Where?" I looked out each window in the car, seeing nothing except those lush green fields.

"Right there."

"The green is rice?"

The family chuckled at me as I began to understand. I giggled a bit, despite my embarrassment, as we passed the rice fields, and I gave up trying to convince my host family that I really would love to see the rice, up close. Rubber-boot close.

I'd driven into Seoul many times in this familiar beetle-black car, and I thought I'd learned all there was to know about heavy traffic. But then again, when I'd moved from Winnipeg to Toronto, I thought I'd finally seen what heavy traffic was all about. Compared to this, Toronto's rush hour traffic resembled the empty streets of St. Agathe, Manitoba. No trip to Seoul, rush hour or not, could have prepared me for the amount of traffic we were about to enter.

When Mr. Ahn had explained Chosok, he'd said, "At Chosok, everyone goes home." I hadn't realized he'd meant it literally: just about every person living in Seoul and Inchon—about 15 million people—seemed to be on the same highway as we. Seventy-five percent of Korea is mountainous, which means the remaining terrain, any space that can remotely be considered flat, is filled—crowded, jam-packed—with signs of daily urban life: cars, roads, buildings. So when a holiday like Chosok occurs, when virtually all of the cars from the urban centres head for the hills, that remaining twenty-five percent of the landmass is damn busy. We got onto the highway and the car stopped. Six lanes of traffic and we were stopped dead. We made our way out of Inchon in an agonizing series of stops and starts, emphasis on the stops.

Mr. Ahn turned proudly to me and said, "I have been driving for ten years."

"So have I." I regretted saying it before the words were out of my mouth. I followed my statement quickly with a question, hoping to talk about anything but me and how long I'd been driving. "Do most people in Korea drive?"

"Many business men drive, but not very many women. My wife drives, but many women in Korea do not. Did you know that Koreans have only had personal cars for about ten years?"

"Really? What was it like before?"

"There were taxis and buses, but only recently did people start to drive."

My mouth may have continued talking about cars and driving and Korean history, but my brain was elsewhere: as we had been talking, through the glint of sun on chrome, I saw strange apparitions on the road ahead. As cars squeezed past them, men and women

walked slowly from car to car, unaffected by the chaos around them. I stared, open-mouthed, at the Highway People.

I'd seen a couple of these Highway People on an earlier trip to Seoul, so I didn't need to ask: I knew they were walking from car to car, selling snacks. On that earlier trip, Mr. Ahn had rolled down his window and purchased a stack of rice cakes: lightly sweetened crisps, about the size of McDonald's pancakes, each one as light as a sheet of Kleenex. But here, with traffic and congestion amplified, I was seeing the Highway People as if for the first time. Dressed in the casual clothes of the older generation, loose cotton pants, calf-length, and shirts to match, they walked calmly, assertively, through the steel skeletons, breathing exhaust without complaint. Without fear, without hurry, they meandered through traffic, holding up their wares and talking through flimsy white dust-masks, the kind I'd worn one summer when I'd sanded down a wooden table in our garage, cursing the uselessness of the coffee filter over my face as my eyes and nose filled with dust. Armed only with these small white masks, the Highway People seemed both sad and brave. They stood in the heat of the highway, these few souls not heading home for the holidays, offering food to travelers sitting in air-conditioned comfort.

I was jerked out of my stupor by a soft whirring sound beside my head. I jumped quietly in my seat and looked over at Mr. Ahn, who, I realized, was unrolling my window from the control panel at his fingertips. I was still staring to my left, still watching Mr. Ahn, as a dirty white glove on a sun-darkened arm reached through my window. From my place in the passenger seat, where I'd pushed my head as far back as I could into the leather headrest, I watched as money passed hands. My window was rolled back up,

sealed tight, before I was even aware that my left hand was no longer resting gently on my lap.

I looked with surprise at a strange object dangling between my thumb and index finger. The masked face had passed me what could have been a stiff organically-shaped piece of handmade paper, and I was now holding it away from me as if it were a dirty sock, eyes widening in slow realization. The object pinched between my unwilling fingers was the colour and texture of a rawhide bone, and though I desperately wished it to be, this was not a piece of paper.

I was too engrossed with the thing in my hand to notice the excited chatter behind me. I was only peripherally aware that the back seat had become loud with excited squeals. I hadn't yet realized that this strange object in my hand was desperately coveted by the three people in the back.

The piece of paper in my hand was in fact a dried squid. Hard and brittle, it felt rough on my fingertips. I grappled with the mechanics of it—it looked as though it had been smoked or freeze-dried, and then had been thinly sliced, lengthwise, so its shape—the triangular body and long tentacles—were wholly visible and unmistakable. I laughed silently as I tried to fathom that I was sitting in a car in South Korea, traffic stopped dead, holding in my left hand a squid that had been delivered to me by a ghostly apparition.

I was still in shock, in my own little world of wonder, trying to figure out how it was possible to slice a squid that thinly—how it was possible to slice it so that its shape was still so obviously intact—when Mrs. Gu's red-striped fingernails lunged towards the squid. Thomas and Ji Soo were climbing around impatiently in the back seat—each trying to get into the front, and finally I understood: they wanted the squid. Slowly, I

turned my hostage free with a cautious smile. I stared blankly out the window, the fingers of my left hand rubbing curiously together, still trying to understand.

Thomas's small hand ventured tentatively toward the front seat, fingers offering a gift of tentacle. Before I knew it, I was chewing on a salty bit of dried flesh, telling myself it was just like eating beef jerky. I politely declined the offer of a second helping of dried squid, giggling—partly horrified, partly embarrassed.

"Most foreigners think it is strange that Koreans eat so much skid," offered Mr. Ahn, a stiff piece of squid hanging out the side of his mouth like a large misshapen toothpick.

Staring at his mouth, at the squid that was quickly disappearing through his lips, I replied, "Well, it makes sense—with all the water surrounding your country, there must be lots of squid and other sea food. When I was a little girl, we ate squid every Christmas at a friend's house. My mom told me I used to call it 'monster.'"

Mr. Ahn translated and we continued our slow journey making jokes about eating a monster from the sea.

Eventually, well after night had fallen, we arrived in The Country. We pulled to a stop on a long gravel driveway, the sharp bark of a small dog announcing our arrival. It had taken us more than six hours to make a trip that would normally have taken less than three. As I climbed out of the front seat, I breathed deeply. The smog of the city had been replaced by the smell of pigs. I couldn't see them, but had been told that Mr. Ahn's cousin had a pig farm. And though I was delighted to be in a rural space—to see trees and fields instead of buildings and cars, that first strong whiff was enough to dissuade me from taking a second. Mr. Ahn's family had gathered on the driveway, and they looked

at me quickly, with something like fear in their eyes. I followed meekly inside, where the dinner, the reason for our trip, I'd been told, was nothing like I'd expected.

After the introductions (I waved and smiled at each family member), Mr. Ahn's cousin brought a small low table into the open, empty room. Mr. Ahn, Mrs. Gu, Ji Soo, Thomas and I sat at the table, alone. My hip refused to bend so that I had to kneel awkwardly—and impolitely—at the low table, my discomfort turned to embarrassment.

I'd come to think of my body as large and awkward, but nothing annoyed me more than my stupid western hips. I was unaccustomed to sitting on the floor, unaccustomed to sitting with my legs stretched out in front of me. Whenever I ate in traditional restaurants or in traditional homes with low tables, my hip would start to ache. I would have to kneel or sit with my legs spread, acutely aware that it was as rude as it was uncomfortable. As the year wore on, my hips lost some of their western stiffness and sitting on the floor became more natural, but not then, not for Chosok.

While the cousin looked on from a doorway, his wife brought plate after plate of food to the table. Mr. Ahn announced proudly that his cousin's wife had a reputation for being a wonderful cooker. The five of us ate alone. The wife spoke little, brought the food quickly to the table then retreated. Usually, I would stare excitedly at platters of Korean food—to me, the small metal bowls of rice accompanied by various spicy side dishes of meat and vegetables were wonderful culinary mysteries to be figured out—but in this uncomfortable environment I barely tasted what I ate and chewed mechanically, unable to get a sense of what was going on, unable to concentrate enough to make an entry in the recipe archive in my head.

We ate quickly and then sat back against the wall as the wife cleaned our dishes and offered occasional comments from her place in the kitchen. Soon after dinner, fruit and alcohol were brought out on small trays. I declined the offer of soju and sat uncomfortably against the wall as my hosts caught up on the recent events of each other's lives. After an hour—or maybe it was two—I began to realize that we would be here for more than just dinner. Mr. Ahn and his cousin, deep in conversation and drink, didn't notice as I slid outside for a breath of fresh air. I motioned to Mrs. Gu that I would be back in five minutes and sought a safe place to smoke, to regroup.

I stood at the edge of the driveway, unable to appreciate the beauty of the night—of the stars, the first I'd seen in Korea. I wanted to be home, in my cosy apartment, alone. I didn't want to be sitting on the sidelines of a stranger's home in my short skirt, worrying that I was showing too much leg. I wanted to be in my tiny mildew-smelling bed, away from these strangers who stared incomprehensibly at my face. Until I arrived at CNN, many of my students had never seen a white face, and they lived in a city of three million—it was a safe bet that this rural family had never before seen the likes of me.

When I returned inside, desperately wishing there was some way to make myself inconspicuous, frantically mourning my lost anonymity, I tried to ignore the cold stares roaring at me from the kitchen. The men had gotten quite loud since the soju had come out, and I wondered how Mr. Ahn would react if I should offer to drive back to Inchon. As I contemplated various ways to get home, refusing to accept that none of them was plausible, an old man, as drunk as the younger men in front of me, burst clumsily through the door.

Mr. Ahn made an introduction in Korean, then turned to me, "This is my cousin's father. He would like to thank you."

"To thank me?"

The old man sat down beside me and grasped both my hands. I was surprised by this warm greeting, but shook his hands and bowed. As the old man looked into my eyes, a flurry of incomprehensible words pouring from his mouth, Mr. Ahn translated.

"He wants to thank you for all the Canadian soldiers that lost their lives in the Korean War. He would like to thank your country."

Uncomfortable and entirely unprepared for such gratitude, I took the man's hands and squeezed them, unable to say anything—even in English.

"This grandfather fought for all three years of the Korean War, and he met many Canadian soldiers. He is very thankful. He loves Canada. He thinks Canadians are a great people."

"You're welcome," I said, knowing it wasn't the right thing to say and wishing desperately that my dad, who seemed always to know just what to say—what to do—in situations like this, was with me. Mr. Ahn turned back to his cousin and his soju, and I turned to the old man. Mrs. Gu, the children and the wife headed into a back bedroom. I stayed put, out of place. For a half hour the old man, tears in his eyes, talked to me in Korean, and for half an hour, wiping tears from my own eyes, I answered him in English. The only real communication occurred physically, between our grasped hands. Pressure changing as words were lost.

Finally, Mrs. Gu emerged from the bedroom. I looked hopelessly at her, and she and Mr. Ahn had a brief discussion, his tone curt, her eyes hurt. She beckoned me into the bedroom and, bravely, tried to explain.

"My husband....my husband... tired. My husband no drive. Because...because late, no drive."

I looked at her with sadness in my eyes, feeling trapped, and waited for her to continue.

"I don't want to stay. No clothes for sleep. I want go home, but... but we stay. In the morning, we go home."

I smiled, refusing to allow tears to fall, and nodded. I climbed onto the bed I would be sharing with Thomas and Ji Soo and pretended to sleep. The men continued to get louder in the next room, and I found myself becoming angry. I felt like I'd been kidnapped and lied to, sitting here in some remote part of South Korea in the middle of a pitch-black night. I wanted to yell at Mrs. Gu, to tell her to take charge. I wanted her to offer to take us home, away from the loud words in the next room. But I knew she did not have a say in the matter, and I knew there was nothing I could do. I eventually fell asleep, and night turned faithfully into morning.

If Mr. Ahn was hung over, he didn't show it. The next morning we got up and left hastily—headed for the hill behind the house. I lagged behind the family, staring at a large building I had not noticed in the darkness. In the light of the morning, it was impossible to miss: a large building that looked like a barn. On the ground in front of the building's main door, three bright tarps were strewn over the gravel. On top of the tarps was a layer of coarse salt. When I paused to look more closely, Mr. Ahn appeared at my

side and said, "That is rice. My cousin's rice. It is drying in the sun." I nodded with comprehension and followed my new family up the hill.

Mr. Ahn stopped to show us the pigs: row upon row of enormous pig each one resting between metal bars. The children and I stared at the pigs, a little bit scared by their size. The old man from the night before— sober and acting as though he'd never seen me— reappeared. As he and Mr. Ahn talked, I noticed a small cabin at the back of the property. The five of us followed the old man into the cabin, his house, where we took off our shoes and met the old man's wife. As the reunited family spoke in Korean, I stared at the tiny shanty—it was compact, like my apartment, and like the house we'd been in the night before, the living room held no furniture. We sat for about an hour, eating fruit and declining offers of soju, until Mr. Ahn stood up and deemed it time to go. As we prepared to leave, I grasped the hands of the old couple, nodding thanks as I tried to put my shoes back on without falling over. The visiting finally complete, we headed, not, as I'd expected, back down the hill, but instead, further up.

We arrived at a well-kept piece of grass, where I learned that the family visits were not quite over. Mr. Ahn's relatives were buried in the side of this hill, and the tradition of Chosok would not be complete until the family had paid their respects to their ancestors. As the family bowed deeply to the grass, I stood to the side, grappling with the thought that people were actually buried here, up behind the house. When Mr. Ahn and his family had finished, we turned and headed back down the hill, towards the driveway and the still-shiny car.

There was one last stop to make before I was allowed to return to the safety of my doll house. As we came closer to the city, we drove through narrow streets of an

unfamiliar neighbourhood. We parked in a ditch in front of a small café, and Mr. Ahn turned to me, "This is my sister's restaurant. Because it is Chosok—time for family—we must have a short visit with my sister."

We walked into a dimly lit restaurant, empty except for two people talking quietly beside a fish tank in the corner. Mrs. Gu arranged her children—and me—into large white chairs, and we waited impatiently for the sister to arrive. A tall thin woman appeared, offering pop to the children and coffee to me. I stood to shake her hand, and she stared at me, much as Mr. Ahn had done when he'd first seen me, before reaching to shake my hand. Mr. Ahn translated, "My older sister thinks you look hard...and kind."

Uncomfortable, but intent on reciprocating, I blurted out the first thoughts that came to mind. "Your sister is very beautiful, and she looks like a strong woman."

Introductions and first impressions out of the way, I sat back down and turned my attention to Thomas. I'd taught him to play Knuckles, and we sat for half an hour, my hands red and sore from Thomas's repeated victories. The children and I sat, a silent backdrop for the adults' conversation.

I looked at Mrs. Gu, who'd perfected her hair and retouched her makeup in the car, and felt a sudden wave of compassion. She sat, beautiful but unshowered, impeccably dressed, but in yesterday's clothes, young daughter in her lap, playing the role of the wife. Her job didn't matter here—she would be judged by how she looked, by how well her children behaved. There were rules at play here that I could not understand, and I started to wonder just how much freedom she really had. I thought back to her comment, about being jealous of me, and wondered if she was happy, if she was in love.

Suddenly, without indication, the visit was over.

On the way back to my apartment, Mr. Ahn spoke fondly of his elder sister. He was proud that she owned her own business, just as he was proud that his wife was the president of a school. The women in his life didn't fit the mould of the Good Korean Housewife. I smiled at his pride, unable to remain angry at having been kidnapped for a weekend. In a moment of compassion I realized that he saw his family—which consisted only of a sister and a cousin—just once a year. No wonder he'd wanted to spend the night. Once a year this man drives for six hours only to arrive exhausted. He drives happily for six hours to be rewarded with a three-hour visit. He doesn't complain, he doesn't bemoan. In my family, it has been over a year since anyone has walked down the hill to talk to Uncle Billy because his wife is controlling and mean. Nanny Girlie sits alone at dinner time, TV and radio on high, because everyone is fed up with her senility, with her secret drinking. In Korea, Mr. Ahn drives for six hours just to say hello, just to show his love.

As I climbed out of Mr. Ahn's car into the grey-blue Inchon darkness, waving thanks and goodbye, I sighed. I was happy to be home, to be in a space where my rules could apply. I was happy to sit in torn jeans and a dirty T-shirt, reading a book about a serial killer and drinking a cold Coke from a small can. My anger had come violently, but it had passed. These people were trying to include me in their life, and if the rules didn't match up sometimes, didn't make sense, I'd just have to live with it. As long as I had a place to be me—some of the time—I could handle the rest. I smiled and turned the page.

They Say Canadians Are Dirty

My desk, seen clearly through the second window on the right as you walk down the one and only hall of the CNN Language Institute, was not a place of safety. Seated there, I was conspicuous, naked. The older students, heading to their classes at the back of the building, would steal furtive glances through the window as they passed. The younger kids, whose classrooms were in the front of the building, would make a point of escaping their ongoing classes, claiming sudden unquenchable thirst, and run by the window, jumping up as high as they could, only to get a brief glimpse of me as their feet headed back towards the ground.

Between classes, I would sit quietly at my desk, usually unaware that I was aware of people staring. I shuffled papers and leafed through books and avoided doing obviously mindless things, like picking the dirt from my fingernails. I tried my best to look as though I were hard at work, though short of sweeping the floor, which I'd often already done before my first classes, there wasn't much at all to do. Sounds from the hall and muffled exclamations from the president's office became part of my daily awareness; I would sit and listen while my hands looked busy. I was sitting just like that one day, absorbed in my mindless routine of shuffling and listening, when a sentence—overheard from the class next door—scratched the surface, broke the skin. For just a moment, I slipped. My mouth fell open and my head cocked to the right.

Immediately conscious of the other teachers in the room, I regained control and closed my mouth. I stared up at the green steel ceiling fan, hoping my feigned fascination would mask the fact that I was eavesdropping, intently, on the class taking place in the next room. I scanned the floor, my eyes pausing momentarily on the spot where a coffee

I'd spilled had left an ugly brown stain on the already faded linoleum. I read the educational poster on the opposite wall, tripping, as usual, over the vocabulary (apparently, a scale is known to countless young Koreans as a weighing machine). But I didn't stop to consider my surroundings, not that particular day. That day, I was listening. I was fuming. I devoured the room with my eyes, afraid that if my eyes stopped searching someone would read the annoyance on my face.

My annoyance would have been tolerable had I been listening to anyone else at CNN. If it had been Mr. Park in the next room, we teachers would have shared a conspiratorial laugh about his horrible teaching tactics. If it had been Yumi, we would have smiled about her squeaky youthful voice. If it had been Mrs. Gu, the President of the Language Institute, we would have listened sympathetically at her attempts to teach students whose English far surpassed hers (Mrs. Gu was able to read many English words, but she was unable to hold a conversation. She rarely understood me when I spoke, but she tried her best, and I admired her determination—she talked to me in the best English she could, while I'd dropped out of a Korean language class in favour of a yoga class being taught in English).

Had the speaker in the next room been anyone other than Mulan, I would have shared my thoughts with my fellow teachers. But it was Mulan holding court next door. Mulan, adored by the entire staff. Mulan, the President's best teacher. I did not yet trust my coworkers enough to speak—in a way that even slightly listed towards the negative—about the school's most treasured teacher. I didn't trust what I said would stay in our little office. I was the only Native Speaker, as they put it, in the school, and was often misquoted and misunderstood, even by those with the best intentions; I feared anything I

said would eventually get back to Mrs. Gu. So I sat and listened, while in the next room, Mulan stood and talked. Loudly.

Named Cho Eun Jung by her parents, Mulan by her younger students (who'd been taken with a character in a Disney movie), she was Marilyn to me (this name bestowed upon her by a Native Speaker university professor who assured her it was the perfect name for a woman as smart and classy as she). Marilyn was her grownup name, the one she used with peers, with lovers. Marilyn had been at CNN since it opened. Marilyn was CNN's unofficial head teacher; she had studied English more intensively than the other teachers, and she got along well with the boss. She was adored by her students. Smart and energetic, Mulan's greatest virtue was the fact that she genuinely loved her students. She cared. She was sexy, but used this power selectively; she used every asset to her advantage. She was the perfect teacher—hard working and caring, light hearted and spirited—I couldn't say anything bad about her, could I? Not about Mulan. Not about Marilyn.

Team-Teaching. Not, as I first assumed, a joint effort with a Korean teacher and a Native Speaker in the same room. Team-Teaching meant class time was divided between two teachers. I would teach English Conversation for half of the class, and the Korean teachers would spend the rest of the time on grammar and comprehension. On that particular day, Marilyn was scheduled to teach after me. I'd spent the entire class on my toes, grasping for ways to have a meaningful discussion with a group of junior high students. This was somewhat problematic because the textbook (from which I was to borrow the context and vocabulary) read, "Mr. Fitzpatrick is taking a shower." I had spent an hour trying to have a meaningful discussion about bathrooms and had been met

with silence. The closest I'd ever been able to get to a good conversation about bathing had in fact occurred with another class—high school students—some time earlier, when the entire room heaved with laughter upon learning that one of their fellow students washed his hair not with shampoo, but with soap. (I thought it was a logical thing to do, but my students didn't seem to agree). In this class, though, no one volunteered information about their own bathing habits; no one cracked a smile. I had failed.

When my time was up, I tried to reassure myself: "It's not your fault, Sarah; it is absolutely impossible to get junior high students interested in something as mundane as bathing." Just when I started to feel better, just when I had started to convince myself that maybe I wasn't such a bad teacher after all, through the drywall I heard Mulan (effortlessly and cheerily—with the finesse of a true professional) captivate her students, "Did you know that Americans don't take a bath?" I immediately envisioned twelve curious faces peering back at her, with interest, and that's when I started scanning the ceiling for structural flaws.

What I heard and what Marilyn said were two very different things. She didn't actually say that Canadians are dirty. She explained how we westerners don't scrub the dead skin off our bodies when we shower. I knew what she was getting at, and even through my indignation I admired her ability to do what I found so impossible—to have an interesting conversation on a difficult subject with a group of tired students. I admired her for holding the interest of students who'd already been at their public schools for eight hours that day, children who were now in their twelfth hour of classes, children who were spending their evening in a private school so that they might gain a competitive

edge over their peers by becoming proficient speakers of English, children who probably wanted to be at home, in bed. What had me fuming was the incredulous tone in her voice.

"Do you know that they don't scrub off the dead skin?" She may as well have said, "Do you know they think the earth is flat?" I wanted to run into her classroom and explain that although we don't expressly scrub off the dead skin, although we don't have those nifty green nylon scrubbies, we shower everyday, with soap, and that the dead skin certainly comes off on the towels when we dry. But I couldn't exactly storm in to her classroom and disrupt it. That would be rude, and it would mean admitting to eavesdropping. So instead I sat and worried about the following Tuesday, when I would have to go in and conduct a class, pretending not to know what they were all thinking: "Ooh, Sarah is dirty. She doesn't scrub off the dead skin."

That night, I called my only Canadian friend in Korea, Melissa, and told her what I'd overheard. "I hate it when they do that," she replied, instantly bristling.

Later, I sat and thought about this bathing business some more. I remembered the first time I showered in Korea. Not in my apartment, not in a public bathhouse, but in the home of my boss. I remembered waking up in my new boss's house, in what was then a Strange Country to me. I remembered being met by the warm smile of the woman I knew only as Grandmother (though she was not in fact related to my boss's family).

Grandmother, one hand over her shoulder, the other behind her back, moved her arms up and down, as though drying her back with a towel, then she scrubbed imaginary suds to her cheeks, and I understood: she was asking me if I would like to take a bath. I hadn't then realized that her motions mimicked not a towel, but a scrub cloth. She'd been miming the action of scrubbing at your skin.

I remembered how I'd felt ridiculously large doubled over in the small maroon tub, crouching clumsily under the low shower head, trying not to disturb the tall pile of empty plastic bowls resting on the edge of the tub. I hadn't even bothered to wonder why those bowls were there, assuming them to be toys belonging to my boss's young daughter. I sat uncomfortably under the stream of warm water, completely oblivious to the functionality of those bowls, which are used for rinsing, once you've finished scrubbing at your skin.

Hair wet, I rose—ankles warm, the rest of me shivering—and stood, searching for shampoo. In a wire basket at the back of the tub I found bottles—red and pink plastics suggesting cleanliness—that I assumed to be bathing essentials. I had to open each bottle and sniff the contents, had to test a tiny bit of each potion in the palm of my hand—to see if it made suds—in an attempt to figure out which fruit scented serum was meant for my hair, which was meant for my body.

The small bathroom contained more toiletries than the convenience store near my apartment, each bottle and jar neatly organized and brightly labelled—names and instructions beyond my grasp. Large shampoo bottles, the logo of Johnson and Johnson familiar to me though the text was not. Smaller plastic jars, Oil of Olay, I could tell by the creamy plastic and curvy black lettering—but were they moisturizers or exfoliating creams? A few bottles of aftershave, blues and greens shining brilliantly against the glass, may have been mouthwash. The uncertainty, the incomprehension, was infuriating.

As I showered, fairly certain that the suds on my hair came from shampoo but unsettled by an unacknowledged awareness that it could be toilet bowl cleaner on my head, I wished for something English to read—a box of tampons, even. Anything to stop

the feeling that I was living in a world where everything I saw—in the bathroom and out—seemed to be wrong-side-out, upside down. When I emerged from the bathroom, hair dripping and smelling of what I hoped had been conditioner, I was fairly certain that I was clean. Presentable, at least.

Melissa, a fellow Canadian from PEI who'd been teaching in Korea for almost four years when I first met her at a Business English class in Inchon, was the first person to tell me about Korean Bath Houses. "They're really neat. You go in and scrub off all the dead skin." In my apartment, the bathroom was my favourite room. It was a curious source of joy. I loved the tiled walls and floor and was thrilled to see that the ceiling was also water-proof. It was a wet bathroom, which meant the toilet was less than a foot from the shower head. There was no need for a curtain or a tub, you just let the whole room get wet. I loved it.

My desk may have represented insecurity, but my bathroom was freedom. I actually squealed with delight—unintelligible little hiccups joyfully escaping my lips—the first time I turned on the shower. I grinned and giggled and squeaked as water poured over the toilet and floor. I still miss that little wet bath. I'd loved it from the minute I moved into my small one room apartment in Inchon until the day I left. With my weird little predisposition for Korean bathrooms, I was enthralled at the thought of a large scale, public version of my little spa.

"Do you have to go Naked?"

"Yes. It's uncomfortable at first, but you get used to it." It didn't take any more convincing than that; we made a date to meet the following weekend at a nearby bathhouse.

As was to be the norm in our friendship, Melissa had to take control in public places. She could speak what she called, "A little bit of Korean" (which sounded to me like perfect fluency). So she asked for admission for two, she bought us two of the little green nylon scrubbies (I didn't bother to ask what they were for, knowing she would demonstrate in due time). She found us two lockers and instructed me to keep the key, which came on a loopy plastic chain, around my ankle. Breathing in a hot earthy smell I couldn't identify, surrounded by women in various stages of undress, I did as she said and didn't speak. I was a model of submissiveness.

The entrance to the changing room was unlike anything I'd seen in Canada but was identical to the homes and restaurants I'd seen in Korea—in the all-important foyer, shoes were to be removed before you entered the main space. A floor-to-ceiling shoe rack met us at the entrance, and staring at that structure, so different from anything I'd seen at home, so full of tiny shoes, I anticipated a strangeness in the room we were about to enter. So when we got to the main room, when it came time to undress, the familiarity of the space threw me off. Other than that smell I couldn't place, the changing room looked like any other I'd ever been in—orderly rows of lockers, linoleum floors, low benches, and a counter at the back of the room where you could blow dry your hair and check your makeup. I hadn't expected it to be so much like home.

I undressed slowly, with trepidation, starting with my socks. I continued this way, removing my clothing as slowly as I could. Then I became preoccupied with organizing my newly-removed clothes into a satisfactory pile in my locker. Like in a childhood game of strip poker, I wished I had thought to wear extra clothes—earrings, a scarf. But I hadn't, and now only my thin undershirt (Men's, size large) came between

me and the rest of the world. Finally, accepting the fact that I couldn't stand around in my T-shirt all day, I took a deep breath and removed it in one daring motion. Then I looked around uncertainly. "Well, I'm naked. Let's go."

Melissa had been right—it is weird to undress and stand there, naked, in a room full of strangers. Even more unnerving is to be one of two white bodies in a crowd of Korean women, girls and little boys. I was used to being stared at on the streets, fully clothed. Being observed—judged—while standing naked in a closed room with no quick escape route is quite another kind of experience. But the women and girls at the bathhouse were ever tactful; with the exception of the disbelief on the faces of children, who would rush up and engage us in games of splashing one another with cold water, we were tolerated and then accepted. If people stared, they did so when we weren't looking. And besides, a naked body is pretty much a naked body; other than shape, fat and wrinkles, one body looks pretty much like the next.

Except for the tattoo. I had forgotten about the tattoo on my back. But standing on the threshold of the shower room (like when I used to go to the YMCA, here we had to rinse off before heading into the main bathing room), I remembered: "Oh God. What if my tattoo is some kind of taboo?" Melissa wasn't worried. So, rinsed off and ready to go, we sauntered (yes, sauntered; I forced myself to walk slowly and confidently towards the baths) into the actual bathing room. It was large and tiled, edges softened by the warm mist that enveloped the room. Two entire walls were lined with shower heads. In the centre of the room were three tiled tubs, each one filled with liquid of a different colour. The first was terracotta, and though the bright orange hinted at a muddy consistency, it was in fact as thin as tea. The second tub was filled with a mossy green liquid, and just

as I began to think about mould, Melissa reached in and pulled out the largest tea bag I'd ever seen, about a foot squared, and said, "Oh look, it's a green tea bath." The last tub, the largest, was filled with clear cool water, and it was there I wanted to begin. I thought we were supposed to hop from tub to tub and then use the showers to rinse off. As usual, I couldn't have had the process more mixed up.

Melissa instructed me to have a shower. It turns out you do all the washing before you hit the tubs—and the showers are long and hot. Feeling perfectly clean—the shower was much longer than one I would have had at home—I learned that the bath had just begun. The key to the bathhouses are those little squares of nylon. After showering, you see, you must perch on a little plastic stool and spend 10 or 15 minutes sloughing off the dead skin. Melissa told me, "Be thorough. Scrub everything. You can even scrub your bird." (Bird, I found out that day, is a PEI euphemism for female genitals). Little green mitten in hand, I looked around, feeling helpless. Through the corner of my mouth, though I doubted there were many people there who could understand my words, I whined.

"I think I'm doing it wrong. Nothing's happening."

"You just have to scrub harder. It takes a while."

After what seemed like hours of scrubbing at my arm, it happened; a greyish film of skin magically peeled itself from my body, and the bathing had begun in earnest. I finally understood what Grandmother's gestures had been about.

The rhythm of the bathhouse: scrub, scrub, rinse. Scrub, scrub, rinse. The water feels like a sunburn as it slides over the newly exposed skin. You get used to it; clean and pain: delicious synonyms. Raw and confident that we had scoured all the dead skin

away, Melissa and I scrubbed each others' backs, delighted. Delighted at the clumps of dead skin that we found and rinsed away, delighted that, in Korea, friendship includes the intimacy of bathing together. We were happy to be in a place that allowed such closeness. But the closeness couldn't last forever. As the scrubbing came to an end, we turned and contemplated those tubs.

Though we hadn't known it from the street, the bathhouse we'd chosen was lavish. Even Melissa, who went regularly to bathhouses, had not been to many places where there were four tubs to choose from (through the haze, neither of us had initially noticed the fourth tub, filled with water so cold I worried about hypothermia, hidden away in a back corner of the room). We started with the warm orange tub and climbed in next to an old woman, immobile, who'd been helped into the tub by her daughter and was now left there, helpless to do anything but sit, until her daughter finished washing the children and could come and help her into the next tub). Too hot and bored with the orange water (I had wanted it to be something exotic, like a tub of youth-restoring mud), we didn't sit long exchanging smiles with the old woman.

Because we didn't follow the rules (rather, because we didn't realize there were any rules at all), getting from the orange tub to the green was not easy. We were supposed to use the steps, climb out, and get in to the next tub from the floor. But we just hopped over the partition and slipped clumsily—splashing those around us—into the tub of green tea. I poked and sniffed at the huge tea bag, but quickly grew bored. Like the orange bath, it was nothing more than water that happened to be a different colour. No fountain of youth here, either. We spent a long time in that tub, though. Mostly because we knew the third one, shallow and cool, was to be our next stop. And that third tub was

filled with children staring. Eventually, Melissa led the way. We laughed as our bodies cooled and the children made their way to the opposite end of the bath. Naked white chicks can be scary.

By the time we'd finished showering, scrubbing, and soaking, I was no longer uncomfortable. I was naked, sure, but so was everyone else. I was no longer timid in the large room, and Melissa and I wandered around, curious to see what we'd missed in our initial scramble for comfort. We made our way to the back of the open room, where we found a tiny door. Bravely, we walked in. Met by a group of six smiling women in their forties, we sat down. It was small. It was hot. We were in a closet-sized room where women were rubbing a strange white substance into their skin. We looked at the pile of strange white stuff, shared a smile, and followed suit. It didn't take long for us to realize that the strange while pile was in fact a mound of coarse salt. It didn't take long for us to learn that rubbing salt onto clean wet skin makes it itch. We sat for a few minutes, laughing at how terrible the salt felt on our bodies. We tried to look comfortable and happy, not wanting to offend our hosts, who didn't seem to mind the salt at all. Soon, though, our itchy skin took priority over politeness. We smiled guiltily and headed hastily back to the showers to rinse the salt away.

Clean once more, we decided to explore the tub at the back of the room, the one we hadn't seen when we first walked into the room. We walked over and used the ladder to climb in. Lake of the Woods in May is not as cold as the water in that tub. But cold water has a strange allure, and we spent the rest of the time going from the freezing tub to the showers and back again. It was on my way out of the ice-tub that I was approached by a curious young Korean woman.

I looked into her eyes, trying not to stare at her beautifully thin body, as she, unabashed, looked me up and down. Once more feeling shy, once more aware of my nudity, I shrank into myself, wishing for the T-shirt that was locked safely away in a locker in another room. In English, this young woman asked about me and my friend. She wanted to know where we were from. I explained to her that we were "Canada Saram" (Canadians). The response I was used to, the response given to me by children on the streets, was, "I thought you were Migook Saram" (American). So I was surprised when she said, "I thought you were Russian." I said, "No, we are Canadians. We teach here in Inchon." The curious young woman smiled and walked away. When I reported our conversation back to Melissa, ever my source of cultural authority, she giggled madly. Russian women in Korea, it turns out, are widely regarded as prostitutes.

Back at school the next week, facing my class of junior high kids wasn't as hard as I had expected. I smiled to myself, wondering how the children's parents would feel about my being mistaken for a hooker and thanked the powers that be for presenting us with a new chapter in our textbook. As my students took turns naming different fruits and vegetables, trying to master countable nouns, I wondered if I should tell Marilyn about the bathhouse.

In our office at the end of the day, Marilyn sat doubled-over at her desk, crouched so low her head almost touched her thighs, surreptitiously cooing into her tiny hand phone. I carefully packed my bag, tidied my desk and turned to leave. When Marilyn looked up to wave goodbye, I interrupted her love-talk. I paused for just a second in the doorway—one foot in the room, the other already heading home—and turned to her with a grin.

"My friend gave me one of those green cloths for scrubbing your skin. I used it this weekend, and my skin feels very soft today. I will have to remember to bring some home with me when I go back to Canada."

"Hello."

"Hi, Daddy."

"Sarah?"

"Yup, it's me."

"Are you OK?"

"I'm better than OK – things are great. I'm calling because I have some news."

"What, that you've finally eaten dog over there in the Land of the Morning Calm?"

"Funny, Dad. No. I'm calling to tell you that I'm getting married."

"—"

"Dad? Dad. Say something."

"I assume you mean to Michael?"

"Yes. He's coming to Korea for two weeks in February—we're going to get engaged while he's here."

"You just couldn't stand being away from that long drink of water, eh kid?"

I blushed into the phone and squirmed as I tried to explain: "He's family, you know. When I first got here, all I could think about was you and mom and Fraser—and Mike. I cried and cried, missing you all so much, missing Mike so much. He's family to me."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes."

"Well, what can I say, kid? If you're sure, you're sure—you're a grownup now and you have to make these decisions. But I have to tell you, you've finally succeeded in shocking me."

I'd walked out on a five-year relationship to come to Korea; and as the days turned slowly into weeks and the weeks threatened to become months, I'd found myself desperately wanting to talk to Mike. I'd sent him a few tear-stained letters, without reply. When I finally found an internet café, we started talking again. For weeks we sent cautious emails back and forth, neither of us asking the questions that really mattered. I told him about my apartment, about the teachers and the students, glossing over everything with a tepid beige glaze, not wanting to him to know that this was the best—and the worst—experience of my life. One night, in a torrent of anxious self-pity, I typed, "Do you have another girlfriend yet?" He replied, "You are the only girlfriend I've ever wanted."

I doubted that the men around me even noticed my presence. The Internet cafés, PC Bangs, as I'd come to know them, were filled—day and night—with men and boys dialed in. Serious gaming took place in these smoky rooms, and hour after countless hour you could hear gunshots and death howls as characters in Rainbow Six and Starcraft died and were resurrected. Though I knew the men in the room weren't concerned with the white girl in the corner, I didn't want one of them to turn and see me there, crying into the keyboard, ruining a weapon of mass destruction with my tears.

I quickly ended our conversation and went home, where I pounded my fists into the linoleum floor and sobbed, not caring if the whole building heard my sorrow. Lying there, exhausted, I decided to call.

"Hello?" His voice curious, sleepy.

"Hi. It's me. I have to tell you something, ask you something, but it's hard. I don't know if I can keep from crying long enough to get it out. Bear with me." His silence marked consent, and I said, "I wonder—would you—can you. Fuck. Will you come to Korea so that we can get engaged and then move with me to Edmonton in September?"

I felt I deserved it when his reply was cautious. "My instinct is to say yes right away, but I need to think about it. I'll let you know tomorrow."

That night was sleepless, and the next day at school was a blur; I stood, mouth moving at the front of the class, going through motions, automatic pilot fully engaged. Between classes, I sat at my desk, shaking, clutching my secret next to my chest. That night, when my phone shrilly announced Mike's call, I squared my shoulders and leaned into the wall, preparing myself for bad news.

"Hello?" I said, nervously, sure the sound of the phone had been a cruel trick of my mind.

"Yes," he said, and I slipped to the floor, smiling so fiercely my jaw ached. His only stipulation was that we get married that summer, before we moved to Edmonton, before he left his family behind. I was thrilled, and the planning began at once.

Mike arrived in Seoul in early February, a week before Valentine's Day. I took the subway—without incident—to greet him. As on the day I had arrived in Korea some six months earlier, I watched my dark orange shadow fall on the hexagon tiles, shivering

with expectation. Our greeting was awkward, not exactly a Kodak Moment, but he was there, we were there, together—his eyes and mine almost level as we walked to the subway. We made our way back to Inchon, back to my apartment, in virtual silence: we stared and smiled at one another, unsure what to say, unsure what to do.

A few weeks before Mike's arrival, I'd managed to arrange some time off. I'd gone in to Mrs. Gu's office one afternoon, minutes after Mr. Park had left for the day. In one hand I held a calendar. In the other, I held a copy of my employment contract. I looked over at my boss and said, "Do you have a minute?" She pointed to her chest, as if to say, "You are going to try to talk to me?" and I nodded. She joined me at the large table in the centre of the office.

I started by pointing to the contract and saying, "I have one week off."

Comprehension clear in her eyes, she nodded and said, "Yes."

I let it all out in one long breath: "My boyfriend is coming from Canada. We will go to China. Is this week OK?" I pointed to the calendar, showing her the week I wanted off. She smiled—compassion and relief lifting her eyes and mouth upward, happy that I had something as normal as a boyfriend in my life—and nodded her consent. I smiled and said "thank you" as I ran out of the office, back to the teacher's office, relieved that I could finally make my plans public.

As we waited for our real vacation to commence, Mike came with me to CNN. I introduced him to the teachers and to Mrs Gu with enthusiasm, to Mr. Park with dread. Mrs. Gu, usually composed and calm at her desk, seemed to quiver, nervous energy jumping from the tiny hairs on her arms, trailing behind her in a stream that was almost visible. As out of place as a mother hen in a fish tank, she sat down with Mike and

fussed. She smiled and offered tea and pizza. Though he hates tea and doesn't usually eat before noon, Mike sipped cautiously from the flowered teacup and swallowed back a slice of midmorning pizza.

Mr. Park was back into his Big Brother routine, smiling and telling lies. Mike nodded curtly at Mr. Park, but stayed far enough away that he didn't have to shake the old man's hand. As Mr. Park smirked at us—his head filled, I'm sure, with thoughts of what illicit activities we might get into in my apartment, I squirmed in my seat, uncomfortable with all the fuss.

That afternoon, I brought Mike, like a living show-and-tell prize, to a few of my classes. In my Mickey Mouse class, Diana fell instantly in love. She'd been in that class from the beginning, had taken part in choosing the class name, fighting for Mickey, refusing to be in a class named after a Pokemon character, and was usually talkative, curious. She would bring pictures from home, invite me for dinner. One day in September when I'd just started teaching at CNN, she'd shown up when she didn't have class, proudly wearing her Brownie uniform, just dropping by to share a little piece of her life. Some five months later I had a chance to reciprocate—offering my fiancé for her examination, her approval. A steady blush covered Diana's silent face and crept right into her dark hair. She sat beside him, held his hand, and giggled.

The plan had been to use Mike as a prop, to get my students to ask questions. But the girls could only giggle while the boys stared shyly from lowered eyes. With the older classes, Mike's presence was a disaster. They stared defiantly at him, refusing to ask questions, refusing to answer his, and completely ignoring everything I said. I removed

Mike quickly, annoyed that the students were being rude little shits, refusing to talk, refusing to do as I asked.

Between classes, Mike and I talked non-stop. We had six months to catch up on, and I was thrilled to be able to speak at my normal pace, with my usual vocabulary. We talked and laughed and were only peripherally aware that the Korean teachers, though not expressly excluded from our conversations, had a hard time following our words. We spoke too quickly, with too much slang. Finally I understood how the other teachers must have felt, speaking Korean in my presence, and I secretly rejoiced at the chance to do the same.

Now that he was here, I wanted to tell him everything—how sad, how strange, how happy I'd been feeling for the past six months. As we anticipated our trip to China, I talked. About the details. I told him that I did not really trust Marilyn, the head teacher, because I was sure she and the boss were in cahoots. I told him how Cheryl, a teacher no longer at CNN, had followed me everywhere, expecting an instant best friend.

"And now she's working at a new school, and the president told her Cheryl was too hard to pronounce, so do you know what she changed her name to? Sarah. I can't believe it. It's creepy. Taking my name? What is that? That's just freaky."

"I'm sure she didn't mean to freak you out."

"Well, no, but it's just weird. One time she wanted to sleep at my place—for no reason, just to be together, and I tried to be nice, but it freaked me out—my place is so small, you know, what was I going to do, share my bed with her? You've seen how tiny that thing is—I barely fit in it. She told me that she could sleep anywhere, even on the floor, even standing up."

"Whoa."

"No kidding. How was I supposed to react? She's nice—friendly, and worried that I don't have any friends in Inchon—but so damn needy. She acts like we are best friends, but after I'd known her for two months she was surprised to find that my eyes are brown, not blue. I think I'm some kind of living stereotype for her. I stopped answering my phone because I just don't know what to do, how to act. Now I'm sure she hates me."

"Look on the bright side: you've got your very own stalker. Sarah—I mean Cheryl—I mean Sarah."

There was an improvisational quality about Korea that struck me as beautiful—I loved the hectic pace: buildings went up quickly, if shakily, and everything had a sense of industry, of urgency. I loved stopping to get food from the hastily erected stalls that lined the streets, orange tarps signalling delicious food—deep fried and red-pepper-hot—to be found within. But Mike saw the city as messy, as dirty, and the food just didn't hold the same allure for him as it did for me. Mike hadn't been in Korea long enough to come to terms with the lack of personal space, with the lack of privacy. I was disappointed that I couldn't convey to him, no matter how many words I used, no matter how quickly I spoke, the beauty I saw amidst the urban congestion. We were both relieved when he took an instant liking to China.

"So this guy is just going to show up, just going to appear out of nowhere with plane tickets?"

"Yes. Melissa booked a trip through this travel agent last year, and that's why I trust him. He'll be here."

"You just deposited money into his bank account and he is going to show up with our tickets, visa and itinerary?"

"That's the plan. Melissa told me that business is like this in Korea—you put money into an account, and then you get what you pay for. I'm sure he'll be here." Finally, Mr. Kim arrived. We'd never met, but the two pale faces, stretched thin with anxiety, must have been easy to spot in the crowded Korean airport.

"Excuse me. Are you Sarah Cooke?"

I looked at Mike with what I hoped was reassurance, but which felt more like vindication, and replied, "Yes, I am Sarah. This is Mike. You must be Mr. Kim."

"Yes. I have arranged your trip. These are your tickets, and this is your visa." As he pulled out an official-looking piece of paper, signed and stamped, he said carefully, "There has been a small problem." Mike shot me a nervous I-told-you-so look as Mr. Kim continued: "When we talked on the phone, we planned a group trip. To get a group visa, like this, you need at least five people. I wanted to find three other passengers, but no one else signed up for this trip."

"But there are five names on this piece of paper," I observed.

"I used the names of some old clients." I blinked and tried to understand the repercussions of what he'd just said. Mr. Kim carried on, quickly: "When you get to China, tell the customs officials that the rest of your group did not meet you at the airport. It will be fine. Tell them you don't know what happened, that they must have changed their minds"

Nervously, I said, "OK."

Mr. Kim smiled, shook our hands, said "Have a good trip," and disappeared from our lives.

We made our way to the line for Air China, me talking quickly and quietly into Mike's right ear.

"Look at this. He's filled the visa with names and passport numbers of real people, and I bet they have no idea that we are now using their names to get into China. This is crazy. This has to be illegal."

"It's not like we have a choice. Let's just get to China and see what happens."

My dad, a long-time pilot and aircraft accident investigator, later told me that Air China has one of the worst reputations in the world.

"Jesus Christ, Sarah, you flew Air China?"

"We did. And we survived. There were a few loose bolts, and the overhead bins jiggled around way more than Mike would have liked—but we made it."

"Mike flew on Air China? I can't believe it. I can't even believe he made it to Korea. He hates to fly, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does. It's not high on his list of fun things to do."

"Oh my god, it must be love."

We stood closely together as we entered the airport in China, feeling like fugitives with our improvised tourist visa in hand. The airport was large—oppressive because of its emptiness. The ceilings were high, the hallways broad, and every few feet there was another camera peering down from the ceiling. As we approached the customs desk, where men in military uniforms sat at high counters that loomed over the travellers, we both became silent and nervous. The line was long, and as we stood, waiting and

wondering, I spied a wicket that read "Group Visa." I pointed it out to Mike, and after a brief discussion we decided to give it a try. We were, after all, on a group tour.

I approached the counter slowly, intimidated by the uniform and the cold geometry of the space. As I started to explain, the man behind the counter turned to Mike and said, "Yes?" Our fate became Mike's responsibility, and he carefully explained about our imaginary group that had not shown up at the last minute. After a moment, the man behind the counter called over to another customs official, equally intimidating, and the two of them talked together. We watched four careful eyes look from us, to the visa, to a computer screen, to our passports, and then back at us. Finally, we were waved through.

Coming out of the gates into a zoo of people, we were happy to find a man holding a sign bearing our names. The tour guide, even younger perhaps than we, walked gracefully and blinked furiously. A long patch of bangs fell playfully over his right eye, and he smiled easily.

"My name is Simon. I will be your tour guide. Welcome to Beijing."

As we headed towards the parking lot, the wind pressed the thin dark fabric of Simon's pants against his body, his legs surprisingly long and impossibly lean. Accentuating his thin build was an iridescent blue ski jacket—glinting with the same sheen as a new car—that covered the top of Simon's body. As the wind brushed over my face, I realized that Beijing in February is cold. I zipped my own puffy jacket up to my chin as we followed Simon's silhouette—a large metallic get-well balloon—to a boxy white car. Simon introduced us to our driver and helped us into our car.

We marvelled over the car's interior—it looked like a giant doily, white lace curtains brushing gently against the windows. Simon started talking as soon as we sat

down: "We will visit the Temple of Heaven before we go to the hotel. The driver will stay in the car, so you don't need to worry about your bags. You can leave them in the car. In the hotel you will take rest, and then we will go for dinner. After dinner you will see the famous Chinese Acrobats." Mike and I smiled at one another, nodded eagerly, and we were off.

We spent three days in a frenzy of shopping and sightseeing—the tour cleverly designed to combine these two all-important aspects of travel. Aside from the quiet nights spent holed up in our hotel, the trip was a non-stop assault on the senses. One of our first stops was a tour of a jade factory. From the parking lot, Simon pointed to a small door that seemed to lead to the porch of a tiny wood house and explained: "Someone will meet you inside. I will wait here."

We walked up three low steps. Inside, the building looked nothing like a house. That first room was a tiny workshop, glowing green from fluorescent lights. Three men sat, as if hunched over sewing machines, grinding away at large pieces of jade. A small woman with a low voice emerged and somehow managed to make herself heard over the loud grating noise coming from the machines.

"Please follow me."

We obliged, and in the next room a man standing behind a glass counter pulled out a velveteen cushion and began a long demonstration designed to teach us how to tell authentic jade from fake, how to tell the high quality from the low. My mind wandered back to the men at the machines, so covered in fine grey dust they seemed part of the architecture. As I followed Mike and our guide to what was meant to be the highlight of the tour—the jade store—I realized that I didn't care if I could tell good jade from bad.

As we walked on a worn brown carpet that seemed to be fading before our eyes, tripping on the bare spots, we hesitantly reached out to run our curious fingers over the cold smoothness of various jade trinkets. As we walked, clerks approached, prepared to teach and enlighten, prepared to sell. Every few feet there was a new clerk, a new pitch, and a new collection of jade for sale. We stared curiously at the beaded seat covers and pillow cases, half-listening as a clerk droned on about the health benefits of jade. Good for the circulation, or something.

We made three or four trips through the store, not wanting to buy anything, but worried about Simon.

"What if he doesn't get paid unless we buy something?"

"They can't do that, can they?"

"I feel like we have to get something—like they're not going to let us out of here empty-handed."

We finally decided on the smallest and most useless object in the store—a jade stamp that spelled an approximation of my name in Chinese characters.

Barely an hour later, we went though a nearly identical routine at a pearl factory. Simon, who'd shown no interest in joining us at the jade factory, surprised us by hopping out of the car and joining the tour. A young woman guided us through the building's basement. The space was cool and dark, the air smelling of salt and fish. Walking past large tanks that bubbled and gurgled softly, our guide talked happily about the differences between salt water and fresh water oysters. I imagined a rotten smell as she held a large oyster in her delicate hand and forcefully sliced it open, pushing a small pearl into the palm of her hand through folds of slimy wet flesh.

Simon followed our female guide around the store as we walked the aisles of the showroom on the main floor. I squinted in the brightness—cold yellow light bouncing off glass countertops, forcing the pearls to glow. We walked up and down the aisles, concentrating more on Simon's attempts at romance than on the heaps of pearls laid out in front of us.

Of all the stops on our tour, the enamel factory left the biggest impression. A giant statue of a lion, eyes and fur inlayed with brightly coloured enamel, roared a silent greeting. We followed a crowd of tourists down narrow hallways covered in dying red carpet, nostrils full of that nondescript old smell, the one that's not musty and not dusty, but somewhere in between. This was the kind of building that a ghost would adore. Many rooms, many windows, hallways that seemed to intersect by luck rather than by design.

We followed the herd into a large workshop where women sat on spineless metal stools. With squinted eyes and hunched backs, these women peered through magnifying glasses and used tiny brushes to carefully paint enamel patterns onto various artefacts—vases, bowls, plates. Signs everywhere listed statistics: how long each woman spent in her chair, how long she sat at each station, the length of her work day—the signs silencing any accusations that the working conditions were less than adequate.

The store at the end of this tour was enormous—three or four rooms, each one filled to capacity with tourists and clerks and enamel. We bought some chopsticks, some earrings and then spied Simon across the room. We watched as Simon—who must have come in through a back door somewhere—talked to another female tour guide. He spotted us and cut his conversation short. Looking at our bags, he turned to Mike.

"Did you have a chance to shop?"

"Yes. I think we have everything we need."

Between shopping expeditions we did get to see some of the sights and historic buildings in Beijing. We walked through the Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City, naively surprised that even these historic sights were well equipped with gift shops and pushy vendors, and anticipated the most exciting stop on our tour—the Great Wall.

By the time we headed for the Great Wall, I'd had enough of the excess: too many people, too many cars, too many things for sale. Mike and I sat, soaking up the silence—and the space, so much space—unable to grasp the size and silence of the landscape around us. Empty fields and barren land—few trees, few colours but brown—surrounded the car, the emptiness shocking after the congestion of the city. As our driver navigated the car along a bumpy country road, Simon pointed out the window.

"Can you see it? Over there, on the left? It is the Great Wall."

"Holy shit," I said, giving Mike an excited punch in the arm for emphasis. Though we were still a fair distance from the gates, through the window we could actually see it winding a path around the hills. Much longer than I'd expected, it ran along a slow-sloping hill, the same dusty brown as the land. From that distance, it seemed organic, just another part of the hills—a natural phenomenon.

Close up, the constructedness of the wall—the years and people it must have taken to build it—overpowered all my other reactions, dulled my senses. We were staring at the results of a huge undertaking, at the finished product of what seemed like a truly impossible task. As we approached the main gate, I felt my breath tighten in my chest. Looking up at an endless staircase headed straight for the sky, I took a deep breath and grabbed onto Mike's hand. Simon told us he would be waiting when we returned.

"Just look for the car. We will wait for you."

"OK. Do you mind if it takes a long time?"

"No. Please, take your time. Enjoy," he said, waving his hand in the air with the same effortless pride of a real estate agent showing off a sunken living room in a new home.

"Thanks, Simon. We'll see you in a little while."

The steps were high and steep. Like climbing a stopped escalator, the distance between steps just enough to be uncomfortable, we walked slowly, carefully. As we climbed, tripping and teetering and grasping furiously at the handrail, cold metal burning into the palms of our hands, it seemed the wind was strong enough to drop us completely off the face of the earth. Mid-way up, we reached a plateau and were completely unprepared for what we saw next: pushy old women yelling "Cheap. Cheap. Cheap," as they shoved useless garbage into our faces, pretending not to understand the word no.

Elbows out, I made my way—barely—past a row of old vendors, stubborn. I ignored an old man who shoved a replica of the Great Wall in my face and scurried past an old woman pressing a T-shirt ("I climbed the Great Wall" written in proud letters across the front) to my chest, ignoring her pointy fingers and promises of a good deal. Flustered, I stopped and shook my head as another man tried to convince me to buy a certificate that would prove to others I had climbed the Great Wall. I turned to see how Mike had fared along the selling strip and fell to my knees in laughter.

Mike hadn't made it very far. A persistent old woman, head wrapped in a fuzzy pink shawl, had Mike cornered. I picked myself off the stone floor, right knee tingling from my fall, and limped over. The old woman had firmly planted a fur hat atop Mike's

head, and he just stood there, helpless and laughing, as she pulled down the ear flaps and tied the strings around his chin. By the time I reached them, still laughing, still limping, Mike had removed the hat. We turned to go and a dead fox wrapped itself around my neck.

That old woman was quick. She had buttoned a fur stole around my neck in the time it had taken me to turn around. I flailed and laughed, mock shrieks of horror dying quickly in the wind, as the old woman scolded.

"Cheap. It's cheap."

"It's dead, and it's staring at me."

I found a snap hidden behind the poor fox's left paw, and quickly removed it from my neck. Mike and I continued along as a team, heads down, a human wrecking ball, using our size to barrel unscathed through the remaining vendors.

. We spent a few hours wandering along the wall, taking pictures and talking about the impossibility of this structure, so sturdy, so old. As we made our way slowly back down the ancient staircase, a camel—tethered to a stone twenty feet above the ground—stared grumpily at the safe flat ground below. I imagined the camel's eyes to be full of envy as he watched us descend carefully, stomping our feet with satisfaction as we made it back to the earth.

Our last stop in Beijing was at a huge department store, four or five stories high. Each floor sold different things, and each floor employed an army of sales clerks, much less pushy than the vendors at the Great Wall. The building felt like a warehouse—the floors unfinished, the walls unadorned, and we made our way quickly through the junk, stopping only for some T-shirts and a couple of cans of Coke.

Sitting in our hotel room the last night of our visit, I laid out all our purchases on the bed and then stared in disbelief.

"I can't believe we bought all of this. How much did we spend, anyway? This is completely insane." As I tried to cram the memories of our trip into the two backpacks we'd brought, I came to a grim realization. "Uh, Mike, we have a problem. This stuff is never going to fit in our bags. It doesn't even come close. Why didn't we think of this earlier today when we were in that big store where we bought the T-shirts? They sold luggage, for sure. What are we supposed to do, ask the front desk for a plastic baggie?"

"Let's hit the gift shop and see if they sell luggage."

The gift shop—quiet and sparse—had the stillness and ancient smell of a museum, objects carefully spaced out to give the illusion of plenty. This was a direct contrast to the stores in Korea, packed floor-to-ceiling with so much stuff, in such disarray, that I often wondered how the shopkeepers were able to find—quickly—anything the customer requested. A woman stood quietly behind a glass counter, presiding over an incongruous collection of junk food and jewellery. The only items I recognized were tiny Kit Kat bars and glass jars of Nescafe Instant Coffee. We perused the store, dismayed to find that much of what we'd purchased at so-called specialty stores and factories was also available here in our hotel. In the back corner, against a wall, on a four-shelved metal rack, we found a collection of bags and purses. As if connoisseurs of fine luggage, we zipped and snapped and sniffed, finally settling on an army-green carry-on, musty.

In the morning, after three days of full bellies and photo opportunities, it was time to go home, time to climb aboard the Air China flight—smoking section in the rear— that would take us back to Korea.

Impossibly, our remaining time together passed more quickly than the trip to China. Before I knew it, Mike was packing his bag to leave. Early one morning we headed out of my apartment, through the alley, and out to the main street, where Mike would grab a cab back to Seoul. I had to teach later that morning and couldn't go with him to the airport. Mike, embarrassed to be seen sucking face in the middle of a busy street, opted for a hug and a subtle peck on the cheek, our quick goodbye masked by the smog of morning traffic. From the sidewalk, directly across from the Family Mart—a chain which might as well have been a 7-11—we hailed a taxi. My last image of Mike in Korea a hysterical caricature: he sat, surrounded by luggage, in the back seat of a large white cab, arms held out from his sides, body veering back and forth, trying to explain to the cab driver that he needed to get to the airport.

Afterword

To tell a personal truth is to tell a story, and no matter how honestly the story is told, there will always remain an element of fiction, of fabrication, of misremembered fact. This is my story. It is based on fact, and I've tried my best to portray myself and those around me with honesty. I've tried to capture my voice—the voices of my friends and enemies—with truth. But everything I've written is shaped by my beliefs and my baggage. My slant, my subjective truth, is an integral part of this thesis. I hope my personal take is questioned. I've tried to be honest with my prejudices and faux pas, hoping my bungles and mistakes are read as footnotes.

Although academic essays demand good strong writing, they do not allow as much room for narrative, for a blurring of genres. I did not want the stiffness of an academic essay; I strove to achieve the beauty and fluidity of a piece of creative writing. Creative Non-Fiction allows a blurring of lines. It allows me to tell my truths with all the advantages of creative writing. Poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction can all fit under the aegis of Creative Non-Fiction. I wanted to write my truth, and I tried to write it well.

I chose to write about myself because I believe there is political in my personal. As we in Canada become more aware of other countries, of other cultures—as globalization becomes a more pressing concern—issues of Canadian identity and cross-cultural exchange become increasingly important. The stories have no direct correlation to the preparatory reading I did over the summer. I do not quote Bissoondath or Bannerji, I do not draw on Canadian history or pop culture. But those things are part of me, and quietly they sit, shadows in the background of my stories. I hope they ask questions that demand answers.

If writing Creative Non-Fiction allows so much freedom, why did I persist with the inclusion of my images? I believe that visual art does something—some magical inexplicable thing—that writing does not do. The images included here are not meant to illustrate the stories, to retell visually what I have said in words. They are not photographic records, meant to show the reader how cute my students were. A snapshot could show you what Mr. Park looked like, sure; but it could not express the Mr. Park of my imagination, nor the Inchon of my memory. My visual images have their own stories to tell.

I've chosen a literary form that allows a conflation of memory and reality, a genre with room for my particular take on the truth. The medium I've chosen for the paintings is equally free. I started this project expecting to use oil paints, wanting to turn the heady tradition of oil painting on its head. One night, upset by the stiffness in my hands (painting in oils stiffens my hands as arthritis would, and it does not allow me the play I needed for this collection of images), I was hit by an epiphany masquerading as a crisis: what if I switched from oils to acrylics? What if I stopped calling these things paintings and started calling them drawings? What if I made room for collage?

The switch was a good one: in mixed media I found the freedom to express ephemeral moments, to express the meeting of imagination and memory. Charcoal on canvas gets me away from the cumbersome history of oil painting. Layers of Mylar allow a series of meanings to emerge. The images included here are based on a Sarah much more fictional that the one in the written stories, and they question both the fragility and power of my temporary presence in South Korea. They are telling stories that do not want to be told in words.

I am a product of accidentally crossed disciplines: when I went to the University of Guelph (straight out of Art School, with no university experience under my belt), I had to catch up on humanities courses. I ended up taking a series of English classes (ranging from first year lectures to fourth year seminars) and was constantly struck by how well the English was gelling with the Art I'd been studying. I wanted the chance to put to practice my theory that visual art and literature belong together, to see how one form affects the other.

I came at this thesis wanting to explore the construction of Canadian identity, enamoured with the writing of Canadian authors who explore issues of culture and racism in Canada. These stories quickly became much more personal than I'd anticipated (and I never did manage to get in the bit about how we are a culture defined by beer), but I think I did manage to create spaces where my actions—which, I hope, stand in for the actions of many Westerners teaching English in Eastern countries—draw attention to issues of prejudice and Western cultural colonization. Admittedly, these stories are primarily about me. Admittedly, they illustrate my take on things; they explore my personal experience in Inchon. Pause over the silences and scrutinize the actions and comments of the constructed Sarah in these stories. She did some things right, but she also made many mistakes. I can only hope that in telling my side of the story I am in fact raising questions about what it must have been like for the other sides.

Appendix: the Images

Because the images included in this project are not illustrations for the stories, I have resisted including any information (size, media or title) that would interrupt the reading/viewing process. Instead of the traditional List of Plates, I have included this appendix. It is meant to be read only after the images have been contemplated and the stories have been read.

Accompanying Chapter One (page 1):
Pupyeong Yuk Gayo?
36" x 48"
Charcoal and acrylic on canvas with Mylar overlay

Accompanying Chapter Two (page 23):
Teaching
36" x 48"
Charcoal and acrylic on canvas with Mylar overlay

Accompanying Chapter Three (page 41):
Kimchi
36" x 48"
Charcoal and acrylic on canvas with Mylar overlay

Accompanying Chapter Four (page 58):
Sarah-Angel
36" x 48"
Charcoal and acrylic on canvas with Mylar overlay

Accompanying Chapter Five (page 73):
China
36" x 48"
Charcoal and acrylic on canvas with Mylar overlay

Accompanying Afterword (page 92):
Audacious Jade Goddess
38" x 50"
Charcoal and acrylic on paper with Mylar overlay