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fulfillment of the requirements for  
the award of the degree of MA  
Creative Writing**

# **A Journey Through Trauma**

**A memoir about grief, healing, memory,  
trauma, spiritual quest and social justice.**

**Faculty of Humanities  
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**Dela Gwala    GWLDEL001**

# Chapter 1

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I am finally getting used to being home. Two weeks into 2013, I have the kind of routine reserved for unemployed recent graduates. I wake up and try to convince myself to run. On the days where the tedium of being in Centurion wins out, I lace up, push the gate open and put my earphones in. I take a breath whilst Florence Welch's vibrato nudges me to get going. My feet slowly shuffle up the cul-de sac that winds around the corner and ends at the security gate. The best time to jog midweek in the suburbs is after the school run.

Centurion isn't made for people who don't drive. So jogging is a scramble for every piece of pavement. I run in the wrong direction of where I'm trying to go. I pick the roads that make up the innards of Highveld Park – there's less dust and more concrete. I run on the green lawns that peep out from shut gates and high walls. The only nature-y part of the path is when you're approaching Irene dairy farm. You cross a bridge lined with trees – and edge up a street marked with speed bumps and potholes.

I heave through the moderate incline until I turn down the street that will lead me home. Going this way means avoiding the foot traffic – the workers walking from the train station I've never seen. Most of them head in the opposite direction of the private school traffic – deeper into the estates of Highveld Park. I've missed the early morning rush but I still wear my earphones to avoid the unwanted questions, advances and proposals from men sharing the pavement or shouting through the rolled down windows of their BMWs.

Sometimes the volume isn't high enough and I catch a snatched remark about my body.

Eventually, I get to the steep incline that leads past the outskirts of the Centurion Golf Estate. The toughest part of the run kicks in when a pond emerges from behind the estate's barbed electric fence. Here, I take a breather and walk. I bask in the backdrop of the dry Highveld grass plus the entrance of wholesale retailer, Makro. I walk and walk until I can run again.

When I get home, I say my prayers - but the prayers aren't exactly mine. They are Sufi prayers rustled up from the spiritualist corners of the internet. I kneel with a sheet of paper, take a breath and begin:

*Inspirer of my mind, consoler of my heart,*

*healer of my spirit,*

*Thy presence lifteth me from earth to heaven,*

*Thy words flow as the sacred river,*

*Thy thought riseth as a divine spring,*

*Thy tender feelings waken sympathy in my heart.*

*Beloved Teacher, Thy very being is forgiveness.*

*The clouds of doubt and fear*

*are scattered by Thy piercing glance.*  
*All ignorance vanishes in Thy illuminating presence.*  
*A new hope is born in my heart*  
*by breathing Thy peaceful atmosphere.*  
*O inspiring Guide through life's puzzling ways,*  
*in Thee I feel abundance of blessing.*  
Amen. (Coelho, 2013)

I draw another deep breath, and begin again:  
*Send Thy peace, O Lord, which is perfect and everlasting,*  
*that our souls may radiate peace.*  
*Send Thy peace, O Lord, that we may think, act,*  
*and speak harmoniously.*  
*Send Thy peace, O Lord, that we may be contented*  
*and thankful for Thy bountiful gifts.*  
*Send Thy peace, O Lord, that amidst our worldly strife*  
*we may enjoy thy bliss.*  
*Send Thy peace, O Lord, that we may endure all,*  
*tolerate all in the thought of thy grace and mercy.*  
*Send Thy peace, O Lord, that our lives may become a*  
*divine vision, and in Thy light all darkness may vanish. Send Thy peace, O Lord, our Father*  
*and Mother, that we*  
*Thy children on earth may all unite in one family.*  
Amen. (Coelho, 2013)

I unbend my knees, stand up and go about the business of my jobless day. Each morning is a toss-up between the E!news celebrity round-up or the yellowing pages of a book. Sometimes the call of an author's text triumphs over the flashy headlines of celebrity gossip. Then I begin, collecting bits and pieces of my spirituality from the words laid bare before me. I fall in love with the dead men and fictional characters that are on the same journey as me. I have mental conversations with Piscine Patel and that boy named Santiago. I take comfort in Pi's inability to pick one religious tradition because he wants to know many ways to love God. I wrap Santiago's promise of treasure around my shoulders and tuck the reassurance that the whole cosmos is looking out for us under my arms.

Right now, the pillars of my faith stand in the made-up worlds constructed by novelists. Except for Sufism - that came from somewhere else.

During my third year at the University of Cape Town, trips to the library were split between the bookshelves and these ring bound folders that contained laminated copies of DVD covers. I would leaf through the folders looking for 'something'. On one of those days that 'something' was the story of Imam Al-Ghazali - *The Alchemist of Happiness*. Somewhere in a black folder labelled 'A - M', I flicked through enough pages to stumble upon the man that's been called "The proof of Islam". (Salazar, 2004)

The cover pretty much had me at 'Happiness'. That word makes your heart flutter like it knows that place - it's been there before. It might have forgotten the exact street address but knows that neighbourhood. 'Alchemist' is also the kind of word that can make a soul tick. This word and its sibling, Alchemy, feel like a close cousin of 'magic' and 'mystical'. The kind of word that comes from a time where God supposedly spoke aloud.

I decided to take Al-Ghazali home with me because the blurb made some grand promises about finding the ultimate Truth.

That year, I was living in a little studio apartment with barely any furniture or internet - the kind of place that gave me geyser and cockroach problems at an age where I'd still call my mom before the plumber or pest control.

When I got home, I warmed up my 'ready-in-a-few-minutes' microwaveable meal, placed a cushion on my plastic chair and pressed play on the documentary. A few minutes in, I already knew. I knew that what struck me was the idea of the spiritual quest. It's the idea that you can only truly know through experience. It's what we've always known. It's why we yearn. From the moment our feet touch the earth we seem to be looking for something. It's the reason that Al-Ghazali wandered around the Syrian Desert for ten years - visiting sacred places both internal and external to him.

As I ambled through the last year of my degree, Al-Ghazali's shrewd pot shots at academia felt like finding the words I'd been grasping for. His incisive snipes felt like the nerve to push me to leave. Every day, I sat in Politics lectures taking in the violence committed against people around the world in one-liners with footnotes or Harvard referencing. Every week, I'd collect people's humanity into well-reasoned arguments, ideologies and counter-arguments. I'd walk into my "Conflict in World Politics" tutorial debates ready to defend whatever stance had been assigned to me that week.

Al-Ghazali was clear about why we couldn't debate our way to a deeper Truth - our desire to win gets in the way. We dig our heels in. We talk past each other and over one another. We listen to interrupt and not to lean in. We debate not to hold hands in our search for Truth - we strike each other instead of reaching for a way to the heart of the heart.

I sat in those classrooms and lecture theatres, listening to students cut off the heads of others to make themselves feel tall. I delved into the Political texts - watched this game played with people's lives. Watch people flash their private school education and moneyed male privilege. A female lecturer called the entitlement she saw in her class "big penis syndrome" - that disease of showy know-it-allness.

I'd always felt like intellectual knowledge was a channel to empathy and compassion. I thought that's why the "Humanities" is called what it is. I thought we all sat on those uncomfortable benches in those air-conditioned rooms for the same purpose. We were all digging into history and people's stories to find our way back to each other. We were that honest bridge that would take dry text book knowledge and faceless numbers to a better place – one of mutual understanding.

For some reason I thought we'd chosen this degree not just to build a career but a ladder to something better. We chose to be there because we were trying to figure out the mess that we needed to clean up. At least that's what I thought then. By the end of 2012, I knew that I was mostly wrong. It's why I decided to leave.

Like so many of us, Al-Ghazali was saved by a poet. According to some scholars, it was his brother - Ahmad Al-Ghazali- that led him from the realm of intellectual sparring to the journey of true experience and feeling. Ahmad shone a different path for Al-Ghazali - one that needed to be walked and not simply read about.

Al-Ghazali had begun to see his intellectual knowledge as another smokescreen clouding his experience of God. He came to view it as a well-dressed ignorance - an ignorance that shielded him from fully knowing himself. For months, an internal battle raged that's familiar to anyone afflicted with the human condition. He was in crisis. He wanted to leave everything behind and to set out on the path to spiritual truth. He struggled to give it all up - his material wealth, public acclaim and family. He was stuck between wanting to know the mysteries of eternal life and the desire to remain within the folds of his comfortable life.

The universe seemed to have made that choice for him. It claimed the one thing that had brought him all his material comfort - his tongue. He could no longer speak in public - or do any of his academic work. His messianic intellect and oration were gone. It was a crisis that made him ill - a sickness that permeated his mind, body and soul. His speaking ability was not the only thing stripped from his tongue - his appetite was gone too. He was wide-eyed and sleepless at night. His spirit rumbled with his well-being - and won.

At this point he knew what he had to do. He announced to everyone around him that he was leaving for Mecca. Secretly, he set his sights on Syria. He gave away his material wealth and kept what was only needed for his family and his sustenance. He followed the Sufi path and walked into the desert to find seclusion, solitude and spiritual learning - to find the embrace and remembrance of the Divine.

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My quest officially began with a torn piece of paper stuck to my oversized fridge. Written on it was the following: "Next year, you will be in South Korea. You will get to wear long flowing things that don't cling...and feel beautiful. You will stomp barefoot on the soil of Glastonbury. You will see Marrakech. You'll get to see the polluted land of the Taj and maybe you'll even see Japan. Floating palaces, French lessons, miscommunication, dust and the best kind of isolation. You'll feel like yourself again"

It was a prophecy that took shape when I saw a red poster pinned to a noticeboard on the lowest level of the Humanities (now Neville Alexander) building. The yellow text spoke to me and asked many questions: "Are you adventurous, dynamic with a strong work ethic, in good health, under 55 and enjoy working with children? Do you have excellent English

language, grammar and pronunciation skills? Are you an outgoing, friendly and positive person? Do you have or are you about to complete a bachelor's degree, an HDE or a PGCE? Do you have a valid passport and a clear police record? Then you are ready for an exciting year in high-tech South Korea as a Guest English Teacher.” (TeachKorea, 2013)

I ticked all the boxes - I could answer ‘Yes’ to all of the questions. I hadn’t fully made up my mind about what I would do after I graduate. But something in me knew that I had just found the answer.

## Chapter 2

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My cousin and favourite person in the universe died just after her 19th birthday.

Before her death, the fact that we’d ended up on unplanned gap years together seemed like a cosmic joke and accident. She had completed her first year of engineering at UCT but her mostly absentee father refused to pay the fees as promised. I had decided, last minute, to put off university for a year and find a way to get to India. This meant we ended up sharing a room in the bowels of suburbia. She was forced to leave behind her Cape Town life and I had postponed mine.

We had been bedmates and close friends in our primary school days. We’d always been the same age but she always seemed older than me - maybe because of her height and ‘school of hard knocks’ circumstances. We would turn strips of panty hose into a playground, right under the clothesline. After tying strips into a circular rope, we took turns placing our ankles into one end of the rope and placing the other end around the ankles of a chair. Both of us would chant a song and the one free from the rope duty would leap in and out of the gap - following the instructions of what’s being sung.

“England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, inside, outside, inside, on”. She was better than me because she was taller. Her long legs would fold up in the air and land at the each chosen geographical location: England (inside), Ireland (outside), Scotland (inside) , Wales (on the rope).

These were my favourite sleepovers. I’d beg to go every weekend and beg to stay when they were over. She lived with my great-aunt and great-uncle. She was mostly raised by my great-aunt - we both called her “Gran”. We were both ten when we found out that her grandad had died. She was sleeping over at our house and my mother told us that we would be going on a road trip to Zimbabwe. We didn’t find out why until we reached Bulawayo - just in time for the funeral preparations.

Our closeness dwindled as young teenagers. Gran packed them up and moved back to a family home in KwaZulu Natal (KZN). In our later teen years, she would come to Centurion during school holidays. The year we turned 17 we worked in a DVD store that went bankrupt. The year after that we put up with a lot of crap as waitresses at a high-end restaurant. She had started school a year earlier and finished before I did. By the time, she moved to Cape Town, we hadn’t spoken in a while.

I had no idea that I would be the person that got to spend her last birthday with her.

At that stage our lives had two soundtracks - two CDs that were always on rotation in my CD player: I am...Sasha Fierce and a mixtape of Durban House. While walking my wayward dog, we would sing House tracks with repetitive lyrics - to an audience of none. There's one in particular that she used to sing. It would come out of nowhere. During moments of silence, it would seem as though she was snatching these lyrics out of thin air: "Thixo ngi cela ungangithathe ngisase mncinci" (Thebe, 2007). But always sounded like she was singing: "Thixo cela ungithathe ngisase mncinci". The first means "Please God, don't take me while I'm young" whilst the second means please do.

My family had packed into the car to spend Easter in KZN. I was scheduled to work over that time so I stayed behind. Easter ended and they made their way back. I waited at Centurion Mall for them to pick me up on their way home. Instead I got a phone call from my mom saying that they'd been an accident. She told me that her and my brother were fine but that her romantic partner at the time had passed on. She said that my cousin and uncle had been taken to a different hospital because they didn't have medical aid. My mom said that she'd seemed fine - just a little ache-y.

I phoned her phone over and over again until she picked up. She kept saying that she felt so cold and was in so much pain. I was just so relieved to hear her speak to me. I told her that I would see her soon and that I was grateful that she's okay. Before the call ended, something in me whispered "tell her that you love her". I mentally batted that thought away, thinking that I would have plenty of time to love on her when she came home. The next day I got a call from the hospital, they asked me if and how I was related to her then they told me she had died. They said that it was internal bleeding.

I dropped the phone and slumped to the ground.

After the car accident that killed her, I did the only thing I could think of to survive - I read. Instead of sleeping, thinking or grieving, I paged through and pored over books. I avoided my room because her clothes were still in my closet. Her things were still all over my desk. I would go in to grab a new pair of baggy clothes and pyjamas and then spend the rest of the day at the dining room table - reading. At night, I'd sleep on the floor of my brother's room. He had been the first to come home after the accident. At the time, he was a cocky, over-sensitive and talkative 9 year old but when he came home that day he was just silent.

For those first days, I opened up Vikas Swarup's 'Q & A' (now known as 'Slumdog Millionaire'). I was grateful to slip into a life more tragic and broken than mine. There would be brief moments when I would forget then I would surface and remember who I was - and what had happened. My mother was in High Care at the hospital and I would speak to her every day. She would tell me that she was fine and that she'd be home soon. I'd speak to the nurses to double check that this was true. I'd panic right before bed and phone again just to make sure.

When we went to visit, we were the people to tell her that my cousin had died. One tear went streaming down her cheek before she caught herself. She'd always held it in - at least in front of me.

When I was ten, my father had died. I never saw her cry but I heard her. I dealt with that grief through long stretches of napping. But sometimes, when I woke up I'd hear the sniffles

coming from behind a closed door. I'm not sure she ever felt entitled to that sadness – they had divorced a long time ago.

I used to ask her all the time why her and my dad weren't together. She used to swat away my questions (like the nuisances that they were) and leave them unanswered. Many years later, around the age of 16 or 17, she would answer me during an otherwise routine shopping trip at Centurion Mall. But before those answers came, I was nearly 10 years old and we were in that same mall. I was looking at a black dress in the shop window of Foschini. My mother had hurried me away from that shop window, and said: "yes it's a nice dress but it looks like something someone would wear to a funeral". A week or two later, we went back to buy it and I did wear it to a funeral.

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My mother gave me exactly three weeks after my cousin died to get my shit together. That was the allotted time to grieve before I had to go back to work. She thought it would be best for me to step back into the world and attempt, in whatever small way, to keep going. And that's how I ended up at Mr Price tearfully holding a long sleeve t-shirt, listening to Oasis' "Wonderwall" careen around the clothing racks and counting down the minutes before I'd have to go back to selling people books.

That first day, Liam Gallagher's voice cajoled me back to that bookshop in Centurion. Every day after, I would go from being home to standing behind that counter. Other attempts at being out in the world bewildered me. I couldn't understand how everyone could be standing around PicknPay choosing pasta sauces and breakfast cereals when Salvie was gone. I would get out the car at every shopping centre and want to ask the strangers walking by: "Hasn't your world ended? Why are you still shopping? Do you know someone I love has died?"

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I make the decision to go to India. It was something that had come to me the year before - in the twilight of my high school years. My mother had suggested over and over again that I should take a gap year. I had been 'umming and ahning' about my future and she knew I needed another year to decide what adulthood would look like for me. I had shrugged my shoulders and made the choice to go straight to the University of Cape Town and map out a grown-up life while I was there.

Sometime around August, I was sitting on the couch with my mom watching the Oprah Show. This episode featured people volunteering somewhere - in a country that wasn't their own. By the end, I told my mother that I wanted to go to India. It was a matter-of-fact realisation that snuck under my pyjamas and burrowed into my pores. It felt like a bone-level sort of knowing. Something that had always been there but had only managed to catch my attention now.

Almost a year later, and little more than two months after my cousin died, I start the journey that will get me there. I apply to do a volunteer journalism placement in Tamil Nadu with an organisation called 'Projects Abroad'. The weeks before sending the application, I go to the internet to dream - fantasizing as I peruse their website. Every click on their 'volunteer destinations' tab is a respite from hopelessness and grief. I read the summaries of each placement over and over again. I pick two other countries to accompany India then

change my mind. I Google and Google, smiling at pictures of strangers that I want to be and know.

Eventually, I also apply to do a care project in Nepal and a French course in Morocco but we cancel these two placements because we just can't afford all that. The dream is whittled down to a month in India. My mother was still recovering from the loss and injuries of the accident but parts with money we don't really have.

The first of September 2009 rolls around and there I am sitting on a bench in OR Tambo international Airport with a pink diary propped open on my legs. I write the date and underline it and pen the following words:

*“Here I am, I’m here...waiting to leave for Dubai. Finally leaving for India. The fact that I’m completely on my own hasn’t hit yet - let alone sunk in. Maybe because being on my own in a physical sense doesn’t even begin to compare to the isolation and seclusion I’ve felt on an emotional level. I’m still not exactly sure why I’m taking this trip. Maybe because India is the spiritual land of promise - a sort of Disneyland for your soul.”*

When it's time to board, I wrap up my internal dialogue and tuck it away with the black string that bounds the notebook shut. Once seated on the plane, I loop the black string off again to praise and give thanks for Emirates inflight entertainment and then pack it away until we land in Dubai.

Dubai International Airport engulfs any sense of calm I had when I left Johannesburg. I shuffle forward in the security check line, feeling overwhelmed and self-conscious. One of the officials at the security gate calls me “sir” which plunges me further into self-doubt. As the conveyor belt swallows up then spits out my luggage, I languish in the complexes that have always been the undercurrent of my life.

Like any girl child, raised in this world, these complexes revolve around how I look. And like any other black girl, who spent her childhood wriggling under a too hot dryer and relaxer, I felt embarrassed of the natural hair hidden in two braids across my head. Walking past all the duty free consumables, the niggling fears rise and they fall and they question: How am I going to be treated? Am I going to be ignored? Will I find love? Will I finally learn to accept myself?

## Chapter 3

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I'm in India? Landing at Chennai International Airport doesn't settle my uncertainty. I'm disoriented and overcome by confusion. Nothing says 'Welcome to India' like being jostled around in the line at immigration, prodded with a thermometer to check for swine flu and asked for documentation proving I don't have Yellow Fever. South Africa is not a “Yellow Fever zone” but that's meaningless to the guy behind the counter. Travelling while African teaches you that you're often seen as a risk and you'll always be asked more questions.

My passport is checked multiple times but I finally make it through. My next step is to find a bathroom - this turns out to be more of an adventure than I'd hoped for. Before I arrived,

I'd spent a lot more time caught up in the fantasy of India then doing much practical research. So here I am staring at a toilet, I'm not hundred percent sure how to use. I scan every corner hoping to find toilet paper. I eventually heave my luggage out of the stall and rapidly scuttle out of the door - nature still calling. I decide to hold it in until the next flight.

I begin my second unwanted adventure - looking for an ATM. Everyone I ask looks at me with confusion including the people behind the counter of the foreign exchange place. Eventually, I find one outside the airport terminal. I try the one that looks international. When I finally manage to drag my luggage through the door, the screen says 'temporarily out-of-service'. The next ATM doesn't have a Visa sign but I try my luck anyway. Everything seems to be going well until my card is declined. I've been gone for less than a day but my first instinct is to wonder if there's some way to call my mother.

I make my way back into the Anna International terminal. On the way, the security guard stops me and says that I look familiar. I can only laugh because this is the first time I've stepped foot on this continent. I stop chuckling when she clarifies that I look like one of the characters on Hannah Montana. I try to recall if there are any black characters on Hannah Montana - draw a blank and move on. I'm 4 hours into a great wait for my final flight to Madurai. I am beyond exhausted - this is my third airport and 22nd hour of travel. I'm kind of broke - or at least it feels that way because I don't have a rupee to my name yet.

I sit down to journal and the man next to me is snoring. I drool over the thought of taking a quick snooze. I look up from the lined pages and across from me is this really attractive man. At first, I bury my head back into my diary but eventually I attempt to talk to him. We don't seem to fully understand each other but I ramble on for half an hour anyway - and he's considerate enough to listen. His name is Shiva - he tells me that it's the Hindu God with the snake. Later on, I find out that he's the god of destruction and transformation.

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Madurai is not the last leg of my journey. When I'm picked up from the airport there's still another 1 and a half hour drive to the final destination - the Projects Abroad office in Sivakasi. It's really late in the day so the only thing I see when looking out the window is darkness. The office and our rooms are in the same building. I drag my luggage up the stairs. I take a cursory look at the room, wonder if the ceiling fan will stave off the humidity and then fall asleep.

The next day is my first official day at the Sivakasi Times. But before that I struggle to find where we're supposed to eat breakfast. A few trips up and down the same flight of stairs and an awkward attempt at a conversation with the Japanese volunteer, gets me to the cafeteria. The first person I get to know is an Irishman called Simon. We both speak English but I can barely understand what he is saying.

Next into the cafeteria is Natalie from Germany. She's quite ill and disillusioned about her placement but easy to talk to. Next up is Marie, who is French. Her English is better than my French but we still struggle to understand each other.

Overall, I dig deep for all the friendliness and cheeriness I can muster but leave that cafeteria still feeling out of place and way out of my depth. I'm the youngest and brownest

person in the room. I tuck into some pomegranates seeds to reassure myself that everything is going to be okay.

I leave the Projects abroad office with a staff member in search of an ATM. The staring hits me harder than the humidity. I grin and chit chat through my discomfort. The Indian staff member is as curious as the questioning eyes on the street. The first one coughs up my travel card without providing any rupees. I finally strike it lucky on the second try and for the rest of my time in India, the Standard Chartered bank sign is the light that guides me to some much needed currency.

After folding wads of Gandhi's face into my wallet, we head back and the real part of why I'm here begins. The orientation into my temporary life as a volunteer journalist is very brief. Before I actually know what's going on, I'm shuttled into a motorised rickshaw with the Irishman and another staff member. As the streets of Sivakasi tear past me, I'm informed that we're on our way to interview a local environmentalist.

Our next stop is a local rickshaw driver who speaks to us about navigating his disability since the age of three. And from there it's back to the office. This becomes the rhythm of our weekdays. We meet community members, go to community events then head back to the office. We attend sports events, a fire safety demonstration, a food festival and protests. We plant trees, interview local celebrities and shake hands with shy high school students. In the afternoons, we practice our amateur photography in the backstreets of Sivakasi or sit behind our computers to write.

At the end of the week, we pick out a destination in one of the guide books and ask our project co-ordinator how to get there. We debate which route on the handwritten instructions is better then pack our small bags and head to the bus or train station.

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My first weekend, we go close by and explore Madurai. It's the standard fare of temple visits, nice enough lunches and a good amount of shopping. As we walk the streets, Natalie puts her finger on something that's been bothering me since we got here. She says, "I feel like a zoo animal on display". It's the staring - it gets to all of us. But especially to me.

The next weekend feels like it's plucked from a feel good indie movie or someone else's life. We head to the neighbouring state - Kerala. Our final destination is Varkala Beach. We spend our days playing beach volleyball, and floating in the water. The foreigners are the only people in swimwear and the bikinis attract the unwanted eyes of men on the beach. We split our nights between cocktails and midnight swims. The Irishman celebrates his birthday by serenading me with Calvin Harris' cheeky song 'The Girls'. After the merriment, we each curl up in our little beachside bungalows made for two. I end up splitting the mosquito-netted double bed with a Swiss volunteer that arrived that week. She has a South African parent and her name is Dorett. We become close friends.

The third weekend, we're back in Madurai for a "dirty weekend" - Projects Abroad endearing term for manual labour. We are tasked with painting the kitchen of an orphanage. We sing and toss paint at each other. In jest, I put a little bit of paint on the Frenchman, Anthony, and he responds in anger by dumping paint all over my face. The

humiliation hangs in the air until Marie-Laure lightens up the moment by putting a little more paint on me too. The moment passes but the embarrassment doesn't.

We spend the rest of the day playing volleyball and badminton on the orphanage playground. I suck at both but I'm a little better at badminton. Once in a while, I manage to hit the little thingy (shuttlecock??). When I take a bathroom break, I notice little eyes following me. As I move closer to the toilet stall, they keep their sights on me but recoil. They keep looking but don't dare come closer to me.

The next morning we head off to Kodaikanal to get a break from the humidity and enjoy the mountains. Getting there is a steep climb on a road that curves dangerously with blind corners. The road is too narrow for the buses to share. Each time one bus approaches a winding bend, the driver hoots as a warning. When the climb to this hill station is finally over, the relief strikes your chest - but so does the view. Approaching the stop, my eyes abandon a sentence on a book's page and never make it back.

The mountainside is painted with protest messages:

"Save Tibet!"

"China Must Pay"

We get out of the bus and trudge up and down in the rain looking for a hotel. We find one with a broken shower and no toilet paper. We walk through gardens, sample local chocolate, ride through a forest on horseback and get on duck shaped pedal boats.

The next day, the Irishman saves a signpost that says "slow down" from being mowed down by a bus. He plucks it out of the ground and steps aside just in time. Eventually, he puts the sign back and we leave for Madurai then home to Sivakasi.

On one of the weeknights, we head to the closest bar in town. The sign outside says "Recreation Club" but the Kingfisher beer insignia lets you know what you're in for. It's a dusty courtyard with a couple of trestle tables and plastic chairs. There are a handful of men there and all of them seem surprised that there's a group of women in the bar. After a couple of beers, the Irishman and I do a stirring rendition of Bohemian Rhapsody. And we all take a couple of blurry photos and attempt to stumble our way home. We're stopped by a cop whose questions are searching and repetitive. After explaining ourselves over and over again, he lets us go.

That weekend we head to Kochi. And we do the main tourist-y thing. We do a boat trip on the backwaters. At one point they take us ashore to explore a little village. It feels like walking into someone's home after receiving a reluctant invitation. We get back on the boat and I dip my fingers into the water to stir up some peace. I take my glasses off and close my eyes. The water drags my hand along. I open my eyes to take some pictures, lose grip of my glasses and watch them tumble into the green, rippling water.

This weekend trip is supposed to be my last but I decide to extend my stay in India for a couple of days. I put off the dread of leaving by sharing one more weekend with the Sivakasi Times volunteers. We go back and forth about where my last hurrah should be - Bangalore or Chennai. We eventually settle on a party weekend in the capital of Tamil Nadu.

Even though, we'd decided to stay in our state, the trip to Chennai is 9 hours long. We arrive, have breakfast and hustle to find somewhere to sleep for the weekend. We scramble around the city streets, drinking the content of green coconuts and try to figure out what to do. We wander into a shopping mall and decide to take refuge at the cinema. We buy tickets for a Hindi action film called "Wanted". The movie poster features Salman Khan with two guns and oversized shades. We reckon that the dialogue won't be key in this one so we will manage without the English subtitles.

The next day, we get on a train and head to Kishkinta - a water and theme park. We run around like children, challenging each other to action movie poses inspired by "Wanted". We feel like bad guys or anti-heroes as the bullets of water bounce off our chests.

That night, we ask around to find somewhere to drink and dance. No one's particularly sure where we should go but eventually someone directs us to the basement of the ITC hotel. This lounge/ club is called "Dublin". The drinks are a little overpriced and the bar is hard to get to. We fight our way through some men and get our Kingfisher beers. We dance in a group but even then men's hands find their way to body parts that aren't theirs to touch. At 1 am the music stops and everyone is told to leave.

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Monday comes and leaving is as hard as it would have been to stay. I'm holding back tears and wish there was more time. It's been 5 weeks of high highs and low lows - the kind of whirlwind that sweeps through grief and leaves a window of calm. It's been tumultuous for my self-esteem and sense of belonging. It's been a necessary process to leave renewal in its wake.

Right up until the end, I hope for that shining light of enlightenment. Instead, there's a rushed packing spree and dash to Madurai airport. The driver asks me why I speak English so well. I tell him that I went to an English medium school and that it's a language widely spoken in South Africa. I don't tell him how little I speak my mother tongue or the other answer to his question - British colonialism.

When we get to the airport, he unpacks my bags and hoists them onto a trolley. While waiting for my flight to board, I decide to have one last gulab jamun. I'd managed 5 weeks without food poisoning but this last treat would shatter that little streak of wellbeing. I would remember this choice whilst convulsing outside one of the bathrooms in Dubai International. Before I even got there, my luggage would be deemed overweight at Chennai International Airport and I'd be quoted "3000 ZAR" for it. I emptied out all the guidebooks and straggling paper, put more clothing on my body and tried again.

When I reached Dubai, I had a 10 hour wait for the next flight. Three hours in, I would rack the contents of my travel card hoping that I had enough rupees for Imodium. I would come up short. Laying out some jerseys on the floor, I would use my hand luggage as a pillow. Finally, on the flight to OR Tambo, I would curl up and shiver for 8 hours with intermittent bathroom breaks. I land in South Africa and on the other side of the immigration line is my mother. I'm grateful, humbled and dehydrated.

Two months later, I wake up to the sameness of life in Centurion. The only thing different about today is that I'm now a year older. It's the 5th of December and I'm officially 19. On my desk, my diary is open to this date and the only note there comes from months ago. Earlier in the

year, my cousin had written “We Will Dance” across all of the lines. Back then, we’d promised each other that on this day, we’d head out to a dancefloor in black Beyoncé-inspired leotards.

I gather a few friends and we do dance. It’s not the “we” that I hoped for.

## Chapter 4

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### ***Train approaching stand back from the platform edge...Train approaching stand back from the platform edge...***

Every morning that voice rouses me from the stupor of waiting. Over the intercom, crisp and mechanical, these instructions shake all those gathered from their I-pads, notebooks and phone screens. There’s an insistent tussle that moves everyone forward towards the closest door. It’s a torrent of sensible pant-suits and knee-length pencil skirts. It’s a steady stream of black, beige and navy - an overflow of collared shirts, blazers and patent leather shoes. Amongst the briefcases and laptop bags, there’s me.

I’m 22, dreadlocked and sandal-ed. The turquoise fringe of my Maxi dress is skirting the floor. I’m engulfed by the impatient shoving until I find an empty seat. I dig into to the bag between my feet and unearth a little black notebook. I unfasten the string that holds it together and retrieve the pen wedged into its spine. It’s a pocket sized birthday gift, given with the hopes that it would contain all the glories and indignities of a travel journal. It’s a present weighted with expectation that the pages will be filled with ‘you wouldn’t believe what I’ve seen stories’.

Instead, this little notebook begins with a barrage of complaints, confessions and sarcastic questions meant for the ether of the universe:

***We couldn’t pay the language school yesterday- my mother’s credit card got declined. What am I supposed to say? This is the will of God? Paulo Coelho told me that the universe is conspiring for me to succeed?***

The opening pages of my mini moleskine are inked with the bitterness of sleep deprivation. Someone else’s phone calls woke me up at 1 am. I had reached over to answer the vibrating phone only to explain to the insistent voice on the other end that they’d dialled the wrong number. I knew that this would be the end of any hopes of rest for the night. Falling asleep is battle I only narrowly win on some nights and doing it twice in one night is a near impossibility. Something simple enough for billions of people, for me is an everyday struggle. It’s one of the reasons that I couldn’t have just simply carried on the course I was on.

Being awake in the dark means that I have to wrestle with the ‘was this a mistake’ questions. Should I have just stuck it out in Cape Town? Should I have just carried on fighting through the bouts of insomnia? Would it have been more brave to keep moonlighting as Shaolin Kung Fu trainee? I guess I will never know.

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In the last year of my undergrad degree, I am not only chasing down the wisdom of dead Sufi scholars but also attempting to sweat some calm into my being. My dingy flatlet shares a building with the studio of a Shaolin martial arts institute. When the sleeplessness becomes unbearable, I wander into the studio to ask whether I can kick and punch my way out of insomnia. It's a short walk from my door to theirs but I have to bury fear underneath each step. I have to lull my anxieties with the ultimatum of exhaustion - direct them to the dark shadows under my eyes and say that's enough now.

The windows leading down the passageway to the studio are sealed off with large photos of the South African Sifu (master) surrounded by shaolin monks somewhere in the foothills of mainland China. I stand at the door and fidget with my clothing until someone notices that I'm there. A man in black clothing accented with white details approaches me. He's tall and I'm not so he looms over me without meaning to - he stoops with kindness to listen to what I have to say.

I ask about the cost of classes and when they happen. I am met with questions about my intention and schooled on the discipline and philosophy of this martial arts practice. I am warned that the classes will strengthen and challenge my mental, physical and emotional capacities. I breathe in the precautions with the arrogance of ignorance and exhale with the \*sigh\* of 'you don't know what I'm willing to do'. I am instructed on how to pay then told to bring a pen, notebook and black shoes that will only touch the studio's wooden floor. .

Before intimidation can raise an arm to bar my courage, I am sitting cross-legged in the studio. I flick through the pages of my notebook and eyeball everything. The insides of the space are washed with red and gold. The wall behind me is draped in large panels of crimson material and on the right end there's slightly shorter panel that indicates that this is the entry way. The panels also hold up yellow masks whose stern features are stencilled in black. The white ceiling is dotted with scarlet lanterns lit up like lightning bugs. On each side there's a white wall filled with things I'd only seen in badly dubbed Kung Fu movies. On the right, there's a wooden training dummy, a mahogany gong and some long wooden sticks. On the left, there are punching bags and a mahogany rack that houses sheathed swords. In front of me, there's a large mirror flanked by large ornately decorated fans and small table covered with cloth, incense, candles and white figurines.

Eventually, I'm told to stand so that I can greet the Sifu properly. I'm taught how and where to enter - when to bow and how to ask for permission to come in. I am given a sheet of paper with the 10 principles that are chanted in unison before the session begins. I'm told to know them by heart by the next time I pass through the curtained doorway. I'm also given three booklets labelled: "Shaolin Cosmos Qigong", "The Five Elements" , "Yin-Yang theory". I'm told to give them a read before I return.

Nothing much could have prepared me for that first physical. It's the first time I'm surrounded by people doing push ups on their knuckles. I attempt to push my body up onto my fists but crumple in pain. Instead, I'm allowed to start in the basic push up position but I may not stop or rest until all the counts have been counted. If I stop then the whole group has to start from the beginning - that dreaded first count. I try to compensate mentally for what isn't there physically yet. Mostly, I try to beat out the other new guy. We're neck and

neck in our desperation not to disappoint - but we do. We falter - and let the whole side down - we all begin again and again.

When that fresh hell is over, we are taken through the stances and sequences that will form the spine of our practice - the 12 steps of Shaolin. We're given both the Mandarin names for each step and the English description. We're also given a palm-sized piece of paper with the Mandarin pronunciation of numbers - these will be the guides that move us into the next stance. We're told to draw little stick men so that we can remember the intricate formation of stances, blocks, footwork and kicks.

To wind down, we are taught how to meditate the Shaolin way and given a crash course on Qi - our sustaining life force. I leave shivering with humbling sweat and wake up sore in places that are hard to describe. From then on, I move in and out of restful sleep as I do that studio. Days where I get a full night's rest comes in bursts that taste like hope. But when I start to get used to it the restless panic returns. I have to go to a minimum of two classes per week. I can see the studio door from mine but it's always a long journey to get there. It begins when I wake up or get tired of playing at being asleep. I leave for campus in the morning convinced that I'm going but as 6 pm draws nearer, the dread and the excuses begin...

"I'm too tired". This is always true. "I'm not the flavour of tired that can handle a physical today". This is only sometimes true. "I'm not strong enough yet to not drag down the whole team with me". This is true but we are supposed to do the physical at home every day in order to find that strength. But most mornings, getting onto my unswept floor and holding myself up with my knuckles isn't very appealing.

I try the inspiration route. I find a DVD of the movie "Ip man" in the UCT library and check it out for the weekend. With remnants of a sugar bean Sunrise roti caked on my lips, I watch the actor playing the role of Bruce Lee's martial arts master move with accuracy and grace. It's a portrait of a Sifu that is the paragon of the humble and compassionate practice of Wing Chun. This reclusive Sifu spends the first part of the movie training with a wooden dummy and sharing meals or pots of tea with family and friends. It's an effortless and serene existence that is constantly interrupted by men seeking his tutelage or challenging him to duels he's not particularly interested in.

In one scene, a gang of ruffians from out of town burst into Ip man's home. They've come to the Master's home town to open up a martial arts club. In previous scenes, without an inkling of mercy, they've brutalised and defeated all the other Masters in Fo Shan - which is famed for its Kung Fu academies. At first Ip Man refuses their provocation, deferring to his wife's insistence that these men leave their home. His respect for his wife's will provokes a sneering mockery from his opponent. He taunts Ip Man for fearing his wife and fighting in style that was allegedly invented by a woman. After an instruction not to break her things, Ip Man's wife allows the duel to happen. What follows is a showcase of quiet strength that carries Ip man through this particular fight and even battles with the Japanese armed forces that occupy China in the late 30s. I turn it off then spend my cellphone data looking up the founding myth of Wing Chun.

There are various legends about how this form of martial arts came into being but my favourite goes as follows: *Centuries ago, Shaolin temples in the South of China were being destroyed by a dynasty that felt threatened by the power of the battle ready monks and*

*nuns. Temples were burned to the ground forcing the nuns and monks to flee. One of them was a Buddhist nun named Ng Mui who escaped the destruction and settled at another temple nestled on Mt. Tai Leung.*

*During this time, the nun met a young woman named Yim Wing-chun. This young woman had recently rebuffed a marriage proposal from a local warlord/bully. She was in desperate need of means to defend herself against his reprisals. The nun taught her the ways of the Shaolin - specifically how to fight. She taught Yim Wing-chun a new form of martial arts that had been inspired by a battle she had seen - the opponents were a snake and a crane.*

*Through disciplined practice Yim Wing-chun masters the nameless form and beats the warlord in a one-on-one fight. This enables her to marry the man that she chooses and later the discipline is named after her. (grandmasterswingchun, n.d.)*

This legend is a fist pumping feminist tale that settled on my skin long before I called myself a feminist. I decided to push myself a little harder in class and to dig deeper into the well of aspiration. I flipped through those ring bound folders and found a Chinese film that conjured up vapours of my childhood. It was a 2009 live-action version of Mulan. I'd watched the animated Disney version as a young girl and it made me feel like all of us have a shot at being warriors. This version focused on the impossibility of her romance rather than her prowess in battle. She also spends a good portion of the movie crying. As the end credits rolled - I was disappointed. It would be awhile before I learned that there was strength in tenderness and heartbreak.

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As 2012 came to a close, exams arrived to fleece my reserves of any restfulness and tranquillity. This had been a pattern for years. Before 18, I had been a prolific napper and exam periods meant power snoozes to calm the storm. During the rest of the school term, I would often go from sitting at the edge of the bed, taking off my school shoes, to waking up in the early hours of the morning still wearing my dishevelled school uniform. Then Matric came followed closely by insomnia which rummaged around my life and broke some things.

I remember hugging the last Harry Potter book in the middle of the night like it was a life preserver. The Deathly Hallows came into my life at a time when I technically couldn't read it. Your whole schooling life, you're told that Matric exams determine your future. On the eve of my first exam, the weight of that pushed my eyelids wide open. The sense that if I fuck this up there goes my life played on loop with fragments of French verb conjugations spliced into the mix. The 'this defines my life' jitters would be on rinse and repeat for the next three weeks.

I'd spend my nights on the internet researching sleep instead of burrowed in its nape. I would read endless listicles on 'sleep hygiene' and the desperate testimonies of other insomniacs on Q and A forums. When day would break, I'd brush my teeth and sit down to study or head to school to face the questions that would make or break me. Night would come and the high of my morning delirium would wane and I'd crumple into the shower or my mother's bedroom to beg for sleeping tablets.

She'd always say no. My mother is a doctor with the power of prescription buried somewhere in her handbag. She would tell me to exercise. Running is how she dealt with her anxiety in med school - why couldn't I do the same? I would wake up and pop in a 90s

style exercise DVD. I would follow the direction of the spandex-clad instructor. I would sweat and I would hope. Each night with a nervous heart, I'd get under the duvet. I'd whisper my intention into the universe and try the classic - counting sheep. I would toss, turn, and get up to pee and cry. Then head upstairs to ask the internet for more answers.

After a panic attack in my last Math exam, I gave up, got into bed, and read the Deathly Hallows from cover to cover. Page by page, I blotted out the memory of a teacher telling me to sit down, put my head between my legs and breathe. The more I disappeared into the Wizarding world, the more steps I took from the world where a teacher had, had to take me by the hand and take me to another room in the middle of the exam. As the darkness in Harry's life engulfed mine, I forgot the breathlessness, the humiliation and the "what happened?" from friends. Instead when the "All was well" was written as an end to the Potter saga, I breathed a \*sigh\* of relief. I told the 9 year old version of me that had been handed the Chamber of Secrets by a librarian, that it would be okay for him - and for me.

## Chapter 5

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I shuffle around in the blue-carpeted Gautrain seat and my pen pauses on the page. I glance over just in time to see the hulking gold figure of the Nizamiye mosque rush past the window. As the train barrels past Midrand, you can see the minarets of this Turkish marvel reach to graze the clouds. For 16 seconds, I hold my breath and exhale when the landscape changes back to the concrete fence and dull green embankment. I find my way back to the page and ink with the next line:

*Yesterday I lied because I thought it was expected of me. A simple question like 'Are you fluent in another language?' is enough to back me into a corner.*

I should speak Zulu - but I don't. It's my home language - but what comes out of my mouth when I'm at home is English. What comes out of my mother's mouth is a mix between the two but Zulu for her is home. It's the tongue that comes from her childhood in rural KwaZulu Natal (KZN). The tongue that followed her to a Catholic boarding school run by strict white nuns. It's the tongue that moved with her and everyone around her on the streets of KwaMashu. It's the tongue that her and my dad shared. All of his identity was coiled up in being a proud Zulu man. Even when he moved to a province where other languages were spoken - it's still what commanded his mouth.

My mother, on the other hand, moved to Pretoria and picked up Tswana by simply listening. She'd pluck the words/phrases/sentences from the mouths of her patients, tuck them into hers and let them run from her lips. She was not discouraged by the mistakes that would muddle up the words or the not-so-gentle corrections that would come from her patients. She's now multilingual- switching from English to Zulu to Tswana with fluid ease.

I understand all three but fully speak only one. I listen too and grab for the words too. But the thing with me is that I tuck them away - afraid to say the wrong thing, afraid of the mistakes - scared to not be articulate. My Zulu is a three year old child, shy in front of strangers but paying attention to everything that goes on around her.

The train has pulled into Marlboro station. This means that I only have a few more minutes before I get off - Sandton station is the next stop. I hunch over even more and bow my head further towards the page. I barely lift the tip of my pen in the flurry to finish my thoughts:

*Maybe I'll be forced to deal with this issue the hard way. Maybe this year won't be about travel – it might just be about struggling in my own backyard. But I feel like I've done that already. South Korea is my hope of getting strong. The only thing that seems to hold us back is our family. Every time we've managed to claw our way back to some sort of financial decency. Someone dies, gets married or deported from Iran. Someone decides to live in our house to deal with their alcoholism or leaves the financial responsibility of their children to us. Asking for an opportunity to be happy comes at a high price. The most overwhelming part of this situation is that it isn't anyone's fault – at least it's not hers. But sometimes I want to blame her and I always want to blame them.*

“Black tax”: the semi-official term for what my mother and many other South Africans experienced post-apartheid. It's a catchall phrase that supposed to capture the responsibility that employed black South Africans have to financially help or support their extended families - and sometimes whole communities. It's a band-aid fix for the woundedness of Apartheid's legacy - a piece of thin gauze held in place by exhausted individuals to cover for a society that is yet to fully provide equal opportunity.

It's a term that I would only fully adopt years later whilst deep in the throes of the student movement against high university fees. For now, I'm sitting on the Gautrain, holding years on my shoulders that aren't indicated by the date on my birth certificate. I've allotted two years of my life to fix everything - a ruthless pursuit of well-being, joy and spiritual peace.

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I push the glowing arrows on the doors and they open onto the platform of Sandton station. I move forward with the swell of suits and claim my space on the escalator. At the top, I make my way to a parking lot that hosts a fleet of blue and gold buses. I look for the one labelled “Randburg” and swipe my card as I get on. I climb onto the raised platform the seats are on and scrunch my bag and body up to the window.

I don't know what I'm looking for so I double check the name of every stop. When I think it's time for me to get off, I do one last check with the bus driver. I walk up the road to the Engen garage and wait to be picked up.

I double check the message for the description of the car. I search the morning traffic for the license plate number and scan the slow moving cars for the right colour. Eventually, she pulls into the parking spot I'm pacing in front of. She opens the door and her smile welcomes me in.

When we arrive, she gathers her things from her back seat and her boot. I pick up the bag lying at my feet and look around for anything I might have left behind. She punches in the security code and holds the door for me. I slip through the open space and wait at the bottom of the stairs. She checks that the door is locked then leads us upstairs. When we get to the top, she heads to her desk.

She is in charge of all the administration required to run this little language school in Randburg. She logs into her computer and looks for the invoice allocated to me. When she finds it, I hand over my mother's credit card. She sticks it into the card machine then swipes it when it doesn't work. It's declined. She tries again. It's declined. I get lost in a fog of shame and anxiety. She tells me to go see the general manager.

I duck into the manager's office wanting to go unnoticed and unseen. She tells me to have a seat and I explain why I couldn't make the payment. I expect to be rushed out the door and back onto the street. Instead, I get a smile and assurance that my mother has already called to sort it out.

I leave the room and rush upstairs to join the rest of my classmates. They're drinking the free tea or coffee and picking at the sweet early morning snacks. There's the gentle hum of 'getting to know each other' chatter. I insert myself into the improvised circle in the centre of the room and each word pushes us into that weird little phase between strangers and people you know.

Soon we're called to class and my 100 hours of teaching experience begins. We sit at our desks and we're greeted by a tall woman wearing an almost ankle length skirt, a short-sleeved top and sensible flat shoes. She has shoulder length hair, pale-ish skin and long fingers. She gives us a breakdown of what we will be doing for the next 4 weeks and hands out the resources needed.

We throw a ball around to learn a little bit more about each other. Every time someone catches it they have to say their name and why they're here. Technically, we're all here for the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certificate. But we want it for different reasons - for some of us it's the same reason but different countries. We're all feeling our way through a common sense of uncertainty - wading through the in-between of what should happen next in our lives.

After a few more activities we break for lunch. We tiptoe around the awkwardness of trying to figure out who we're going to sit with. I end up with the clique of people that are roughly my age. Being in our early twenties is enough to duct tape over the gulf of things we don't have in common. After cigarettes are smoked, teas are sipped and sandwiches have been eaten - we head back to our little classroom.

When we walk in, there's another teacher standing in front of the white board. There are characters on the board that we don't recognise. We're introduced to our Japanese teacher. She's here to put us firmly in the shoes of our students - she's here to grind some empathy into us. We quickly learn the frustration and folly of trying to read and write in a language that is foreign to us. She demonstrates and we repeat sounds that are unfamiliar to our mouths. I look down at my desk and there are three writing systems printed on our resource sheets - Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji. I wonder if in my early school days, I'd been given three different alphabets if I would have picked up reading as quickly as I did. I look up again and our teacher is giving us instructions. The only thing I hear is my desperation to understand her.

We end the class with a round of applause and she smiles at us with a practiced patience. Our full-time teacher asks us how it was. We burst through our daze with complaints about

how difficult and discouraging it was. Eyes wide open, we vow to remember that feeling when we're the ones standing in front of the black or whiteboard.

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Korea is plan A. But the silence from the teaching agency I applied to prompts me to look elsewhere. I flip through an STA travel booklet that details possible gap year placements all over the world. I start to get that dreamy 'I could end up anywhere' feeling. With the excitement creeping back into my heart, I email the travel company about teaching English in Thailand. The next day I get a response:

*Thank you for your enquiry.*

*I am positive that this is going to be the start of a wonderful new life with endless possibilities and experiences.*

The rest of the email breaks down the logistics of moving countries for a little while - registration costs, requirements to apply to school etc. I click on the attachments with a profound sense of this might work out after all. The first document is a standard application form - I'm relieved at how far less extensive it is than the Korean one. The second document is an information document and programme summary. I click on the second document and quickly read through the list of requirements to apply - I tick all the boxes. Next, I read through the list of programme benefits:

- *Guaranteed Placement or 100% placement rate – answer given when acceptance is done!*
- *Full Support and Assistance – lifelong – work in China and Korea later through Us..*
- *Travel for 3 months to 20yrs + - we have families that emigrate ☺*
- *Dependents Welcome*
- *Couples and Friends placed in the same location*
- *Min Salary of 25 000TB to 45 000TB - currency converter – [www.oanda.com](http://www.oanda.com)*
- *Fantastic Adventure for the young – a life change for the older – 100% Life Changing*

I'm thrilled until the last bullet point gives me pause and lets the air out of my proverbial tyres:

- *Non-Caucasian applicants are extremely difficult to place in Thailand...so no work guarantee.*

The hunt for other options is meant to appease my growing concern. I didn't expect my "endless possibilities" to mean many shut doors. That last bullet point doesn't surprise me - I've circled my way around many online forums that talk about this place or that place that does not hire black teachers no matter how much they're qualified. It's not shock that makes me minimise the window and leave the room to find the TV remote. It's fear, frustration and disbelief. I thought that this experience would be worth leaving everything behind. I never thought that it might not happen.

\*\*\*

Today is my first lesson as a trainee TEFL teacher. I'm at the Gautrain station, there are ring bound files open at my feet and I'm finishing off my lesson plan. My day started at 4 am with bitter instant coffee and a blank Word document. At 7 am, I'm clutching newly created worksheets and running through the rain towards the entrance of the station. By the time, I get to the language school I'm frazzled, caffeinated and damp all over. I take a deep breath and repeat my morning mantra over and over again – "get it together" plays in an endless loop in my head.

I bat my anxiety into submission then I begin. My classmates are staring at me and their pens are hovering over their evaluation forms. I muster all of the enthusiasm not frayed by sleep deprivation and launch into the lesson. At the end, I realise that it's gone okay. I try to use "it's over" to drown out the chorus of "you should/could do better". In this mind, body and soul relationship, it's my mind that wears the pencil skirt. I don't need others to critique me - anywhere they go, I got there first.

The feedback from my classmates surprises me - it's mostly positive.

My afternoon ends with a high speed chase. My classmate has just picked up her 4 year old and we're pursuing an ice cream truck. We weave through traffic, try to console the crying toddler and attempt to keep the jingle blasting from the van in ear shot. Eventually, we flag the ice cream man down and Rowan begins to choke back his tears. His mom takes him out of his car seat. I watch them count up his coins and receive his little tub of joy. Once her son is safely buckled in again, Claire climbs into the front seat and starts the ignition. When we're back on the road, she takes a long breath and talks about what it was like when Rowan was younger.

Claire: We used to chase down that damn vehicle with its wailing siren and just miss it. He'd actually cry more when we caught it.

Me: Why? Did he not like ice cream? Or was it just having something too cold for his hands?

Claire: It was the chase that interested him. He thought that this was the object of the game.

Me: I guess that the pursuit of stuff is often more fun than when you actually get it.

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It's Saturday morning and I just missed the train. I'm so exhausted that this sort of thing almost brings me to my knees. Everything is still so uncertain. The agency invited me to a "Visa party" – whatever the hell that means. Apparently, my application is "far advanced" – whatever the hell that means. Does that mean I have a Job 'yes' or 'no' – that email didn't get a reply. I'm starting to feel strung along. Like I was led down the sweet trail but at the end of the road there's no brick house made out of chocolate. There's only waiting at empty train stations, knowing that you're going to be late.

45 minutes later, I arrive at Sandton station. After a quick phone call, I stand outside and wait. A Tuk Tuk adorned with the Old Mutual logo pulls up to the curb and I climb in – this is my first taste of the business experiment to bring this form of transport to South Africa. There's something surreal about being in a Tuk Tuk in Sandton. It's like India but without

the family of 4 on the back of a motorbike flying by, without the bus driving in the direction of oncoming traffic and without the spattering of cows.

It's a windy and bumpy journey. The three-wheeler has to go head to head with all the luxury vehicles making their way to the golf course or brunch at a shopping mall. It does an okay job of nipping between the silver BMWs and white Mercedes Benzs. Once the roads get quieter, the driver asks me a few questions and tests out my novice French. He's from the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) and I took French as a subject in High school (and for a year of university). We don't get too far past the greeting/small talk pleasantries: Ça va? Ça va bien et vous? Comme ci comme ça.

It gets greener and greener the closer we get to where we're going. We hurtle past rows of overbearing trees and the gated communities begin to vanish. When we reach the park, I climb out and hesitantly spin around. I can't believe there are places like this in Johannesburg. The Sandton Field and Study Centre is a patch of real life forest in the hub of back-to-back office buildings and oversized homes.

I hurry past the "Don't Swim" signs. I dash into the one of the little cottages with the English Access sign on it. One of my classmates has already started teaching her lesson and I slink into a corner at the front of the room. I look around to see who's in our class – it's mostly working class black South Africans who are probably north of 30. Almost immediately, I know that we've made a mistake. We haven't bothered to ask them why they want to improve their English. We're just throwing random grammar lessons at them. They're just the test bunnies before the real thing. They're promised free English Lessons and that allows us to practice teaching. It means that their learning will be disrupted and disjointed. In a month, the next round of wannabe teachers will shuffle in with lesson plans meant for primary or high school learners somewhere in East Asia.

Finally, we do a little section on employment possibilities. I see the women's eyes gloss over when I ask who wants to be an entrepreneur. In general, the women don't say much. After class, I discuss this with Claire and she simply puts it down to "a cultural thing". The men are supposed to speak whilst the women keep silent. We're not supposed to be high-powered or fend for ourselves – until they leave and we have no choice.

## Chapter 6

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So I finally got the call – the one confirming an interview slot for TeachKorea. I hope this will mean that my plan will be official, official. I hope this means that I no longer have to dodge questions about this year from my friends and family members.

On the night before the interview, I roll over and press my cheek further into my pillow. I relive all the steps it took to get to this part of the process. All the Metrorail ticket stubs and the glimpses of the Cape sea filtered through the grimy and graffitied windows of the train to Simon's Town. That time I got lost looking for the agency's office and a garbage truck picked me up (plus a barrel of trash) and took me close to the right place. I think through that time I fought with the woman in charge of issuing police clearances at Mowbray police station. She was surrounded by piles of unmarked paper, coffee stains and fumes of cigarette smoke. She said that my first application had disappeared due to the postal service strike. Her curtness (read rudeness) led me straight to the office of the sergeant in charge.

Where I knew that my hair and skin wouldn't buy me much currency but I hoped that my UCT hoodie and accent would.

He nodded compassionately as I laid out all of my complaints. He agreed to have a chat with her and frustration purged, I left to have my fingerprints taken once again. They brought in a homeless man as my fingers were being inked. They began to belittle and bully him. I squeaked out a "there's no need for that" which got lost in the loud taunts and the sneering laughter. After he got his fill, the officer finally turned to me and let me know where I could wash my fingers.

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On the morning of the interview, my head leaves my pillow at 5 am. I try to drown the nerves with a quick shower and a half a cup of coffee. I sit at my desk to look through the list of possible interview questions. I practice my model answers for the last time. I etch little notes onto the already marked paper. I switch my towel for business wear - pulling on a black second hand blouse and a sensible skirt borrowed from my mother. I put on a black short-sleeved jacket to cover up my shoulders even more. I've been warned that skin from the top part of my body should not be peeking out - that my arms and neck are the only things permitted to be visible.

I throw my bag onto the passenger seat of our silver Yaris and drive down the road to my friend's place. They have better Wi-Fi so it's worth the security hassle of trying to get into the golf estate. She greets me at the door barefooted and in her pyjamas. She takes me upstairs to the family's office and I take a seat on the comfy black leather chair. The nerves pull my butt to edge of the seat.

I log out of her Skype account and enter in my details. It's 7:05 am and I realise that months of jumping on and off trains, walking up steep hills to the agency and tons of documentation hinge on this - what I would say for the next 20 minutes. At 7:10 am, I'm swinging side to side with anxiety. This was when it was scheduled to begin. I look at my model answers again but it feels like my eyes dart over the text without taking anything in. The contact add request from the interviewer pops up and I accept. Then after a few long minutes, the window for an incoming call bleeps to life. I answer using video call but their web cam is switched off. An American voice echoes through the screen. I answer the voice's questions as best as I can whilst checking on my video feed to make sure that my face still looks calm and not too awkward.

I fumble my way through imaginary classroom scenarios. I hear myself stutter a couple of times and my internal doubts begin to echo in my eardrums. It feels like an exam – a game of luck and chance that no amount of preparation could prepare you for. My model answers are still floating around in my mind but most of it feels like guessing - trying to figure out what they want to hear and what I should keep to myself.

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***Next train to Park is a 4 car train and will depart in 15 minutes.***

I feel thoroughly drained and winded. I raced through the ticket reader after it bleeped green and sprinted up the stairs. After the intercom voice lets me know I'm early, my heart

rate and pulse amble back to their normal pace. I let the sweat on my forehead drip dry and flip the card in my palm over and over again.

I look down at my little gold train pass. “For people on the move” that’s what my Gautrain card says but am I going to go anywhere except the stops between Centurion and Park station? I didn’t think that things would work out this way. That it would be the 5<sup>th</sup> of February and I still wouldn’t know. I had no idea that I’d be on a train platform in Gauteng fighting back fatigue and not on a train in Seoul fighting back butterflies. I only find out my fate next week but I keep hearing the words of this man. A man in his early twenties I met at a birthday party. A man who sealed my crush on him by signing his surname on my thigh the night we met. He told me that I have to see my own country first before I decide to leave. I keep pleading with the phantasm of him in my mind begging him to reconsider because I was always coming back – and I have left before.

***Train approaching stand back from the platform edge...Train approaching stand back from the platform edge...***

The arrival of the train stirs me from the worst-case scenarios and panicked thoughts. I stand aside to let some passengers get off then join the steady shuffle to get in. I get off at the Sandton stop and 20 minutes later I’m standing in front of a class of 8.

I start the lesson by asking them what they want to be and what they wanted to get out of English classes. It’s the first time we actually ask what they want - what we could offer them. One person volunteers an answer and says that he wants to be a lawyer. Funny enough, it’s one of the words written on the flimsy 30 seconds cards I made for this lesson. I tell him that could definitely be in his future. He tells me that because his English isn’t good enough, he couldn’t do well. He says that, if tested, he would have the answers but wouldn’t be able to fully understand the question. I smile and say that we can help him with that.

What I want to say is “don’t believe the lie”. We live in a country that confuses English proficiency with intelligence. That mocks accents that mean someone speaks multiple languages. Don’t let them tell you that a coloniser’s language is the key to your intellect or your humanity.

But I don’t say these things; I break them up into two groups and make them play an English vocab version of the game 30 seconds.

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I’m starting to feel like a suburban mom - one of those annoying helicopter ones. They cancelled soccer at my old school. It’s the sport my 13-year-old brother is good at and a popular choice during break times. It’s the profession he dreamed of when he was a little kid. My mother complains to me about how they take decisions without even thinking about the people who it will affect. She tells me that she is suspicious of the new deputy principal and that it was probably a racial decision - considering who dominates the soccer field. She says she won’t make a noise because they won’t listen to a black face. Money talks she says and ‘they’ speak louder than we do.

I think that it’s mostly because ‘they’re’ willing to speak – it’s because ‘they’ were always told that they can. I decide to give the school a call. One of the secretaries informs me that it was due to numbers and it was a decision made by the board. I find the numbers

explanation hard to believe as each grade had two teams throughout his time in the prep school. I decide as an “ex-pupil” to write a strongly worded email. I ask my ex-principal to clarify why this decision was made. He sends back a one-liner that ends with an exasperated exclamation mark telling me to read the school newsletter.

I harumph at the slight of being dismissed and end my crusade against private school injustice. I shake my head bitterly at all the memories of Saturdays spent watching a less than mediocre rugby team. How I’d been forced to come in full uniform, sign in, cheer and watch our rugby team lose again. In my day, soccer was the sport that made the boys toss their school ties and blazers during break. They’d battle for the ball, running until their collared shirts untucked themselves. Then the bell would ring and they’d collect their things. After school, during the official time for sports practice, their only choices were rugby and hockey.

A couple of years ago, I would never have sent that email. Racism - I used to think that, that word belonged in our dark, dark past. I had white and Afrikaans people that I loved. And I hadn’t been born in time to see what “they” were like before. I was born the year that Nelson Mandela was released from prison and was toddling my way towards four years old when the first democratic elections - where Black, Indian and Coloured people were allowed to vote - happened. I was a few years shy of what’s known as the “born-free” generation.

Three years in academia had given me a taste of what institutionalised racism really meant. That it simply doesn’t end when political power changes hands and the laws are changed. It’s tightrope between the actions, attitudes or behaviour of individuals and the social, economic and political norms of the country. Born into a home of material comfort, I didn’t know how much I’d been protected from - and how much I wasn’t protected from.

## Chapter 7

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I’m at OR Tambo International Airport. I’m on the way to KwaZulu Natal. I’m on my way to Riola. I’ve never tried so hard to swat a day away like yesterday. I wasted it on purpose - tried to fill it with nonsense so that hope of something meaningful wouldn’t completely overwhelm it. Two weeks later and I still haven’t heard anything from the teaching agency. What now and What if? No news is good news I’ve been told. But no news could mean I’m waiting in vain - holding on for nothing in particular.

Knowing that I am going to see one of my best friends (loves of my live) has pushed me through the waiting. It’s taken the edge off the panic and held back the disaster scenarios. The TEFL course ended two weeks ago and since then I’ve turned to YouTube for further education. My Search History is littered with the following: ‘teaching English South Korea, foreign teacher South Korea, being black in Korea, black teacher in Korea, dating black in Korea.

I was the only black person in my TEFL class. There were fears and concerns that I couldn’t discuss with anyone else in the room so I turned to the internet. I spend stolen hours watching YouTube videos of what it’s like being a black teacher in Korea. It’s testimony after testimony of unwitting racism, cultural insensitivity and the use of well-worn stereotypes or slurs.

Watching these videos urges to me to believe that it's going to happen. I get lost down the rabbit hole of endless playlists and start to superimpose my life onto theirs. But watching their sadness, their frustration and their dashed humanity - felt like a knowing that this could be all mine too.

Somewhere between the doom and gloom of my thoughts, I check in my bag, shuffle my way through the security check and wait to board. After getting my ticket checked for the last time, I make my way towards the orange plane with the word '**MANGO**' painted across its side and lower rear. I budge my way through passengers trying to lift their hand luggage into the cubby holes. I scoot my way into the window seat and as soon as we are airborne, I pour my excitement into my little black notebook.

I look up in time to see Joburg clouds make way for Durban skies. The captain lets us know that we'll be landing in 10 minutes. I shove my notebook back into my handbag and stow it under the seat again. We land and the sound of seat belts being unclipped reverberates around the plane. We disembark and that signature humidity slaps me in the face. We hurry past all the signs of greeting 'Welcome to King Shaka International Airport'.

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I have a difficult relationship with KwaZulu Natal. It's the region of my people. It's the highest concentration of Zulu people in the country. Everywhere you go, there are people speaking with the same intonations, gestures, idioms and pauses as my mom - and the rest of my family (on both sides). For me, it's a place where I am confronted - with everything I'm supposed to be. It's a place I used to try and avoid. As a teenager, I used to abscond from family holidays to Durban by simply refusing to go. One year, I spent what was supposed to be family time on the couch alone watching the Beijing Olympics. I preferred poring over swimming, basketball, volleyball etc and cheering for countries I knew nothing about rather than dealing with the shame of not belonging.

We've driven to Durban several times a year since I was born. When my father was still alive, he loved carting us around in his Opel Kadett on cross-country trips. My mother kept that going long after he was gone. The day before we'd leave, I'd watch as countless little sandwiches were made and transferred into a gigantic transparent plastic tub. These drives would mean that I could eat things that usually never made it into our house - fizzy drinks, Simba chips, wine gums and milk chocolate.

Flying to Durban feels like landing in a different place. This airport feels foreign to me. I can count the times I've ended up here on one hand. I follow the signs that say pick-up point and hustle my way through the arrivals terminal. I pick a spot in the flurry of open boots and discarded trolleys. I look around for the car described to me over the phone. Finally, I see it pull up with Riola curled up on the backseat. I exhale from the depths of my diaphragm for the first time in weeks.

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It's a 20-minute drive of non-stop chatter until we make it home. Soon we're in the beachside holiday town of Ballito. We tag in at the security gate and the booms open up to Zimbali lodge. It's a part hotel/part holiday home estate/part residential area hybrid. It's brimming with quiet winding roads that loop around bursts of greenery. When we reach the

house, I get out of the car and think 'Wow'. Riola and her father grab my things and we make our way up the path to the house.

When the door opens, the first thing you see is a pretty big kitchen, with a moderately sized dining area and a medium-sized lounge area. To get to the bedrooms, we have to go down a steep but carpeted flight of stairs. We set my things next to the double bed we'll be sharing. Both she and I flop onto the bed - continuing our car conversation. We only stop talking when we are summoned upstairs again.

Back upstairs, I meet Riola's younger siblings - her two teenage sisters and her 6-year-old brother. Her stepmom corrals them to their rooms to get out of their school uniforms and to put down their things. I also meet Zandile who works in the family's home as a domestic worker. "Sawubona" - I give a shy greeting. She responds "Sawubona, unjani?" Then, I finish off the ritual: "Ngiyaphila, unjani?" and she ends it "Ngiyaphila".

It doesn't go much further than that. "Hello", "how are you" and "I'm fine" are where my Zulu is most comfortable. I want to talk to her more but I'm afraid of embarrassing myself. I want to tell her she has a beautiful smile but I've forgotten what the Zulu word for "smile" is.

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We wake up the next morning and I turn over to say happy birthday to Riola. She's 21 in the year that I'm turning 23. I'm two years older than her but she's always seemed more grown up than me. I've always looked up to her. We get out of bed and true to her selfless nature, she gives me gifts on her birthday.

She hands me a bag that she picked out for me in India and a beautifully adorned journal to match. The journal is turquoise with sparkly gems on the cover and the pages are the crisp white of a new beginning. These gifts come straight out of a suitcase that she's barely unpacked because, as soon as she's sorted out a plan to work, she's heading back to India. Back to the North of the South - Hyderabad.

We'd always shared little bits of India. By the time we met, 3 years and a bit ago, I'd been to India and she hadn't. But she still managed to school me on Bollywood movies, on Hindi songs, on material, on scarves, on food, on scents and spices. During our three years together at UCT, she'd given me giant mugs of tea and tucked me into her bed to watch the latest or a Classic Hindi release. Every year, we'd head to the India textile and trade show at the CTICC (Cape Town International Convention Centre). We'd spend the day buying clothes that we'd held under our chins to see if they'd fit and touching furniture we couldn't afford - and had no place to put.

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On the night of her birthday celebration, family members pour into her dad and stepmom's home. There are aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins everywhere but eventually everyone gathers around the kitchen island. Joke after story after joke, we laugh ourselves raw. I think they like me, at least I hope I represent the kind of person Riola is well. I keep my guard up but I feel comfortable enough to be happy.

At some point the laughter carries me to thoughts about my own family. When they come together, language becomes a barrier and I stand on the side-line. I cheer them on as I feel more isolated. A loud rendition of the birthday song brings me back. We eat cake and I smile at all the ways the kids are trying to keep themselves amused. The adults have booze and the attention of the room to keep them going.

The noise peters out as people begin to leave. There's a Bhangra night happening at a club close by so Riola and I decide to go out. When we get there, the dance floor is quite empty. But in the few spots that are occupied, there's a crop of men with spiky gelled hair, slim fit t-shirts and gold chains. As soon as we start dancing we attract unwanted stares. The bulk of the lip licking attention is targeted at Riola. She has that light brown skin/light eyes combo that for so many screams seduction and sexual currency.

After the discomfort of being creeped on for an hour and half, we decide to go home. Riola's birthday ends with us in bed wishing that we could be somewhere, as women, where we could dance without the loose hands and loose eyes. Somewhere we could be fully human.

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The day before I leave, one of Riola's aunts pays the family a visit. The conversation starts innocently enough - she asks where I'm from, what I study, how I know her niece. Before long, we veer into explosive territory - the bad road that leads to conversation about relationships and religion. The Aunt decrees that men should be the head of our families - and de facto in charge of who women are as people. Apparently, that's what God wants. Riola and I give each other the look to confirm that we heard right then gather strength to tag team this patriarchal minefield.

Since she's family, she's goes for the direct hit and since I'm effectively a stranger, I take the more diplomatic route. We both get to the same place. We're not just here to be someone's "neck" - holding it all together whilst the "head" dictates the parameter of our lives. My soul did not make the journey here for me to be in the cheap seats of my own existence. A woman's life is her own sacred stadium - yes she can step up for other people but she most definitely needs to step up for herself. We both believe in a higher force that wants the best for us- not one that wants us to be the footstool on someone else's path.

The conversation ends with the convictions of both sides still seemingly intact. The Aunt remarks about how impressed she is that young women are so strong these days and so willing to give their opinions. It's an unexpected compliment that mellows the conversation back into chitchat.

After the aunt gathers her kids and leaves, Riola and I head to the beach. As the skies darken, we unwrap all our vulnerabilities and we speak about the men we have wanted so desperately for our entire friendship. We speak about dreams we've had about them. Words they've said that have clung to us. The hope that won't let go - that someday it will all work out. We speak of the years wasted on yearning. Eventually we walk up the path back to the house and go inside.

The next morning, I know I have to leave but I don't know when I will see her again. Hours disappear and before the tears come, I'm looking out of a Joburg bound aeroplane at a sky of orange and yellow.

## Chapter 8

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I wake up to another day like every day that February in Centurion. It's the 22nd and the nearer we draw to the end of the month, the more my chest seizes up with fear. I give myself a quick pep talk and with newfound hope open up my Gmail inbox. There's nothing worth reading so I write an email instead. I type "progress of my application" into the subject line. I type and delete, type and delete, attempting to strip the words of the frenetic disquiet of my mind. I try to dial down my frustration and end up with this:

Dear Administrator,

I have been waiting 3 weeks for a response after my interview. The person who interviewed me said it would only take 2 working days for a response. What is going on? Should I just give up and look for other opportunities?

Regards,

Dela

I get up and try to fill the hours of that Friday with something that resembles a productive life. I get out of my pyjamas, run/jog, read, drift on and off Youtube and watch the travel channel. Riola sends me her login details for a forum that connects you to different internship opportunities abroad. Before I pay the subscription fee, I have a snoop around. I salivate over an internship to work at a television station in Afghanistan. One of my majors was media but I'm wholly under qualified. I start being a tad more sensible and look through the teaching English options. Seeing the various job descriptions starts to stokes up some fires of belief again. I shrug and think 'maybe, I'll end up in China'.

New hope doesn't lead to good sleep. I turn from cheek to cheek, from eyes open to eyes shut, side to side, back to stomach and back again, I curl up and straighten out until the dark curtains are lit by sunlight. To most people one bad night would not be a cause for concern. For me, the alarm bells start ringing. I've been sleeping so well lately that I thought all was well. But I'd forgotten that anxiety nips at your feet. Your whole body may be sitting on the side of the swimming pool but if you dunk your feet in, you're in danger of being pushed in.

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It's March, which means it's been more than a month of waiting. I've stopped sending needy emails and have gotten used to that unsettled feeling that marks my days here. I pull my Ipad off my desk and check my emails and there it is:

Dear Dela

Unfortunately, your application was not successful.

There's more text in the email but I don't read it. Tears plop down on the screen and I begin to cry in prayer. I shake my head at what I've done. I officially have no plan. I woke up yesterday and I was going places. I woke up this morning and I'm not sure. I had a feeling

that I had bungled up that interview but I kept telling myself that this is what was destined. Maybe I know less about my path than I thought.

I could still get a direct placement but it will be without the orientation. It will mean being thrown head first into Korean society without “a getting to know you” phase and without the two week period to become friends with other foreign teachers.

I’m not sure what to hope for anymore besides a plane ticket to somewhere that will make me happy. I’m trying to keep my eye on the bigger picture. Trying to remember that this reluctant time off has given me an opportunity to check-in with parts of myself that I’ve forgotten.

Does the universe just watch or does it nudge us to the path that needs to be forged? If I knew that this disappointment was a push towards a greater scheme then I would feel so much better. I’m trying to surrender to that possibility but I’m also trying to be stubborn with what I wanted for myself. I know that sometimes paradoxes are a helluva of a spiritual thing - and maybe there’s a bit of God in both those things.

## Chapter 9

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Sometimes happy events can register as grief. One phone call set me back on a path that I’d given up on. It’s the beginning of April and I’ve just signed an employment contract pledging me to teach at a high school in Gyeonggi-do (a province whose name I can only marginally spell and pronounce). The fact that I will be teaching teenagers tinkles my worry but it is the health statement form that really brought on the full threat of anxiety. Had I been treated for an emotional disorder? For me that’s a difficult question to answer because technically, the answer is Yes and No. A few years ago, something was prescribed to help with my chronic insomnia but I chose not to take it - I knew that’s not what I needed.

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It’s mid-April and I take a break from the struggle to get to Korea to attend a bridal shower/kitchen tea. I get into a car with a friend and make my way to an Italian restaurant in Centurion I didn’t know existed. We get there and take a seat then wait for her to arrive. The bride-to-be is ushered in with a lot of cheers and fanfare. Someone puts an apron on her and she beams whilst taking a seat.

We sip on some wine and champagne then the pizzas come. After the business of eating is done, we settle down to ooh and aah over the gifts populating the Bride-to-be’s table. Something about watching her unwrap spatulas makes me want a kitchen – makes me want a husband. There’s always something about other people’s happy moments that unveil desires that you usually shame away in the daylight. The life she is going to lead is the exact opposite of what I hope for. She is going to stay put in Centurion and live in a house close to her parents with her engineer husband. It honestly reads like my worst nightmare. Funny enough there was a time when she feared that she would be forced to move to Cape Town. My worst fear is that I would be forced to move away from it – banished to Gauteng.

My separation anxiety from my beloved Western Cape has reached the stage of physical pain – my heart literally hurts. I chose to leave the one place I loved that loved me back for a place that’s already rejected me once.

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The scramble to get me out of the country continues. My mother uses her day off to drive me around the CBD of Pretoria. Our first stop is the Korean Embassy. After a week and a half of waiting for Korean immigration to issue a visa number - it pops up in my inbox with a few days left to spare before my departure date. I take my 8 digit number to the embassy to make it official.

It’s pretty empty when I get there - there’s one other person filling out a form. I sit down and do the same. The administrators ask what we will be doing there - we both say that we are future English teachers. We smile our best smiles and chuckle our best chuckles and hope that our passports come back on time.

We leave the embassy and head to SARS, I brace myself for the long queues that are associated with government related offices. I get my number and get into line and inch forward until I’m summoned to one of the cubicle windows. Eventually, I leave with a tax certificate and some unsolicited advice. Whilst typing in my details, the lady behind the glass pane sifts through my life plan. She asks pointed questions like a distant relative and keeps telling me to have children while I’m still young.

Her constant refrain triggers the embers of an Arcade Fire song. All the way, home I hear a faint echo of the lead vocalist singing: “I want a daughter while I’m still young, I want to hold her hand, show her some beauty before the damage is done” (Arcade Fire, 2010). I do want that but it’s still a ways away and needs to give me a couple of years to catch up with it.

My mother smiles at me and asks if I’m sleeping better now that my immediate future is guaranteed. I mumble an answer to her question. I don’t want her to know that I’m starting to worry more than ever. She’s driving me around after a night shift at the hospital. I want her to feel like it’s all worth it. I want her to think that I’m happy so that she can be happy.

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I’m scanning through the language books at Exclusive Books, hoping to find one that can teach me some Hangul and some spoken Korean. I have less than a week to learn how to greet and thank someone. I have a few days to tuck some useful phrases into my mouth and my memory. I pick up the one book that they have and squeeze the little pocket guide like the hands of a new friend. I pay and take the little book and its audio accompaniment home.

I pop the CD into my laptop and press play. Then, I open up the sparkly turquoise journal that Riola gifted me and use its first page to catch all the Korean phrases that are flying past me. I’m stumped by the ‘Hello’: ahn-nyuhng – ha- seh – yo. I listen to it again - ahn-nyuhng – ha- seh – yo. I say it aloud and then write it down. I decide to write all of them down so that I can see, listen and speak them.

Hello: ahn-nyuhng – ha- seh – yo

Goodbye (leaving): ahn- nyuhng- hee-gah-seh-yo

Goodbye (staying): ahn- nyuhng- hee-geh-seh-yo

Yes: neh

No: ah- nee-yo

Excuse me! (get attention):yuh-boh-seh-yo

I'm sorry: jweh- song – hahm – nee- dah

I'd like: joo-seh – yo

How much?:uhl – mah – eem – nee –kkah

Where is...? : uh – dee – eet – ssum – nee – kkah

Thank you: gahm – sam –hamn – nee – dah

An hour later, I declare an early defeat and take a break to dream. I write myself a fantasy list of all the things I'll do in Korea:

#### **All the things I want to do:**

- Karaoke
- Rafting (DMZ)
- Ansan Valley Rock festival
- Templestay
- Hike
- Jeju island
- Learn guitar
- Learn to cook
- Read whole Masnavi
- Read all Game of Thrones
- Summer sonic fest Japan
- Hunting for bookstores
- Camping on the beach
- Penis land

I start to feel that twinge again. I start to feel that pull that drew me to this moment - the one that deposited me here into this reality. The one that thought I deserved a wondrous life.

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The night before my flight, I'm shoving things into pockets and attempting to pack a year's worth of clothing into a bag that can only fit 20 kilograms' worth of stuff. I flip open the flight guide and give it a quick read. It says that you can leave your hair loose if it won't distract you. I have a feeling that, that doesn't completely apply to me. "Dreadlocks are taboo" my mother says to me, trying to remind me of the ignorance I might deal with. She talks about my hair like it's something to be hidden. The last time I went out of the country, she made sure that I had it done in a way that tucked it all away. I was 19 at the time and had never felt so unattractive.

For this journey, I want to feel like myself which means looking like myself too. I want to do this journey with my bleeding heart and its cavity open. From what's on my head to the nether regions of my soul, I want this to be my story.

After I zip up my bag, I write myself a little talisman for my expedition into a new life: "Seek the wisdom that will untie your knot. Seek the path that demands your whole being" – Rumi (Hakkani, 2008)

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"Fear so what?" Liz Gilbert proclaimed this as one of her favourite sayings (Glibert, 2006). I'm repeatedly whispering it to myself as I sit alone on this Cathay Pacific flight. First stop Hong Kong, final destination Seoul, South Korea. I got what I wanted but I'm still scared shitless. "All doubts and fears are scattered by Thy piercing glance" (Coelho, 2013). At least (or most) I have God and I'm hoping that those eyes will be cast on my terror and remind me why I did this.

I make a pinky promise with the universe that I'll come back a better person. I've been the beneficiary of an incredible outpouring of love. The goodbyes have come in many packages and forms. Melissa Jane delivered the gift I always hoped for – a copy of "Oh the Places you'll go". It's been my gift of choice for every Dr Seuss fan since I curled up in the kiddie's corner of Exclusive Books, during a quiet night shift at work and read it for the first time.

I've always hoped someone would get a copy for me and it finally happened. I'm also finally out of the waiting place but I don't know what lies beyond the exit. I hope it's happiness, reflection and adventure. It could be solitude, confusion and rejection. Whatever it is, I hope it brings me many steps closer to my own divinity.

Hong Kong emerges out of the water, as the XX's "Angels" is playing in my ears. I look out the plane window as this metropolis begins to unfurl itself onto the Ocean bed. As we get closer and the city gets bigger and bigger, the spectacle of it all cuts into the utter defeat of my exhaustion. As the 10 minute countdown is announced, I plunge into the deep of my struggles.

What will happen next? Will my sleep patterns go back to normal? What if this doesn't work? What if I'm not happy after all of this? What if I can't see God past all the fatigue?

All the lights go on, I get my hand luggage and disembark. I have a two hour window to stew in my anxiety and make it onto the next flight.

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We're about to land at Incheon International Airport and I glance out the window to see my home for the year. I see fields of brown and flashes of green. My nerves let me know that this is it. In less than 10 minutes, I will be starting all over again. I'm going to be writing a chapter that looks nothing like the ones that have gone before.

I disembark, and follow the crowd to the baggage carousel to get the luggage I checked in. After I grab all my things, and get through immigration, I'm not sure where to go so I choose the direction most people are going. Everyone breezes by customs except me. I get pulled aside for a "random" check. I'm the only one from my flight who has her bag opened up

and belongings strewn all over the floor. I was the only black person on the flight so I'm not that surprised but the exhaustion of sleeplessness is getting to me and tears begin to leak from my eyes. He asks me why I'm here. I tell him I'm here to be an English teacher. He asks me again why I'm here and says that I need to produce proof. I take a breath and hand him my passport with the VISA page visible. I dab at my eyes whilst he scrutinises my VISA. He asks me for papers with the address of where I will be staying, the name of the school and the Korean person that will be responsible for me. I dig through my black folder of important documents and show him my teaching contract. He backs down and lets me leave. I'm left to pack my underwear back into my bag and to shove my clothing back into some kind of acceptable order.

After I zip up my bag and compose myself, I walk towards the exit. I look for a man holding a board or piece of paper with my name on it. There he is. He takes some of my luggage and we walk to the parking lot. I try to introduce myself and apologise for being a little late but he doesn't seem to understand me. When we get into the car, I attempt some chatter again that goes nowhere. He smiles, turns on the radio and sings along.

The drive is an hour and half long. We don't pass much except sparse apartment buildings that spring up out of nowhere. Drowsiness has my head lolling to the side. I gulp at sleep - catching a few minutes here and there. Finally, we pull into a nondescript town and stop outside an equally unremarkable apartment building. I look at it without really looking at it then get out the car. Waiting in front of the building is a man I recognise from Skype. He's the man that interviewed me. He's the head English teacher at the high school where I'm going to work.

He greets me warmly, introduces himself again and leads to the charge to my flatlet. The taxi driver and I lug my stuff upstairs. Mr Head Teacher opens up the door and gives his first lesson on Korean etiquette. He tells me that the demarcated square in front of the door is where I should leave my 'outside' shoes and that I should get slippers for when I'm inside or go barefoot or wear socks. He lets me know, that I will be going to school tomorrow to get orientated and that later in the week I have to go do my medical check-up and that next week he'll take me to apply for my Alien Registration Card (ARC). After I get that then I will be able to get a working cell phone and internet.

He leaves and I'm left to sit alone in my little flatlet. I wish with all my heart that I could call my mother. Instead, I have a look around. I open up some drawers and peep inside the fridge. I open the glass door that leads to the washing line and run my fingers over the buttons of the washing machine. I pick up the remote and then realise that I don't have a subscription yet. I get onto the bed and because I can't talk to anyone else, I take out my little black notebook/journal. I speak on the faint lines of the slightly yellow pages. I speak and I speak until I can't anymore. I turn over and curl up in a ball until hunger rouses me from grogginess and gives me the courage to leave my door.

I make it onto the doormat about the same time that my neighbour does. She's an older woman dressed in a loose shirt, medium length skirt and sensible slippers. I greet her with the nicest "Ahn-nyuhng – ha- seh – yo" I can muster. She doesn't turn to face me, and mumbles her way back through her door. Undaunted, I shrug that away and dig deep into my optimism reserves. I walk down the main street and try to ignore the shocked facial

expressions and the staring. I keep checking out the storefront signs. I can't read Hangul yet so I rely on the pictures to see if anything looks good. Finally, I come across a pizza place.

Another sing song-y "Ahn-nyuhng – ha- seh – yo" leaps out of my mouth and the man behind the counter responds with a curt "Ahn-nyuhng". I gaze at the images of the different pizzas. I try and suss out one that doesn't have meat. None of the options look vegetarian but I'm starved and want to run home to the safety of my walls. I point at two of them and handover my money. I sit away from the windows and glance around at different things until the pizza man calls me over.

Back home, I open up the first box and bite into what I know to be pork. One munch ends 7 years of vegetarianism. One bite lets me know that all of this will be harder than I thought. That this chapter doesn't only entail beginnings, it entails endings too.

## Chapter 10

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Today is my first visit to the school where I'll be working. It is also the day when I meet the South African who came before me - the foreign English teacher that has vacated the job. Mr Head English teacher comes to pick me up at the apartment. He tells me to keep track of where we're going because I will have to walk to work. When we pull up to the school, there's large brown sports field with net-less soccer posts. We drive up a long driveway and park in one of the many empty spaces in front of the High school building.

I open the car door to my new life. It's grey building - that's modern, industrial and forgettable. I follow the head teacher up the stairs. Kids pass by and have a peek at me. I hear the giggles and the gasps but I'm too busy adjusting my formal office attire and re-arranging my nerves to swallow it whole. We enter the staff room and the introductions begin. Names come at me fast and I catch none of them. Then questions come my way. The one everyone is most curious about is my age. I tell them that I'm 22 which makes them quite distressed. I soon learn that my Korean age is actually 24. They count from the time you are conceived - the 9 months is an added year. Plus, at the end of each year everyone collects an extra year. So I'm going to be approximately two years older for the whole time I'm here.

I'm shown to my cubicle and given the laptop I'm expected to use in class. Soon enough, Nelisa arrives. As the ex-teacher, he's been tasked with taking me through my day long orientation. We walk by some classes and the kids shout his name and wave their hands. We step into some classes and the room explodes with excited chatter. The kids tell him that they miss him and ask him to come back. A kid asks him if I'm his sister - he laughs and lets them know that I'm their new teacher.

I meet my co-teachers. I will be sharing my high school classes with one of them. She's chatty and friendly. She has a sly humour that's disguised by her pragmatic pants, blouse, low ponytail and sensible sandals combo. We have to leave the high school building to meet my second co-teacher. We walk down a short slope to get to the Middle school. Inside, the building is pulsing with quick moving limbs, whizzing hair and big grins. Amidst it all, there she is. She's older - in the kind of way that fits someone who has adult children. She wears

glasses that fit her face and clothing that's comfortable but neat. Her tousled bob frames her round cheeks and when she gives a smile of welcome, I know she means it.

After Neli says bye to the kids for the last time, we head back to my cubicle. He settles into the chair like someone who's always been there and I fish around for an extra. After I'm seated we go through the software/programmes for their textbooks. I feel at ease knowing that there's a set syllabus I can simply click on. I'm more of a chalk and blackboard kind of girl but I remind myself that I'm in the land of Samsung, LG etc. I'm in the land of tech is best.

We leave the school and Neli walks me home so that I learn the route. We talk in a stilted way. I get the sense that I'm not what he expected. He seems keen to speak some Xhosa with who he's pegged for a Zulu girl. Our languages are really similar so I get most of what he's saying. But I don't join him in that ritual of being South African that he wanted - I don't bring him the piece of home that he yearned for. He rushes me through a shortcut that I will promptly forget and we emerge a street away from the flatlet that was his but now is mine.

As we walk, I realise how brown the 'greenery' of this little Korean town is. The dryness of its landscape reminds me of the Highveld back home. The universe might be playing a trick on me because some areas feel like the Asian version of Pretoria/Centurion. We get to the right street and Neli decides to pick up some beer at the store. He tells me this is the best place to get my liquor - I give a non-committal 'okay'. We leave the store and he gives me hazy and scattered orientation of the street. He gestures towards where he used to get groceries and where I can take the bus into the main town.

He comes back to his old place and my new one. He lights up a cigarette and we talk for the requisite time to be polite. He tells me some fun stereotypical facts about Korea: it's the plastic surgery capital of Asia and Koreans are as passionate about their fried chicken as they are about their coffee. He parts with some recommendations of the best places to party and make friends - all of them are in Seoul, which is more than hour away. He tells me which Facebook groups to join to meet people in the main town and about another group to meet other black teachers in Korea. Wisdom and experience dispensed, he picks up his beer and in a matter of minutes is gone.

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My second and last day of orientation comes with some surprises. Every time I leave my desk, I come back to a fresh shot sized cup of coffee, my High school co-teacher takes me out for lunch and my Middle School co-teacher lets me know that she's leaving for the States soon. She's going to watch her son graduate - a proud moment for her and interesting times for me. I'm going to be teaching alone while she's gone. The first lesson is going to be an introduction - of myself and my ex-life. I need to create a flashy PowerPoint that's true to who I am and what I love - plus also makes them excited to have me here.

I ask her where her son will go after graduation. She says that he has to come back to Korea. Military conscription is compulsory for men here so he has to come back and serve his time. It's the first time I really think about their really volatile neighbour since I landed in Incheon. Just before I'd left South Africa, North Korea had threatened their neighbour with drone attacks.

This threat was broadcast in news bulletins on South African TV, blasted all over online media and spoken about on radio. But being in South Korea, not a word is said to me about their belligerent neighbour. It doesn't feel like a country teetering on the brink of war.

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It's Friday night of my first week of being here. I spend part of it balancing on a chair in a pair of wedge heels. There are no blinds or curtains covering the glass doors that lead to laundry room on the balcony. Since these doors are next to my bed, I hunt for something to shut out the light and the dark. I dig through the pile of blankets in my wardrobe and find one that's just about the right size. I get on a chair with plastic clothes pegs in my mouth and the blanket in hand. I'm too short to reach what I want to hook the corners of the blanket to so I get off and dig around the wardrobe some more. I find the highest heels I own - they're pea green in colour with a cork wedge.

I imagined wearing them to school next week - for my first real job. I bought some "suitable for the office" dresses to pair them with. I pictured myself in a black and grey dress with a high neckline, short sleeves, and a hem that just brushes my knee. I envisioned myself walking into school all business up top and a little bit of green fun at the bottom. I didn't know that the first time I'd wear my "grown-up" shoes would be with my pjs in a studio apartment in the middle of the Korean countryside.

Once the blanket is up, I climb off the chair and toss the wedges back into the wardrobe. I turn off the lights and get into bed. The right side of my face is starting to make a comfortable indent in my pillow when my left ear picks up a loud whirring noise. I turn over and try to ignore it. A few minutes later, the sound jumps down the canal of my right ear and vibrates in my eardrum. I throw my blanket aside and march to the fridge. I glare at it with bald-faced frustration and disgust. I open its door and glare at its bareness with contempt and despair. I fiddle around with any button I can find.

Once my face off with the fridge is over, I get back into bed - this time with the lights on. I pluck my little black notebook from the bedside table. My pen hovers over the page for a second and then this comes out:

*I think that at the root of my sleeplessness lies fear. A fear that I will not be good enough. A fear that I will not make it through the year. A fear I will be alone this. A fear that without proper rest, I won't be able to give off my best. The fear lives in the thought that my best nights are behind me. That I won't be able to live up to Nelisa or be loved the same. But the validation of others is not why I came here.*

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It's Saturday morning and I resolve not to spend the day hiding out in this little home or this little town. I put on something patterned and bright. I dress for the Spring I had hoped for rather than what's actually happening outside. For the four days I've been here, the end of Korean Spring has been overcast and miserable. I've been told to hold off on wishing for summer because all it brings is mosquitos.

I do a quick countdown for courage and then leave my place. I walk to the bus station and look straight ahead as everyone else turns to face me. I ask someone which bus heads to the main town - he shakes his head at me and turns back to what he was doing. I cross the street to the other bus stop close to the police station. There's no one on that side and something doesn't feel right so I cross back. I wait until the green and white bus comes - say hello to the bus driver and say the main town's name. He nods his head and I get on.

I keep my eyes on the window - even though there isn't much to see. After 20 minutes of watching swathes of countryside pass by, we enter the main town. I get off at the bus stop and walk like I know where I'm trying to get to - like I know where I'm going. I concentrate on trying to be adventurous and remind myself that I came here for this lost feeling. I trudge past many coffee shops and once in a while a fellow foreigner walks by. I'm so tempted to walk up to them and say I'm new here and I need a friend. But I don't - no one needs that kind of vulnerability from strangers.

What happens is I get hungry and to soothe my sense of isolation, I look around for something familiar. I spot a KFC and walk in. As a long time (former) vegetarian, I haven't been in a KFC in years. My eyes dart around the menu. I point at something that looks okay and the teller hands me an empty cup. I expect it to be filled already and must look confused because he points at a machine behind me.

After I eat, the loneliness begins to exhaust me so I decide to go home. I search for the Women's clinic I used as a landmark. Once I spot it, I turn right and stroll past the Paris Baguette. I enter the bus station from the back entrance. Instead of walking along the side path, I make a beeline across the bus lot and head straight for my bus. From nowhere, I hear a whistle - it gets louder and more shrill the closer it gets. I look back to see a man running towards me. He's blowing on the whistle and pointing to the side path. I shrug my shoulders in apology and then dig for the Korean word to say 'sorry'. I can't find it so I go for the English version. He turns away as soon as I head in the right direction and start following the rules.

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I wake up on the Sunday before I begin work with some questions. Some are mine and some have been asked of me by others. During my visit to the school, Mr Head teacher asked "How I would describe myself". The only answer it could give then was blank face and a gaping mouth. Tomorrow, I know that I will have to put parts of myself and my life on display. I know that I have a day to neaten up the frayed edges of who I am and present myself as an adult.

The solitude of the weekend, pushes me out of bed and out of my door. I head to the neighbourhood PC Bang (internet cafe) and sit down to write emails and Facebook inboxes to people I love. The nerves and weariness about my upcoming first day come out in spurts in the messages. Pressing enter puts everything into perspective for me. I am so deeply loved whatever happens tomorrow - there will always be a wall of arms to protect me. There are people in the world who have seen me at my worst and still believe that I'm a capable and strong human being. I want to see what they see.

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Monday creeps up on me from the shadows of restlessness. At 4 am, I get up and comb through the lessons for the day. Then make bright coloured notes and will myself to shower. At 6 am the kettle goes on again and when it's done, I pour myself a jug of hot water. I read a passage from Eat Pray Love whilst gulping down the steaming water.

I put on one of my work dresses and a pair of wedges. I hoist my work laptop over my shoulder, switch the lights off and click clack with false confidence out of the door. I'm not sure about the shortcut so I take the long route to the school. I walk up the narrow street in front of my building until it's time to turn the corner that leads to the main road. I dip past a large spider web with an equally large spider attached to it.

It's still too early for morning traffic so I consider making a run for it to cross the road. I remind myself that I have to respect the rules here so I click clack up the stairs of the pedestrian bridge. I pause midway to see the sights of my little rural town. There isn't much to make me linger but I keep gazing anyway. Then, I walk on - keeping my pace steady so I feel like I know what I'm doing.

Eventually, I make it to school. I'm a little early so there's not that many teachers to greet. I sit at my desk, switch on my laptop and one of my colleagues arrives at my cubicle with a little shot of coffee for me. The pop up box with all the office announcements bounces across my screen. It's all in Hangul so I click exit and hope that none of them are related to anything I need to know. The school buzzer goes off to signal the beginning of the day, I swivel my chair around to see if anyone knows what I'm supposed to be doing.

A voice booms over the intercom with precise and instructive Korean. I swivel around and hoping someone will translate. Many of the teachers get up and head to class. My head darts to my timetable. Ten minutes later, Mr Head teacher collects me from my desk and tells me to bring my laptop.

I pummel back the panic as we head down the stairs and enter a class on the first floor. As I'm setting up the technical stuff, a girl climbs through the window and sits at her desk with a chuffed smile on her face. Before we even open our mouths, some students put their heads down to nap. Some girls pull their desk mirrors from underneath their tables and start applying their make-up. Mr head teacher's eyes don't even move from his English grammar book. I tell him that I'm ready. He looks up, greets the class and introduces me.

I look down at my notes, check the textbook page number and get ready to begin. Mr head teacher announces that the lesson today will be dedicated to asking me questions about myself. After a few seconds, more heads hit the desk as the kids settle in for a snooze. I reconfigure my face so it seems like I knew this all along. Mr Head teacher walks around trying to rouse disinterested kids from sleep to dig into my personal life. After a tepid response, he grills me with questions. I answer with one eye on him and one eye on the class. At some point I realise that we are only talking to each other. When Mr Head teacher runs out of questions and I run out of bemused monologues, he searches for funny animated shorts on the internet. He plays video clip after video clip until the school buzzer rings.

We head back to the staff room. I settle back into my cubicle and scroll through YouTube looking for answers - for some kind of relief. I click on Sir Ken Robinson's famed Ted Talk "Do schools kill creativity". I chuckle for 19 minutes and 24 seconds and search these almost 20

minutes for the will to be a teacher - the will to be an educator. I recover myself in those 20 minutes. I remember that I'm all story, all creativity and all compassion - that I have spiritual bones that can't be crushed by teenagers.

Forty-five minutes later, I'm back in the classroom. This lesson goes a bit better. Some of the students want to know who I am. I try to tell them. I give them answers that I'm unfolding for the first time. I try to give them answers based in simplicity but I sneak in some nuance anyway. I attempt to make myself known, understandable and comprehensible. I attempt to keep it light and fun but all the shades of who I've been darken my inflection. I navigate all of the unhelpful interruptions thrown my way by co-teacher. The school buzzer goes off, I pack up everything and head upstairs.

After another free period, it's time for lunch. My female co-teacher collects me from my desk. I walk with her and her clique of friends to the dining hall. I chat here and there with the Chinese teacher whose conversational English pours out with thoughtful ease. I joke with the Music teacher whose youth and cheekiness transcends the language barrier. All of the female teachers tease the Social Studies teacher who is young-ish, roguish and good looking. Some other teachers try to ask me questions and my co-teacher jumps in with some translation.

When we get to the hall, I watch carefully as each teacher/staff member picks up a silver tray and silver cutlery - chopsticks and a spoon. I grew up in a society where school lunch equals sandwiches and a snack in a lunchbox brought from home. I watch as the trays before me are filled with soup (cabbage miso), kimchi, rice, veggies (na mool - chilli and spring onion), seaweed sheets and a tofu dish. I slide my tray along the serving station and each compartment is topped up as I go along. At the end, I make my way to the teacher's table.

I wonder if anyone will want to sit next to me. My female co-teacher motions at me to come sit down. The hum of conversation is already going. I concentrate on trying to use my chopsticks. When I've eaten any kind of Asian cuisine before, I've always cheated and used the cutlery that was familiar. So here, I attempt to dig into the veggies with the thin metal rods. The other teachers notice my cross-legged chopsticks and begin to laugh. I smother my embarrassment with a chuckle. I decide to use my spoon instead.

The hubbub of chatter starts again and I focus on my food as everyone talks around me. My co-teacher slips into the banter and forgets to translate so my attention drifts to the rest of the room. All the other tables are jam packed with students. But on the far right, Mr Head teacher is sitting at the end of one of students' table, eating alone with his earphones in. My eyes make their way back to the teachers table. I ask my co-teacher why he's sitting alone? She says that he's chosen to isolate himself, fights with everyone and refuses to be friends with any of them. She says something to them in Korean and they laugh. The music teacher pauses for a second asks my co-teacher

A couple more spoonfuls of sticky rice and then it's time to head back to the staff room. Trays are slowly picked up and then dumped in the section close to the door. We walk at a leisurely pace - taking the scenic route rather than the straightforward one. Some are sucking food from their teeth, some patting their bellies and some with fingers entwined

behind their backs. When we finally make it back, everyone grabs their toothbrush and gathers for one last gab at the sink.

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The next day, I wake up to a sense of dread and a blocked toilet. I look over my lesson plans again to deal with the apprehension. Then, I jiggle the toilet handle up and down to deal with the blockage. When that doesn't work I ask the cistern some questions like "Really?" "What's wrong with you?" and "Why are you doing this?"

This one sided conversation makes me more frustrated so I decide to shut the toilet lid and walk away. I get dressed and head to work. I leave even earlier than the day before. There's no one on the grounds when I arrive but the door of the staff room is open. I put my stuff down and rush off to use an unblocked toilet.

One by one, teachers begin to arrive at the door. Each and every one stands in the centre of the frame and greets. Some give gruff ahn-nyuhng's, some ahn-nyuhng's quietly slip out of their mouth and disappear before they get to their desks, some ahn-nyuhng's are formal and straightforward, some ahn-nyuhng's brisk and smiley. My favourite is the music teacher whose ahn-nyuhng bursts into the room with such verve, it holds you in its sparkle. Some heads peep up from cubicles to return the greeting, some side mouth it whilst looking at their laptop screens, some stir their coffee and turn their heads to say it, some brush past tables and pause briefly to say it back.

My first couple of lessons today are with my other high school co-teacher. I jog up to her cubicle and show her my lesson plans. I toss a barrel of questions at her. She answers them with the reassurance that I don't need to worry about everything so much. She looks at me with a little smile of concern then let's me know that it's time to go.

We're outside the class waiting before the buzzer goes off. We shuffle around and chit chat for a bit. When it's time for us to enter, she exchanges a quick joke with the outgoing teacher. I setup the laptop and she enforces the discipline. She calls everyone into line and shakes the nappers awake. She refers everyone's eyes to lesson projected on the TV. She looks to me to start and translates my instructions. We teach in tandem, picking up where the other left off. I feel held together, supported, and for the first time since I arrived, like a real teacher.

Just after lunch, I have a free period so I traipse down the stairs to the admin office. No one in the office speaks English so one of the women waves me over and indicates that I should come behind the reception desk. She clicks onto Google translate, points at the screen and passes me the keyboard. I write that I need a plumber to fix my toilet. She nods her head and types to ask me what time I go home. I type a response. She tells me to come back to the office before I go home.

A couple hours later, I make my way downstairs again to the admin office. I give an expectant ahn-nyuhng – ha- seh – yo and the lady I 'spoke' to points towards a man typing away behind a desk. He sees me, grabs his blazer, and indicates that I should follow him. We get into his car and drive to my place. I unlock the door and he fishes around in the cupboard under my sink. He pulls out what he needs and flips my toilet lid open.

I sit on the bed and pretend to read. Eventually, I get up to peer through the door and watch this man in his collared shirt unblock my toilet. It takes him 15 minutes and when he's done he passes on some much needed advice - "flush twice and use less toilet paper".

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I'm finally half way through this tough first week. Today are my first official lessons with the Middle Schoolers. I tinker with a couple of slides from my introductory PowerPoint and leave when the buzzer goes off. I have a short window period to leave the High school building and make my way down the steep pathway to the Middle school. Halfway there I hear the buzzer go off again and begin to jog. The laptop bag is slamming against my thigh but I click clack up the stairs at a decent speed.

I stand at the door and watch them swarm around for a second. I catch my breath while unpacking. My co-teacher puts her hand on my shoulder and greets me with the most genuine smile. A couple of clicks later a picture of me is enlarged on the TV screen. I say my name and where I'm from and click to a map of South Africa and our flag. Eventually, I get to my education and qualifications. I click to a picture of the University of Cape Town and look at the familiar buildings nestled at the foot of the mountains of Devil's Peak. I turn back to the class, some of them seem stunned and others literally gasp. I smile because I know what that feels like.

I used to look at UCT that way too. As a first year, I would stand in the centre of Jameson Plaza and want to grab people and say 'look there's a mountain'. I grew up in the dry flatlands of the Highveld so being surrounded by mist-covered mountains felt a bit like a fairy tale. I remember walking through the campus with my Orientation week group, seeing the ivy covered walls and trying to act natural - dulling my excitement by reading through my information packet. I remember promising a friend I made in those first weeks that we would never be like everybody else - we would never bury our heads so far into what we were doing that we'd forget how beautiful the place is. Three years later, like everyone else I did forget until I was looking into eyes of a classroom of Korean pre-teens.

I end off the highlights package of my ex-life by playing them a tourist trap video I found on YouTube. It's titled "10 reasons why Cape Town is the best city in the world". I try and wangle an English lesson out of the 3 minute video by making them name what those top 10 things are: 1) Table Mountain 2) The Sea 3) Inspiration/ Creative Hub 4) Coffee 5) Space/Nature Reserves 6) Beer 7) Transport 8) Food 9) Wine 10) Night life. It takes them a while to give me answers because they're too busy asking me questions: Is this Africa teacher? Is this your home teacher? Is the man from Africa teacher? I look at the frozen image of the White man narrating the video and say that he's South African. They follow this up with "really teacher?" I'm thrown off-kilter by the fascination. The two teachers before me were South African so I didn't expect any awe or surprise about what we or our country looks like.

The lesson ends and my co-teacher walks me to the door. In the corridor, a boy whizzes by and shouts "Teacher I like your hair, will you marry me". He then says something in Korean and my co-teacher responds with scolding tone. She shoos him away and apologises on his behalf with a 'kids will be kids' shrug of the shoulder. She tells me not to pay attention to these misbehaved boys and says that they always say things they don't mean. I nod my head

and say that it isn't an issue - not knowing that I'm leaving a door open. The door is left ajar to disrespect and unwanted advances from teenage boys.

After lunch, Mr Head teacher drives me to a medical centre nearby. Part of the conditions of getting this job is that I pass the Health check - which for most part is a drug test. We walk up to the receptionists and he says a few words to them before taking a seat. I sit down and fill out a form. The Hangul swims around on the page and I have to be assisted in knowing where to put my name and date of birth. My address needs to be spelt out for me and I leave some of my contact information blank. I don't have a phone number because I don't technically exist in the country yet - I don't have an ARC (Alien Registration Card). Eventually, one of the nurses takes my form and takes me behind a screen for an eye test.

I take off my glasses and can't see much of anything. Then, they test my vision with my glasses on and shake their head because I don't even have 20/20 vision with my framed eyes on. They ask me for my blood type and are shocked that I don't know what it is. In Korea, blood type is said to give an indicator of the negative and positive personality traits of a person - it's their version of horoscopes. I tell them that I think that I'm blood type O. Later, a google search tells me that my blood type means that I'm social, outgoing, creative, popular, and I speak my mind. However, on the other hand, I'm unreliable, not dependable and like to be the centre of attention.

One of the nurses motions at me. I think she's telling me to follow her but I'm not sure. She looks at the others and they try to figure out what the right word is. They try a loud "Go!". Then, one of them volunteers the word "Come!" I get up to follow her. We get to a room and she points at an unattractive pea green smock. She says "bra off". I'm led down one of the corridors. We enter a room and she points at the chair. I sit down and the x-rays of my chest are taken. I'm lead out of the room and down another corridor. People are walking by and turning to stare at me. I feel like a sad float at an abandoned parade.

Finally, we get to the doctor's offices. His cute face and easy temperament make me soften into the chair. His questions are punctuated with an American lilt. After my short answers, he hands me a polystyrene coffee cup, some plastic gloves and a test tube. He tells me to pee in the cup and then transfer some of my urine into the tube. He gives me the lid that I need to secure my pee. He then directs me to the nearest bathroom.

I sit there holding a cup under my cooch and wonder how in the world did I get here. I wipe up then hold the tube and the cup over the toilet bowl. My hands are a bit shaky so I spill a bit but eventually the tube is full. I dump the rest of the contents in the coffee cup then throw away the cup itself. I pop the lid on top then wipe the sides of the tube. I throw off the gloves and wash my hands. I make my way to the doctor's office. Once I'm standing in his door way, he calls in one of the nurses to pick up my urine sample.

I take off the smock and put my 'office' clothes back on. I walk out of the medical centre with the same feeling you get when you dream that you're naked and everyone around you is clothed.

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I'm standing at the bus top on the police station side. I'm looking out for bus 3 or 301 to Yangji but I'm actually trying to get to Seoul. It's Saturday and I woke up hopeful. I'm headed to a teaching agency's barbeque which means that this might be the day I finally make some

friends. I'm not sure that I know how to do that anymore. My friend-making skills have been on ice since my first year of university.

The bus comes and I quickly dig out the right change from my wallet. I get on and read until we reach Yongin station. I get off and examine all the boards in front of the buses looking for one that says Seoul. I find it and ask someone waiting in the line when it leaves. They tell me to check my ticket. I realise that I've skipped a step and I head inside the bus terminal to the counters. I greet the person and say "Seoul". She prints the ticket and slides it to me.

I head back outside and the bus driver is waiting at the door of the bus collecting tickets. I insert myself into the quick moving queue and board the bus. My head bobs around trying to find my seat. Eventually, I sit down and tuck my bag between my feet.

In a little less than an hour, I get off at Gangnam Terminal. I smirk at being in the district that's now famous for Psy's Gangnam style. I scan the area outside the terminal for cabs and notice that there's a line of people waiting for the same thing. I take my place in the line and fix my face with the pretence of knowing what I'm doing. I get to the front of the queue and a cab pulls up. I open the back door and stick my head in to say "Ahn-nyuhng – ha- seh – yo". As I try to get in, the man starts screaming at me and pulling at the door. I pull my leg back out onto the sidewalk and turn back to the line hoping someone will explain what just happened. Their eyes are glued to their phone screens and their arms chained to their lovers or their friends. The people behind me get into the cab that I vacated and drive away.

I walk away to hide my tears. I don't get too far. My will to keep going ends at the nearest bench. I sit and wait for a moment. I wait in hope that someone will come and say a kind word - that someone will sit next to me and say I'm not alone. I open up a random page of my book and tears begin to dot the margin. I go through what happened again. I'd waited in the cab line like everybody else but I was the only one that was refused and dumped back onto the terminal. His tone was inflected with so much hatred. I consider just turning back and going home. Instead, I decide to leave the terminal and keep walking until someone stops for me.

I put one foot in front of the other until a cab pulls over and takes me to where I need to be. I creep into the gathering relatively unnoticed - not really knowing why I'd been invited. One of the co-ordinators doesn't recognise me so he asks if I am a Hands Korea teacher. I answer 'Yes' even though I'm not really sure. This isn't the agency I applied with but for some reason they were the first people to call when I landed.

Before awkwardness shuts down my tongue, the other South Africans take me in. We chat city or province specifics about where we're from and they give me vague teaching advice with some funny stories thrown in. The snacks and the party don't last very long. I leave with one of the South Africans and her Canadian friend.

They ease their way through the streets of Seoul and I keep in step even though these street signs mean nothing to me yet. The North American is from a town called Flin Flon - a town named after a character in a sci fi comic. I don't find out much else about her because the South African spends our entire walk gabbing about the 'Anglo Boer' war. She drops words like 'Boer' and 'Afrikaner' with no explanation and the Canadian keeps asking questions that aren't answered.

An odd hour ends with a crash course on using the subway. The train whooshes in and we all get on. The South African takes out her phone to show us a blurry picture of her boyfriend. As I peer at the young unsmiling face, I think of my own dating prospects. Rumour has it that foreigners get a lot of play/action here - but I have a feeling that I'm the wrong kind of foreign.

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The phone at the English Head Teacher's desk rings three times before he picks it up. His phone calls don't usually have anything to do with me so I keep my focus on the lesson resources I'm flicking through online. He puts the phone down and walks to my desk. He leans in too close like always and says that he's just received my medical results. He says that my first drug test came back positive for opiates. Something in me breaks and I hold my breath to stop from sobbing.

My mind tries to search through the shame to find an explanation. It flashes a light on the mild tranquilizer I pop into my mouth each night. The shame fog thickens as I settle into self-blame. This is what happens when you conceal your anxiety. This is what happens to people who lie.

Mr Head Teacher marches me to the Vice Principal's office. I walk straight into their hostility and get plunged into a conflict that came long before me. The Head Teacher and the VP grit their teeth throughout their brief chat. The VP points at me to follow her and we hightail it to the nurse's office. The VP's lips flat line as she speaks to the nurse who only nods and nods. Finally, she turns to me and asks which pills I'm taking. I confess to taking painkillers for period pain and 'sleeping pills'. She nods and nods then tells me to stop taking the pills, drink lots of water and wait three days before I take the test again.

The VP repeats the words "three days" and sends me back to the office. My butt barely skims the chair and the Head Teacher is standing behind me. He tells me that I have to take the test again today. It's more convenient for him to take me now. I explain what the VP and nurse said but he insists. He says that it's for my own good - getting this test out of the way will make my life in Korea easier. I scan my brain for a polite way to say "fuck off, this could get my ass kicked out of the country and you're worried about what works best for your schedule". I settle for silence.

Mr Head Teacher tells me to leave school and go to the medical centre. I repeat that I've been told to wait for 3 days. He insists and tells me to go. I pack away the laptop and grab my bag. I decide to head home. I begin a regimen of gulping down large jugs of hot water to purge all the medication from my system.

For two days and three nights, I sob so much and sleep so little. On the third day, I head back to the medical centre. The doctor keeps asking me if I'm on hard drugs and I keep saying no and keeps refusing to believe me. He asks me about the medication that I've taken in the last two weeks. I tell him about the painkillers and the anti-anxiolytic. I give him the name of each of the medications. He looks up the pain medicine and realises that it has codeine in it - a kind of opiate. He tells me that even though this is available over the counter in South Africa - it's a restricted substance in South Korea. He allows me to take the test again. A couple days later, it comes up clear.

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I've been in Korea for almost two weeks. Finding friends in real life turned out to be a bit of a dud so I turn to the internet. I search for the Facebook group specific to foreign teachers in my area. When it pops up, I turn on my sense of humour and type the following on the wall: "Okay, so I'm fresh off the plane and new to Korea. I'm in the 'what am I supposed to do with my weekends' stage? Where do I meet people who aren't school children with really great haircuts? Suggestions and thoughts please." I click post and hope that the desperate 'Please like me and please be friends with me' undertone isn't poking through.

A few minutes later, responses begin to crowd the comment section. Two kinds of responses come up: Go to Seoul or Go to the foreigner bar. South Africans cram the thread and also suggest alternate groups where I can meet other South Africans. I add some of them and then a few days later send a personal/inbox message to one of them. Loneliness has struck and I'm turning to people whose faces I know from profile pictures as a lifeline.

*Hey, I just moved here so hope you don't mind if I add you - the reality of being alone in a foreign country has hit.*

The South African in question sends back a response with exactly the right mixture of 'I've been there' and 'how can I help you?' She invites me to coffee and offers to give a tour of the downtown shopping district. We agree to meet at Tom n Toms after work at the end of the week.

Thursday night comes and one bus later, I'm standing in front of the Korean version of Starbucks. There she is - smile, black framed spectacles, dark bob length hair and all. We hug and then sit down to find a table. We decide to split a dessert and she orders a coffee. The conversation lurches from home to here - South Africa to South Korea and back again.

I talk about the kids. I talk about how difficult and how good it's been. I talk about how I'm trying to relate to them. How I'm watching K-pop chart shows, despite my hipster-esque tendencies, to connect with them. I natter about how different the classes are - how some make me feel like I'm soaring into the creative minds of the future and others make me feel like I'm free falling into panic and disaster. How the head teacher has done nothing but be a hindrance and now I can't help the students that need it the most.

I talk about my surprise at how important looks are here. I talk about how shocked I was at how many students always had mirrors with them. I say that I witnessed a child fly into a fit of rage and grief when a teacher took her mirror away from her so that she can do an activity. I say some girls spend my entire period doing their make-up.

What I don't say is I know if I make it through this month I might just make it through the entire year. I don't say that this has been the hardest part of the experience - feeling like I'm failing as a teacher.

We talk about dating. Both of us have made good headway into our twenties without ever being in a real relationship. She's just met someone. He lives here but he's not Korean. He's running from a civil war in his home nation. I talk about my (lack of) dating pattern - how I've always wanted people who didn't quite want me back.

We talk about the weddings and the marriages that haven't happened to either of us yet. We talk about how we celebrate at home. She's white but grew up in KZN so she knows the Zulu way of doing things. I say I'm not sure that's exactly what I want. I say that I want the kind of wedding where I actually personally know and am close to all the guests. "You're so westernised" she exclaims. For me, that phrase is a variation of the assertion that I'm not black enough. It's a reminder of who I'm not and who I'm supposed to be.

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My alarm goes off at 3 am. I climb out of bed to greet the darkness and the silence. I turn on the kitchen light then switch on the kettle and listen to it gurgle to life. While the water heats up and bubbles, I spread textbooks all over the duvet and place a laptop in the centre. I fill a jug with steaming hot water and put that on the bedside table. I toss my lesson plan notebook into the throng of textbooks and get back into bed. I grab my glasses off the bed side table and place them on the bridge of my nose. I listen to all the little soundbites that come with the lessons. I trawl Waygook to see if they are any games that go along with this particular language lesson. Two hours later, my notes are complete. I get up and throw some cereal into a bowl then sip on the sugary milk when all the flakes are gone.

I step into the shower and soak in the fact that Friday has finally come. I'm only two and a half weeks into this new life but the mental/emotional exhaustion is trickling down my face faster than the droplets of water. I've formally signed up for the kind of adulthood I always thought would never happen to me. The sort of grown up-ness where you're detained by your existence - where every day is an exercise in doing your time, waiting for your pay and planning your leave/ weekend away/next holiday.

I smother that sinking feeling by putting on a nice dress and slipping on a pair of black and grey heels. I pull my hair back by reaching for two strands of dreadlocks on each side of my face and tying them together. I secure the laptop bag on my shoulder and start the short death march to my responsibilities.

Mondays and Fridays begin the same way for me - with back-to-back lessons of my worst/toughest classes. These are the classes that I co-teach with the Head teacher. It's more accurate to say that these are the classes where he stands in the front and reads from a book whilst I try and wrangle teenagers in a language they don't really understand. He is studying for an exam that would allow him to move up the ladder and get a promotion - one that would take him out of the classroom and into the offices of the education decision-makers and their prestige/social status. Last week, he took me to that hallowed building - the Office of Education. He made me sit in the car and wait - while he shook hands and schmoozed with those in charge.

On this Friday, I flop onto my chair, flip open the screen of the laptop and straighten my back. The buzzer goes off and I begin to slowly pack up. I look up and see that none of the teachers are moving. I cast my eyes towards the Head teacher's desk and he's typing away. I walk over and ask if we shouldn't be making our way downstairs. He says no because classes have been cancelled because of a special event. He says it was in the weekly announcements. He means the pop up messages that are in a language I can't read or understand yet.

I breathe in the relief of an unexpected free day and sigh out the disappointment of missing out on the chance to sleep more than 5 hours. I sit down and turn to the internet to find something to do. I go where I go most days - a forum for TEFL or ESL teachers called Waygook.org. I click through the lesson plans sections - collecting grammar related games and reading posts about classroom discipline issues. When I'm done with that, I scroll through the recent activity thread and click on the links for the news articles. I skim the articles then head back to the thread for the comments. I roll my eyes and sigh a lot. A thread on Korean ethnic nationalism and the country's struggles with multiculturalism leads down an internet rabbit hole that keeps me burrowed for a few hours.

I read about mixed race kids who are isolated, mistreated and sometimes get the shit beat out of them for not being Korean enough. I stumble upon an article about the world's most and least racially tolerant countries. It's based on research done by two Swedish economists who wanted to know whether economic freedom made people less likely to be racist. They used a survey which asked people if they'd be comfortable having a neighbour of a different race. One in three South Koreans said that they did not want a neighbour of a different race. I smirk and mouth out "that's probably why my neighbour refuses to talk to me".

I pull my head out of the internet wormhole in time to prepare for my first extra English class. When the time comes I gather my things and walk to the allocated classroom. I write some notes on the board and pace for a few minutes then lean my butt against the front desk. Ten minutes later, I resign myself to the fact that no one's coming. I head back to the office and pack my things then head home.

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My third week in Korea dawns with a sliver of excitement. My Monday mid-morning scroll through Facebook reveals that The Dodos are performing in Seoul. I grab my earphones from the desk and plug in for a 4 minute and 22 second celebration. I pull up YouTube and type in "The Dodos Fools" then click play. The pounding drums of the first 15 seconds feels like remembering myself again. Before she slips away again, I click onto the Facebook group specific to foreign teachers in my area and ask the following:

"Does anyone know of a dirt cheap place to stay in Seoul for one night (motel, hostel or whatever)? I'm not too fussy - a mattress and a floor is fine with me. If anyone out there is into them, the Dodos are playing at Mullae Mun in Seoul on Friday."

The comment section piles up with suggestions for jimjilbangs, guesthouses, hostels and cheap hotels. One commenter interrupts the thread with: "Holy crap! The dodos?? Love them. Can I have some details?". I give her all the information that I have: "Check their events page - all it says is that they are playing at Mullae Mun (Seoul) at 7 pm on Friday. I have no idea what or where Mullae Mun is but I'm googling the hell out of it to find out." She finds a map link/directions to the venue and asks if I'm going alone. I answer her: "I will probably go on my own- I'm new here, only been here for 2 and a half weeks so haven't had time to meet any Dodos fans. Going to talk to the handful of people I know and see if anyone is keen." She promises to maybe come with me - a friend of hers might be coming to stay over the weekend but if her friend cancels then she will join me.

On Wednesday, I send the Canadian Dodos fan a thinly veiled/quirky plea to come with me to the concert. I drop in a quip about my terrible sense of direction and sign off as the kind

stranger she met on the internet. She responds a few hours later and lets me know that her friend has bailed on her so she will come with me. We make logistical plans about how we'll get to Seoul. The next day she lets me know that she's booked the bus and the gig tickets. I promise to refund her and sneak out of work 30 minutes early to make it to the bus on time.

Friday dawns with a flurry of Facebook messages. I ask if I should bring an overnight bag or if we're just going to rough it with just the clothes on our backs. She recommends just the clothes on our backs and slips in that she plans to go home with a guy she met the week before. She promises to not leave me high and dry though. I'm not sure if that's true but I choose to believe her.

I barrel through the day buoyed by anticipation. Mondays and Fridays are usually my toughest days - these mornings start with back to back periods of my worst classes. But this Friday feels different even though nothing has changed. I push through the chaos and antipathy with a secretive smile dancing all over my lips, cheeks and eyes. I grin through lunch even though no one is really talking to me and my co-teacher has given up on translating the conversation. I bounce into the classes I love with the quickness of excitement. I keep saying to myself - this is what you came for. Before getting to Korea, I would sit stary eyed in front of a laptop screen looking through the line-up of Korean music festivals and checking if my favourite musical acts have a tour stop in Seoul. Here I am at the beginning of a journey that will be filled with nights like this - with bare bones venues, sweaty swaying and closed-eyed sing-alongs.

As the minutes creep closer to 4 pm, I start packing bit by bit and look around to see if I can slip out the door. Just as I'm about to get up, the Vice Principal walks into the staff room and stops at different cubicles to have a word with a few teachers. At 4:05 pm, I message the Canadian to let her know that I might not be there on time. I promise to refund that ticket money if we have to take the next bus.

I keep packing and looking over my shoulder. At 4:25 pm, I make my move. I take the longest strides possible in a thigh hugging dress and give a quick wave goodbye. I giggle while jogging down the driveway that leads to the school. Once I hit the road, I start to chant "I've been, I've been silent" at the top of my lungs. It's something I've been whispering to myself during bathroom breaks and in my cubicle between classes. It's lyrics to the last 30 seconds of the Dodos song "Fools". It's also the soundtrack to this new life where I've had to quietly store pieces of myself away.

I get home throw down the weight of my responsibilities and toss my 'respectable' knee length black dress onto the bed. I put on a sheer, dress-like bohemian top with a blue and white print. The sleeves look like angel wings. Layered underneath the shirt/dress is a white strappy top and a pair of silver grey leggings. I sit on the bed to strap up my bejewelled sandals. I get up to take a look in the bathroom mirror. I feel sexy - even though the only skin visible is the little patch that stretches from right before my collar bones to the end of my neck.

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There she is - standing at the other side of the bus terminal. She has long hair, which is both starkly blonde and brunette. We embrace each other like strangers - with chatty banter to cover up the awkwardness. We get new bus tickets and get into the line to get on. We circle

around each other's surface - asking the right kind of questions and not getting too deep. Mostly we talk about our life in Korea - like the people we were before are somehow not relevant.

She's been here much longer so as she uses the hour bus ride to talk me through what she knows/ learned. She giggles about the lengths that young Koreans have to go to have sex. She explains the love motels and the DVD bangs. How you can pay per hour for some love motels - instead of paying for the whole night. How DVD bangs are supposed to be a comfy place to watch movies but are actually used as a cheaper alternative to a motel bedroom.

I listen and try to laugh in the right places, give sharp answers and dive in with witty social criticisms or observations. Mostly, I try too hard and don't quite relax into fully being myself. She reminds me so much of the indie cool kids I used to share social circles and classrooms with during my undergrad days. I liked the same sort of obscure bands as them, cared about the same indie films as them, wanted to go to the same festivals and weekend gigs as they did but I still felt like an imposter. My close-knit circle didn't share my hipster-esque tendencies so I would have to reach further out and attach myself to these vague acquaintances. I didn't quite look like them. I don't wear the 90s era faded denim, the muted colours and the right kind of second hand garb. I wear hand me down dresses with gregarious prints on them and sandals. My style is what you get in a bargain bin at an Indian market - it's kinda sparkly, sometimes floral and always patterned.

I'm also black - which means I'm not stereotypically who this genre is for/ sold to. I made it mine anyway or it made me. Its fingerprints are all over my late teens and early twenties - all over my heartbreaks and my triumphs. Those lyrics were where I hung all my burdens and wrung out my smiles. I used to put them all over my walls. I would cut up pieces of coloured paper and write the words of Bat for Lashes, Avi Buffalo, Fever Ray, Cold War Kids, Kate Bush, Foals, Karen O with blue koki pen then prestik these shards of paper all around the room.

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We get off at Nambu bus terminal. I step aside and let her navigate the streets of Seoul. I don't pay attention to where we're going or how we're getting there. I'm a passive passenger to where her feet are taking us. Eventually, we duck into a Korean barbecue/BBQ restaurant and settle at a table in the middle of the room. She translates the meat menu for me and I go with her suggestion of what we should get. She also orders some Soju for us to share. This is my first encounter with one of Korea's national liquors. It's a colourless spirit that comes in a see-through green bottle. I've heard it's lethal and potent - the South African teacher I met last week claims it changed her personality for a night and also made her forget who she was.

I sip on the clear liquid and it hits my chest with the warmth and burn of a bona fide spirit. It tastes like lightly sweetened and watered down vodka. The raw meat is brought to us and the Canadian grabs the tongs then puts some pieces on the grill in the centre of the table. As the beef sizzles, it starts to feel like the adventure I signed up for. The Canadian grabs a piece for me and places it on my side plate. She takes one for herself, douses it with gochujang sauce (red chilli paste) and folds it up in a lettuce leaf. I follow suit - wrapping up my beef with the quickness of pretending to know what I'm doing. We tuck into all the

banchan (side dishes) and she cracks up laughing at the folly of my dodgy chopstick technique.

Two hours later, we walk into the venue for the gig. It looks like an abandoned storage space - it's got that brutal industrial look that's popular with the indie set. There's a threadbare bar in the corner and across from it a teeny barebones stage. Everyone is gathered in their little circles and performing the ritual of nervous pre-show chit chat. The band members of The Dodos arrive say their hellos and begin to unpack their things. They set up as more people pack into the room. After a short intro, the clatter of the drumming begins, it's joined by the pluckiness of the guitar and then the vocals soar into the mix. The room becomes a chorus of whooping, foot stomping, and clapping hands.

The band jumps off the stage and disappears into the modest crowd. We make our way outside and the buzz from the venue spills out onto the pavement. People approach us and conversations begin to spring up. Someone talks to me about the little recording studio they have in the district and hands me a business card. I begin to get caught up in the fantasy of this being my new life - weekends spent in Seoul finally being able to use the singing voice I've kept in storage since my high school choir days. I start to relax into the thought that this will be what my weekends will be like - getting to see bands I wasn't sure I'd ever see perform.

Somewhere in the hubbub, the Canadian introduces me to three men. I'm not quite sure if she knows them but I'm pretty sure at least one of them wants to sleep with her. I take a backseat in the chitchat because I know where this leads. I've played this game before I know it ends up with me fading into the background whilst she hooks up with the one she chooses. I've third wheeled enough to know that this ends with me dancing alone - trying to enjoy myself but feeling the jab of loneliness.

The friendliest of the three men is married and one of the others is in a committed relationship. The most awkward one is single. Having  $\frac{2}{3}$  of them be taken makes me feel safe. We walk towards Hongdae's clubbing district and stop by one of those 24 hour convenience stores that occupy every corner of South Korea. They get a large Soju bottle for us to share and we try to chug it down before entering one of the nondescript clubs.

The dance floor is what draws my attention/my eye but the men want to head to the bar. They ask if I'd like a drink. I say 'no' - there's a lot of month left before I get my first month's salary and I'm too broke to keep up with a night of drinking. I'm also already a little too tipsy. Despite my 'no', they buy me a drink anyway.

We finally get to the part I love and dance for a little while. The Canadian is grinding on the guy who spent most of the night talking about his girlfriend who has just left for Taiwan. Eventually, he turns to her and asks her for sex and she turns to me to say she wants to leave with him. She asks me if I'm okay with that. I nod my head and my mouth says 'yes'- but my inner voice asks if I even know where I am or how I'm going to get home.

After she leaves, the single awkward one gets me more drinks and tries to force more conversation. I do the polite thing by answering the inane questions and accepting his drinks. A dull dizziness begins to thrum in my head after the last one he offers me and there's something in his face that seems apologetic as he hands it over. He starts to lean in way too close and I say that I need to pee. I stumble into the bathroom - I have to hold onto

the walls to keep myself up straight. The room seems blurred and is pulsing even though I'm standing still.

A young Korean guy grabs me after I leave the bathroom. He doesn't say much to me before he pulls into kiss me - I let him. When it's over, he speaks to me more and I'm relieved that his English is fluent. I ask him to help me get home. I ask him to help me get to Nambu bus terminal. We leave the club and street lights give me a better look at him. A third of his face is covered by a black cap and his wearing a white t-shirt and dark jeans.

He holds my hand loosely while we walk down the street - like he can't decide whether he wants to be seen with me. We get into a cab and he digs through my purse for some cash. I've used most of it on dinner and he shouts at me for not having money on me. He asks the cab to stop and we continue walking up the street. Eventually, he pulls me into a building. There is a man in a booth at the front entrance - they have a brief conversation in Korean then money is exchanged.

He walked me through a door. There are red leather couches all across the room and porn playing is on the big screen facing them. It is a DVD bang - the Canadian had told me on the bus to Seoul that this is where Koreans went to have sex if they were still living with their parents. He kisses me and I let him.

Eventually, he pins me down and he tries to lift up my shirt and touch my breasts. I push his hands away again and again. He gives up and tries to pull down my leggings. I push his hands away and try to keep my leggings up by holding them up at the top. I win the fight to keep my shirt on but he pins my arms down and I lose the battle to keep my underwear and leggings on.

He asks me how old I am. I mutter "22". He starts to get frustrated when he can't get his penis in. "It's too tight", he says. My virginity seems to make him angry. He keeps shouting the same question - asking why haven't I been with another man before.

I pass out for a few minutes or more and when I wake up he is gone. I feel around the floor looking for my underwear and can't find them. I get up and walk past the man in the booth at the front entrance. I try and navigate the streets of early morning Hongdae. I can't read most of the street signs and what's written on the buildings.

I've been in Korea three weeks and the money I brought to survive the first month is running low but I hail a cab anyway - hoping it will be enough. In the cab, I realise that I have money on my T-money card. I offer it to the cab driver when we get to Nambu Bus terminal and am shocked when the amount covers the trip.

On the first bus from Seoul to Yongin, in my head, I keep repeating "I had sex last night" because I don't want to accept the real word for what happened. I don't want to accept that someone treated me like I was nothing and I had allowed it. I don't want to accept that shame. I look down and notice the blood on the tip of my peasant top. I lift it up the top and see the blood stain that has pooled around my inner thigh and crotch area.

When I transfer from the first bus to the second one, I try to hide the blood with my hands and my handbag. I climb on with my head bowed and eyes cast low. I know that I can't deal with the staring this morning. I know that I'm the only foreigner on the bus so I attempt to wedge myself into a corner - to make myself even smaller than I already am. I slouch down

so that I can't be seen behind the seat in front of me. I lean my head against the window and keep the drowsiness at bay by promising it that we'll be home soon. That in a matter of minutes I can get into bed and maybe when I wake up things will be normal again - I will be normal again.

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As soon as I walk through the door, I peel off all my clothes and toss them into the corner. I get into bed but vomit climbs up my throat as soon as I lay my head down. I get out of bed and put on the kettle. I swallow down a jug of hot water hoping that it will flush out everything and I will be able to sleep.

I think about showering. I know that if I want to report what happened to the police I shouldn't shower but I so desperately want to be clean. I so desperately want to wipe away and scrub off everything that happened. I want the comfort of not smelling like the bad things that happen at night - I want to be warm and smell like my oatmeal shower gel. I decide to shower but make sure not wash between my legs - to leave that crime scene intact.

I wish more than anything that I could talk to somebody - anybody that I love. My ARC (Alien Registration Card) has not arrived yet. According to Korean immigration, as a resident, I don't exist yet. This means that I can't get a phone contract or internet at home yet. My only means of contacting loved ones is in a public PC bang and how do I Skype the people that I love in a public place and tell them someone raped me.

I get back into bed. I roll around with my eyes closed for hours until I finally accept that sleep isn't coming. It's 1 pm and I remember that I made plans to meet up for a picnic with a new friend at 3 pm. I want to cancel so badly but there's no way for me to get in contact. She invited me because she thought it would be a great opportunity to meet with the other foreign teachers in the area. Right now, I can't think of anything more harrowing than having to chit chat with strangers.

An hour later, I pull a black, blue and white patterned dress over my head. I bought it at the same time as the outfit that I'd worn the night before - the angel-winged top that was now stained with the evidence of something I never thought would happen to me. I'm taken aback my ability to do ordinary things - to go through the everyday motions. I pat down my dress and find a black cardigan to conceal the burgeoning armpit hair. Somewhere, I find the ordinary will and soft-spoken courage to leave the apartment, close the door behind me and get on another bus.

I get off at the bus stop and make my way across the road. I have half an hour before my friend arrives and there's something that I need to do. I see it immediately - the Women's clinic. I open the door and hesitate but my feet carry me forward. I stand a few paces from the front desk for a few moments then make my way forward. I ask if they do STD and pregnancy tests. None of the receptionists seem to speak English so they shake their heads and keep gawking at me. I turn to see that most of the room is staring at me. I squeak out a quick "never mind" and "thanks anyway" and turn around to leave.

I dash up the road to meet my friend at the Tom N Toms that's closest to the bus station. We rush in for a quick hug and then get into a cab. The taxi edges its way up the road to the local park. When we get out, I'm hit by the calm of the still, dark water. We walk up a path

that hugs the greenery on one end and laps up the water on the other side. We're looking for the landmark that signals the meeting spot - a giant clock.

We're greeted by waving arms and smiles. When we sit down names are thrown at me and I try to slot them into the haze of my memory. As I tuck into the snacks, I'm startled by how much I'm still able to laugh. Sometimes, the jokes and the chuckling are part performance and part fighting to forget. But it makes me feel kind of hopeful - like I might be able to stay. Like I might be a little the same.

At some point the desperation to speak to someone I love becomes overwhelming. I ask the South African teacher if I can leave the picnic a bit early, go to her place and Skype a friend. She hands me her keys and her login details. After she gives me some brief directions, I gather my things and walk the way she pointed out. When I'm out of their view, I break into a slow jog and then a full blown run. Everything hurts and I hope that if I move fast enough, the truth won't catch me.

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The tears come as soon as Riola's face fills up the screen. It takes a moment of silence for her to register the sobbing. Before she speaks, words leap out of my mouth and the same thing tumbles out of my lips over and over again.

Me: Something bad has happened. Something really really bad has happened.

Ri: What's wrong? What's happened?

Me: Something really bad...

Ri: Are you going to be okay? Where are you?

Me: Something really bad has happened. I don't know if I can even say the word. I don't know what to call it.

Ri: Okay then don't say the word, just start from the beginning.

We talk for a long time before I use the word "rape". Our conversation is dominated by me stumbling head first into self-blame. I talk about how much I'd had to drink. I talk about how I'd been told how potent Soju was but I had it anyway. I talk about how I left the club with him and how I kissed him. I cry and I talk and we try to put the pieces of what happened together. I ask her (and myself) if all of these things are true then how could I have been violated. It takes a lot of wrong turns before we get to the point - I was too intoxicated to give consent and I had tried to prevent him from penetrating me.

The South African teacher gets home as I'm wiping up the last of my tears. A few of the others come into her studio apartment to say their goodbyes. I put on my shiniest face and hope that my red eyes don't expose the lie. After everyone leaves, I'm too exhausted to keep lying so I tell her what happened and ask if I could use her phone to get a hold of my mother. I need medical advice and some comfort so she seems like the right person to call.

Me: Hi mom, it's me.

Mom: Hi Dee, it's so nice to hear your voice. How has everything been?

Me: Mom, I'm calling from a friend's phone because it's a bit of an emergency.

Mom: What's happened? Are you okay?

Me: Last night someone forced himself on me.

Mom: O mntanam, where are you now? Have you gone to the hospital yet?

Me: No I haven't. I tried to go to a clinic earlier but no one understood what I was saying.

Mom: You need to get to a hospital now. Can anyone take you? You need to get tested for STDs and maybe pregnancy. You really need to get the HIV post-exposure prophylaxis.

Me: Okay, I will go now. I will talk to you later.

I get off the phone and tell Justine that I need to go to the hospital. She calls her Syrian boyfriend to take us - he has a car and being in Korea for three years has given him a decent command of the language. Our first stop is the closest hospital. Justine and I sit down and he heads to the reception desk to speak on our behalf. They tell him that they don't have the facilities needed and instruct him to take me to a hospital in Suwon - Seoul National University Bundang Hospital.

When we get to the next hospital, I sit still and gather my blue-black-white maxi dress around my legs - the one I had been smiling in at the picnic. The crying starts again so I turn my face and smother it into the clavicle of Justine's shoulder. We sit in silence until someone comes to get me. The nurse gestures to me to follow her. I shuffle behind her until she opens the door to a doctor's room. I'm grateful to see a woman sitting behind the desk. She asks me a few questions and then I'm taken to another room. The nurse gestures for me to lie down and says "off" to indicate that I need to remove my underwear. She points at my legs and says "open". The doctor comes in and takes a seat beside me. I stare at the ceiling and try and blink away the tears.

I feel something cold and metal enter my vagina. The doctor tells me that this might feel uncomfortable. I begin to sob out loud and one of the nurses holds my hand - nodding her head in sympathy. After the examination is done and all the swabs of evidence collected, the doctor asks me if I want to report this to the police. I say "No". She tells me that if I report then all of the medical procedures will be free. She tells me that I wouldn't have to go anywhere, the police would come straight to me. I still say "No".

I lie there and think of all the ways that this is my fault. I know that if I tell the police my story, they'll write it off as another drunk girl that got into trouble. I know that I don't have the strength to fight a legal case in a foreign country - I don't know the language or the laws. I don't want to be seen as a troublemaker and I don't want to get fired. I want to sleep - I want to sleep so bad. It's my second day of being awake and in pain. I don't want to answer any more questions and I don't want to feel any more shame. I choose to pay and move on with my life - to try and forget this all happened.

They give me the rape kit and tell me to hand it to the nurse downstairs. I grab the bag of evidence and head down to the reception desk. I hand it over to the nurse at the front - she seems surprised but takes it anyway. She points me to another desk so that I can settle my

account. They tell me that the total will be the equivalent of R 10 000. I don't have the money so Justine swipes her credit card. I promise to pay her back as soon as I get my first month's salary.

We exit through the automated sliding doors and Justine bundles me into the car. I lean on her the whole way home. Once we get back to her place, she tucks me into her bed and asks me if I want to eat. I shake my head and close my eyes. I tug at the blanket so that it can hold me tightly.

## Chapter 11

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I'm standing outside with my back facing the classroom. I clutch the side of my face - my palms cover my ears and my fingertips rest on my hair. My arm is pounding in all the areas where I got shots and my blood was drawn. I was writing on the board when the ache became too much. I turned around and no one was paying attention anyway. My co-teacher was studying a book in preparation for his interview and the kids were chattering/hitting each other. Before the well of tears spring forth again, my feet carried me out of the door.

I'm pacing outside and for these few seconds, surrender my brave face. I look up to see my co-teacher standing by the door. It took him a little while to realise that I'd even left. He asks me what's wrong and tells me that I can't do what I just did. I tell him that I'm feeling unwell and didn't have the strength to stand there any longer. He concludes that I need to get this "flu" of mine checked out but for now I need to return back to the lesson. I nod my head and walk back into the classroom. My robot sensibilities kick in and I parrot a text book lesson. I pretend for as long as I need to but when the bell rings I rush to the quiet of the bathroom.

After leaning over the sink for a few moments, I wash my hands and raise my head carefully so that I don't catch my reflection. It's too easy to see the dirt, shame and disgust if I look myself in the eye. It's Monday and so far I've only survived the first lesson. With a tepid grin, I try to convince myself that I will make it through the week. I have a follow up appointment on Wednesday at the hospital. Leaving early is the only way I would make my appointment. I don't have classes on Wednesday afternoon but I have to stay put or come clean.

Who's safe to tell? I carry that question as I push open the bathroom door and click clack my way to the next class.

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It's day two of what's become a big contender for the worst week of my life. This Tuesday begins with one of the high school boys hissing my name, licking his lips and winking suggestively. I keep walking as he calls after me. For a few moments, I drop out of reality and revel in the fantasy of packing my bags and heading to Incheon International airport. When I come to, I'm still moving forward. There's a cold numbness to my deliberate movements but I keep going anyway.

When I'm back at my desk, the head teacher informs me that my ARC is ready to be picked up. The relief almost makes me chirpy. This means that I don't have to tell anyone what

happened in order to get to my hospital appointment. I can sign out tomorrow to get my card and then head to the hospital afterwards.

The (sort of) giddiness is gone almost as quick as it came. I sink into the realisation that tomorrow means the first round of test results - the first hurdle in finding out whether I've contracted HIV or any other STD. Tomorrow also means putting on a shining face for open classes with the parents.

Today keeps nudging at me. The head teacher keeps stopping by my cubicle to ask inane grammar questions in preparation for his interview. I want to turn to him and ask if he knows what it feels like to scream in pain at 4 am on a Sunday morning because a metal object has been shoved into your genitalia. Instead, I give him a gentle pronunciation correction and explain how a word is used in a sentence.

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"If I can see the other side of today then I know that God hasn't completely left me." said under my breath like a weary mantra. I lean forward and sign the sheet. There's a block that asks me why I'm leaving work early and I write "ARC pick up". Many strides later, I'm at the bus stop. I crush myself into the corner of the bus shelter so that none of my students see me. Although, no amount of shrinking can hide the fact that I'm sitting there.

The detour to pick up the card leaves me running late to my appointment. After leaving immigration, I pound the pavement looking for a cab. I walk towards one and wave at the driver to get his attention. I'm about to reach for the door handle when I hear the ignition go and watch him drive away. In my head I scream "please, I need to get to the hospital" but nothing comes from my mouth. The stares and the repulsion of some of the Korean people I've come across stings. Before the rape, their eyes and their disgust felt like tiny pinpricks on sensitive skin. But after, it feels like the throb of a gaping sore.

When I finally arrive at the hospital, I'm not sure where to go. There's a doctor's name and a department written on my appointment sheet but I can't read either of those details. I walk fast and calm to the info desk - not wanting to call any more attention to myself. The woman behind the desk doesn't understand what I'm saying so some poor soul from the admin office is pulled from their work and re-assigned as my chaperone. He tells me to call him David. He adopted that name during his stay in the US a couple years ago. He needed a name to go with his new English persona - one that people where he lived could pronounce.

We chitchat as we walk to the next desk. I hold up my end of the cheery banter with practiced pretence. Once we get where you need to get to, a nurse informs us that I can't see the doctor today and that she can't give me the results of my tests. Something in me breaks and the veneer of normality shatters. The nurse hands me another appointment sheet - this one for Friday afternoon. David walks me to the entrance and my trauma starts to leak out. I tell him why I have to be here and why I have to come back. I throw him details of that night he doesn't ask for. He doesn't ask any questions - he gets more silent the more I speak. I keep saying things out of painful vulnerability that he can't hold or do anything with.

He leaves me at the entrance of the hospital and mutters a goodbye. I wait a while outside but there's no one there to get me. Eventually, I head back in and knock on his office door. There's nearly a dozen people behind computer screens in this long but boxed in room. He

looks up and cuts everyone's surprise short by getting up to meet me by the door. I plead with him to call a cab for me - I don't have any emotional reserves left for rejection.

He waits with me until it comes. My gratefulness is desperate but sincere in its timbre. I get into the back and lean my head against the seat. "I'd rather be dead" - these words announce themselves with so much certainty. I say them to myself again - "I'd rather be dead than have this life". The only thing that cuts this spiralling loop is an image that floats up of my mother's face. I have to stay alive because I don't want to hurt her.

I cradle my bloodied clothes to my chest. I'd carried them to the hospital because I decided that I wanted to report. I don't know why I'm holding this plastic bag on my lap. I guess, I miss the girl/woman who used to wear these clothes before they were ruined - like she is.

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I had to tell them today. I asked one of my female co-teachers to come with me to speak to the school nurse and just blurted it out. I thought that being able to say it out loud would make me feel better. All it did is make me wish I could take it back. I struggle to believe that I was the drunk girl that was taken advantage of. I ask myself the same questions everyday - why didn't you run? why didn't you scream? Why did you kiss him? Why did you drink? Why did it have to be you sitting on a bus on a Saturday morning with blood all over your clothes? Why can't you just go back to who you were last week?

I find myself daydreaming about what this week would have been like if it never happened. I'd be worried about mundane things like the Head teacher's strangeness and the misbehaviour of his classes.

The Head teacher misinterprets and misattributes my sadness. He sees my sombreness as disillusionment with his classes and this really persistent "flu". After a difficult class, he launches into a rambling speech about perseverance and endurance. Every sentence makes me want to chuckle with bitterness. I come from a family where resilience is the touchstone of who we are. After being violated, I'd woken up at 4 am to plan lessons even though I hadn't really slept for two days. I turned up to work an hour before everyone else (as usual) because that's who I have been taught to be.

For the last couple of days, I'd curl up in bed and imagine my mom putting me in a bath. My mind is trying to rewrite a scene from Season 3 of a British Teen drama called Skins. In episode 8, one of the main characters Effy cries in the bath whilst her mom uses a measuring jug to pour water down her back and into her hair. I want to be cleaned and I want to be loved so bad.

Speaking to my mother on the phone after the rape, I hoped she'd beg me to come home. I wanted to hear her say, "my baby, get on the next plane and when you arrive in Johannesburg I will put you in the softest pyjamas and tuck you into sleep". But she never said that. She told me I had to stay. She told me to not let a man ruin everything I'd worked for. That's how she loves me - by pushing me to endure. It's a hard love to accept when you're shattered.

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Friday afternoon ends at the same place many of my days have ended this last week - at the hospital in Suwon. I'm holding another appointment sheet I can't read and wandering around the emergency centre seeking out help. It's the only place that's familiar to me - this is where I was taken that first night. No one there can/is willing to help me so I head out in search of anyone who knows where I need to be.

"I don't want to be here. I don't want to be here. I don't want to be here." my silent war cry as I roam through alien passage ways. Eventually, I stop at a random reception desk and hand the person behind the desk my sheet. She shakes her head and gestures in the direction of where I need to be.

She points me in the direction of a sign that says "Oncology" and she says "cancer ward". I'm surprised but too fatigued to panic. My legs take me to where I need to be and I sit outside the right door. The man sitting next to me turns his whole body so that he can stare at me unencumbered. I bottle up the urge to scream and ask him what he's looking at. I swallow down the discomfort and keep my eyes fixed on the door. I'm called in and feel his eyes track me to the door. I turn back for a moment and stare back in what I hope is defiance but is actually despair.

I don't recognise the man sitting behind the desk and I'm not sure why I was sent to him. I'm not sure that I have the emotional reserves to speak through what happened again. He goes through my results in *that* clinical tone - the one that says 'I have seen many of you and compassion packed her bag and left long ago'. He tells me that I will need to be tested for HIV again because it's too early to tell and also says that if my period doesn't come, I should come in for another pregnancy test.

I put the plastic bag with my bloodied clothes on his desk and tell him that I want to report - that I'm ready to talk to the police. He asks me why I didn't do this at my first appointment. I feel like it's a question he has no right to ask but I answer him anyway. I also tell him that all the evidence from my first appointment was sealed in a bag and given to a nurse downstairs in the emergency centre. He tells me that if I don't report immediately they don't keep the rape kits and that the sealed bag was thrown away. Finding out that the evidence of my rape no longer exists is like being told that as far as they're concerned it had never happened.

Post appointment, I'm standing in front of the bathroom mirror and close the tap after washing my hands. I catch my reflection and wonder who is that person wearing my clothes. I first wore this dress at my graduation. Now I no longer feel like it's mine. This dress belonged to a woman that was cared for, whose thoughts were valued and whose path was marked by achievement. The person wearing it now is just a victim - someone whose pain is gladly ignored. Someone whose story isn't important - someone not worth helping. If I'm ever going to feel like I'm worth anything again, I know that I need to walk out of these doors and never look for healing here ever again.

## Chapter 12

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I knock on the door a couple of times then wait for a response. The music is creeping through the edges of the door frame and so is the laughter. I quickly fold away all the remnants of today's hospital visit. My face is expectant and my hands are buried in my black

shorts. The door opens up to a living room the size of my whole studio apartment. There are three mismatched couches - one black leather, one red velvet and the other made of brown crunchy material. There are people on all the couches and Cass beer bottles all over the floor. There's a tiny wooden table holding up half full mugs and bottles of makgeolli.

I know half of the people here but everyone shouts 'Heyyyyy'. There's another knock on the door and the pizza arrives. Someone hands me a mug of something and I settle on the floor. This is phase one of the birthday celebrations. I don't know the person who is turning a year older but this is life here - special moments are shared with brand new friends and strangers.

Phase 2 is Noraebang. After paying for two hours - we walk into our little private singing room. One of the group is excited that this one has both a drum kit and a stripper pole. We look through the thick flip folder of song choices and key in the codes for the ones we want to sing. The makgeolli arrives as we're handing out the neon tambourines. Someone grabs the first mic and there's a bit of a verbal tussle about who's going to claim the second one and sing back-up.

As the first song starts, the room goes dark and purple-green-red polka dotted lights begin to dance around the room. I shake my tambourine and chuckle at the budget/ knock-off music video that accompanies the lyrics on the screen. When "Chop Suey" by System of a Down comes on we all head bang and air guitar our way around the room - our dark silhouettes slightly blurred on the mirrored wall by the stripper pole.

The screen says that "Fighter" by Christina Aguilera is up next so I toss my tambourine onto the couch and pick up the mic. I'm singing this to reach the person that I think I've lost. The teenage girl who used to giggle with her best friend in the Soprano section of the choir. The young woman who used belt out her solos on the stage of her high school - hoping that it would make her unrequited crush reconsider. As I croon the first lines of this anthem of overcoming, I feel like I'm shaking a lifeless body. With each high note, I muster up the strength to pretend that I am the me I was a week ago. I'm hitting the notes like I'm supposed to but I can't shake the familiarity of this room.

This room looks similar to the one in which I was violated. The room where joy leapt out of the door and didn't promise to return. I summon joy from my diaphragm and try to lift her through my vocal cords. I almost catch her but she's spooked by the ghost of what's happened in rooms that look like this. After declaring that I'm a fighter enough times that I almost believe it, it's time to pass the mic.

"Gangnam Style" comes on and we light up the dark room with our ridiculous dance moves. In between the giggles, we wiggle any body part willing to groove. It's a group performance where everyone has abandoned the tambourines and it doesn't really matter who has the mic.

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I get off the bus just before midnight. The lights on the main road are sporadic and an uncomfortable silence shrouds the pavements. I walk home at a dawdling pace to remind myself that in some ways I haven't changed. That I've always been someone that refuses to live in fear - no matter happens to me. I'm part of a gender category who's always told that

the dark and the streets are not for us - that 'frightened and threatened' is our collective identity. But even now, that's not true for me. I'm not scared - I'm overwhelmingly sad.

Once I'm in bed, I fold a lime green blanket around me and begin to plead. I ask the dark for help. More specifically, I pray to whoever's listening. I start in the middle trusting that the universe already knows my case: "I can't do this alone. Something in me knows that I can get through this. But I can't do this alone. You need to send help...just help". I close my eyes with the word "help" still on my lips.

The next day, I head to the closest PC bang and log onto Facebook. Help turns up in the little red notification hovering over the inbox icon. Help is ushered in by only five words:

helllooo 😊

are you free?

Skype?

Help is a face I miss more than most faces staring at me from a profile picture. In this particular photo, his grey hoodie creeps over his mouth a tiny bit and but his eyes are almost squished tight to accommodate his smile. His face is looking towards the camera but his body is hugging me. My eyes and my smile are closed. We're standing on a beach in the dead of Cape winter. It could be a couple-y photo but that's not what we are. We're the kind of friends who've shared tubs of marzipan, tears during Bollywood films, incomprehension at the other's music taste, Monty Python related jokes, bedtime stories and sometimes a bed. We've seen each other through insomnia, nosebleeds, depression, family drama, petty plus not-so-petty frustrations and heartbreak.

I want to say so much but all I manage is:

Yes please

I put on the big headphones as the Skype call jingle begins to play. There he is looking at me with shorter than usual hair and a cheeky smile. I try not to lose it when his voice pings against my ears. For a moment, I wonder if I can tell him what happened in such a public place. But the fatigue of trying to keep it together sets in and the tears plus their accompanying truth come pouring out.

At some point we get disconnected. We head back to our Facebook inboxes to keep talking to each other. I've been struggling to figure out where I can get English language counselling in my little rural town. Jarryd suggests Skype counselling while my search for in-person sessions continues. He tells me that he will contact several places and sort that out on my behalf. He also lets me know that he loves me - a lot. I tell him the same.

As I get up to leave the PC bang, I'm gripped by memories of listening to him talk during his sleep and early morning chats about the latest dude creeping into his heart. I open the door and the grief for those ordinary moments hits me harder than the early June humidity.

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I'm becoming a bit more of a human being again - not just a hollow mollusc that plans lessons and speaks English on demand. Apart from the head teacher's two classes, teaching is making me feel full-blooded again. Today, I asked my highschool-ers what they wish they could learn more about. One of them said that he wanted to learn how to fall in love. Romantic love is a subject where I'm out of my depth so I open up the floor and ask who could teach us about that? A hand shoots up with ready advice. The owner of that hand sums up what we need to do in three words: "Change your face". What follows is a brief make-up tutorial. I stammer out a platitude about loving people for what's in their hearts and move onto the next person.

I know nothing about the intimacy between partners, but I do know about the fierce love of a teacher and her favourite class. They cheer as I walk in and my heart skips a beat. The 3-1s are my oldest. I say that like they're my kids and they feel like mine - even though I'm only a few years older than them. They're in their last year of high school and they brim with the extreme contradictions of almost grown-ups. They come at me with enthusiasm and fatigue. They thrill me with their silliness and their earnestness. They spool me into their laughter and antics but little by little they also let me into their pain.

This week their textbook chapter is on the narrative structure of stories so I introduce the lesson by playing them Alt J's video for the song "Breezeblocks". In the video, the narrative happens in reverse so I ask them to untangle the story and put it back into a chronological format. Immediately after it ends, they give me the order in which everything happened. Without hesitation, they also say that this is a story about a husband who is cheating on his wife.

The indie kid/aspiring musician of the group puts up his hand and says "In Korea, cheating is a small crime and anyway, the other woman in the video was more good looking". A couple of heads nod in agreement. My co-teacher tries to tell them off a little bit but it's hard to hide what's true. The thread of this conversation takes me back to a throwaway comment made by a friend. He said "Why do you think there are so many love motels here and they charge by the hour instead of by the night?"

The Indie kid/aspiring musician pulls me back into the room by asking about some of the lyrics of the song. He asks "what does 'I love you so...' mean?" I say it's a short way saying I love you so much. He's one of my favourites possibly because we share a liking for the band Two Door Cinema Club. Also because he seems a little out of place here - like I do.

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I open my door, throw off my shoes and sprint in so that I can attempt a quick clean. My co-teacher and some of my other colleagues are following close behind with the man who is going to setup my TV and internet. They all walk in, take off their shoes, and make themselves comfortable on the floor. I squat down next to them. My co-teacher wanted to come along and make sure that everything is installed properly and that I don't get scammed. She acts as a translator - her words move between the installation man and me. She double checks everything - struggling for a few words here and there to make me fully understand.

I look at them sitting cross-legged on my floor - kicking myself for not buying proper groceries and having nothing to offer them besides tap water and uncooked ramen. They've

offered me so much openness and kindness. I run a teachers' class once a week, after school, where I give them Extra English lessons. They show up with their notebooks and sit behind the kid-sized desks. After a day of teaching teenagers, their attentiveness is a balm for my fatigue. They tease and correct each other - nudging each other forward with encouragement.

On so many days when I want to go, they make me want to stay. It's standing in front of them, with a piece of chalk between my fingertips, that I start to believe that I can pummel my way through this. Yet even then, I feel like I'm staring at the from behind a thick film of shame.

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## Chapter 13

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We're all huddled up in the nurse's room when the decision is made to take me to the police station. My high school co-teacher, the Vice Principal and the nurse discuss it then eventually look at me to check if I want to report. I'm scared but I drum up a righteous 'Yes'. My co-teacher volunteers to drive me to the main town. I wrap up my teaching duties and pack up my things. I add another two hours to my absentee record and fill in 'private matters' when the form asks why I'm leaving early.

Twenty-Five minutes later, I'm sitting by a desk in the police station. It's an open plan office and men keep jostling past my chair. The officer asks me why I'm here. I say that four-letter word and look around to see if anyone heard me. His gaze makes me feel like a cheap wooden sculpture in a Curio shop. I pull down my dress, cross my legs and sit up more straight - hoping this will make him believe me. I put on the air of 'dignified professional' as a defence against what he might be thinking.

We have to wait for a translator before they can take my statement. I sit in silence whilst the police officer chats with my colleague. I relax a little when a young-ish looking woman arrives and they say she will be our language go-between. I'm even more relieved when the male detective hands me over to two female officers once I'm in the interrogation room. It's a cold, light-filled room with cameras visible in each corner - everything is metallic or glass.

The police officers begin to coax the story out of me. Their talking to me but most of their eye contact is with the translator. I answer their questions with deadpan numbness until we get to the part of the story where I have to describe how he was on top of me. They ask if I tried to fight him. I describe my meek attempts to try to keep my clothes on. The tears well up because I wish I had fought harder. The police officers assure me that I did everything that I could. They say that I'm a small lady and that there is no way I could have physically overcome my assailant.

Minutes tick by and we come to the end of the statement taking. The police officers hand over the statement to the interpreter and she translates the written statement for me sentence by sentence. I stamp each page with a red fingerprint as assurance that I agree with what's written. The translator gathers me up and takes me outside. She rubs one of my shoulders with one hand and wraps her arm around my back. She invites me over for dinner

at her place and says that she'd love me to meet her daughter. We chit chat for as long as my emotional reserves allow and I give her my newly acquired phone number.

A police officer offers me a ride home. It's a necessary and practical mercy - they need to pick up my clothing from that night to use as evidence. The police van pulls up the side street where I live. I climb out and feel the eyes of half the neighbourhood boring into my body. The policeman and I hurry into my apartment. We shuffle up the stairs in silence. When we enter, he hangs back in the doorway whilst I rush in to grab the plastic bag with the bloodied materials. In clipped sentences, he tells me that they will find him - the man that did this. He says that the lab will blow up my clothes and find his DNA. They'll be able to see if he's done this to someone else. I nod my head and then show him to the door.

When we get to the police van, I thank him and stand there while he drives away. Before I turn to walk away, a woman approaches me. She's wearing a black apron, 40s rimmed glasses and a straw fedora. Her opening words are "I know what happened to you - it happened to me too". Next, she introduces herself as Amy. She points to the coffee shop around the corner and says that's where she works. She tells me that it's her mom's place and that I should come over so we can chat and eat. She apologises for her English not being good - even though I can understand everything she's saying.

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Today's lesson for the 3 -1s is about formulating questions so I put a chair in the front of the room and say that they can ask the person sitting on it anything about their life. I create a healthy boundary by allowing the person on the chair to choose whether they would like to answer or not.

When it's my turn on the hot seat, one of the kids asks me what was the worst moment of my life. I don't completely answer and offer a half-truth. I say it was when my 19 year old cousin and favourite person in the family died. Yes when Salvie passed away, it was one of the darkest times of my life. But when I think of her, I connect that with the memory of having witnessed her life and the happiness that brought me. The rape is different - it will mark me for the rest of my days but there will never be any joy associated with memories of what happened in the early hours of the 25th of May.

My co-teacher uses this as an opportunity to explain my use of the term "passed away" - talking them through some other synonyms for death. I slip out of the room unnoticed - because I'm still sitting there - I get a flash of him, the blood and the urge to throw up. It's someone else's turn to take my place so I get up. Their bum hits the seat and the room starts firing questions at them. I'm laughing at the silliness and seriousness of their answers. But, I'm still gasping at the wound of not telling them the whole truth.

After school, I head in the direction of home but make a stop at the cafe around the corner. There she is - a different set of quirky rimmed glasses but the same straw hat. She greets me as if she's always known me - waving with the excitement of familiarity. I'm not sure what to do with this warmth so I quietly sit down and give the top of the table a furtive rub. She emerges from behind the counter with some bar snacks and asks if I want some coffee. I'm still struggling with insomnia but accept the offer anyway.

When she takes a seat, she quickly unpacks her 'me too' story. She tells me that her cousins raped her when she was six. After that, she survived violent attacks from her elder sister then emotional torture from her in-laws and soon to be ex-husband. She has survived mental health issues, suicide attempts and self-harm. She thinks her life is a miracle.

In the midst of her divorce, she tells me that I would be okay. She said her husband told her that he didn't love her. I don't know how he couldn't. She studied law so that she could be a judge and saviour for girls like us. She's already my unexpected angel.

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It's so difficult to keep telling people that I love what happened. Hearing their stunned silence on the other side of the line drives home the seriousness of what I'm facing. Every time I've collected enough pieces of joy to kind of forget, having to tell someone is a reminder.

Saying it aloud - sometimes the bitterness catches in my throat. Sometimes the loneliness snatches my words. I think of all the people I know sharing beds with people they care for. How they get weddings, snuggles and someone to help them carry the burden of being alive. Under my covers, there's only dread, disappointment and an incredible emptiness. I share my bed with rape flashbacks, tears and the taunting words of rowdy children.

I try to stave off the isolation by adding the new Cold War Kids and Foals albums to my playlist. I click on the first track and wait to sink between the notes. I expect music to do what it's always done - wrap a sonic blanket around my shoulders and give me somewhere to rest. But it doesn't sound the same. None of it is knocking on the parts of me that need to be touched. I can't find the lyric to sum up what happened to me. There's nothing that I'm replaying to get that feeling I got the first time.

## Chapter 14

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Today is the first time that the Head Teacher decides to teach with me. His face droops with disappointment but he opens up the textbook and introduces the lesson. This is the first time I really see him face the students instead of having his head buried in a thick English study guide. He's speaking to them instead of mumbling definitions to himself. I teach and he translates. I teach and he disciplines. It's not perfect but it's better than it usually is.

On our way back to the staff room he tells me that he failed his exam - the one that would have guaranteed him a promotion. He tells me that he is "face sensitive". At first, I think that he means that he has to keep up with appearances. For him, he says, it's about building his self-esteem. Today he is not just another problem on my list. He's someone who is hurting and grappling with failure. Someone as fully human as me.

The bell rings for my next class. I grab some white boards for the lesson, heave my laptop over my shoulder and fling my candy bag onto the other shoulder. I scuttle into my favourite class. As I start to unpack, my co-teacher shushes some of them and tries to wake the ones slumped over their desks. It's one of the things I've marvelled at during my time here - how the kids seem to be able to nap anyhow, anywhere and anytime. I've seen kids sleeping while standing - their heads leaning against the wall. I've seen kids sitting straight up in their

chairs - with their heads lolling back and their mouths open. I've witnessed kids shifting their heads from side to side to try and make the crook of their elbows more comfortable.

In today's lesson, I rouse them with the promise of speaking about something they actually care about - food. Each of them spends a few minutes giving their sermon about what they love to eat. They knit together their English vocab and grunts of excitement. Their voices gather thunder and a rumble fills the room when someone mentions tteokbokki. They throw out the names of Korean dishes I have and haven't heard of. They grin as they ask "Teacher do you know ....." and tell me that I have to try it when I shake my head.

Amidst the buzz, I hand out the whiteboards then split them into groups. I tell them to come up with their own concept for a restaurant and draft a possible menu. Three boys go with a mafia themed menu complete with a disturbing illustration of a man in a fedora pointing a gun at another human-shaped blob. Another group of boys spend a lot of time drawing the muscles and 6-pack of their mascot. They name their restaurant 'Oh my shoulder curry' and they swear that their flexing figure with a bad crew cut is a good representative of Indian food. The girls come through with sensible options - names that make sense and well-thought-out food options.

After the lesson, one of the boys volunteers to help carry my stuff back to the staff room. We take the short walk at a slow pace. Half way down the corridor, he yawns and I gently prod at his life:

Me: Why are you so tired? Are you like the other boys, staying up way too late playing League of Legends?

Him: No, Teacher, I work until late.

Me: Where do you work?

Him: I work at GS 25.

Me: The convenience store?

Him: Yes, teacher. I work there from 11 to 1 am

Me: Is this to earn some pocket money?

Him: Teacher, what is pocket money?

Me: Extra money that you earn for yourself. Money that you can use to spend on things you like.

Him: No teacher, I give all that money to my parents.

Me: They are lucky to have you - you're a good son...

He shrugs off my praise and hands over my things when we get to the door. I admonish myself for the League of Legends joke and push the door to go in.

That evening, I tell this story to Amy, when we're sharing the table furthest from the TV at her mom's café. She sighs at the young man's burden and admits that maybe not all the teenage boys at my school are hooligans. She asks me if any of them are still making sexual

advances towards me. I say yeah, there's still moments when they whistle or grunt in my direction then say something to me in Korean. If I'm with a co-teacher I ask for a translation but they're not willing to give me one. They wave away the comment and give me some version of the phrase "boys will be boys".

Amy says that the problem is that a lot of Korean boys get their sex education from porn. She says it's probably the only place that they encounter foreign women especially black women. She says that for them, black skin can mean that a woman is to be toyed with. In porn, we come with the promise of an easy time and magically different vaginas.

I tell her that I'm surprised how accessible it is here because it's supposed to be illegal. But I know that they're definitely watching. I tell her about a class a couple days ago where one of the boys was being mocked because other kids saw the title of the movies he downloaded on a file sharing site. They were telling me that he was watching "sexy videos".

After a few moments, I say that it's not about them watching adults have sex. It's more about how porn is the only media that is still high-fived for exoticising, stereotyping and demeaning black women. I take a breath and say that also it scares me that it's where they are learning how to navigate sexual relationships especially questions of consent. That they have nothing to compare it with and no one besides their equally ignorant friends to talk about sex with. I end by stating that we live in societies that do a really shit job of differentiating between sex and violence.

I look up from my plate and feel the rant begin to simmer down. Amy sips from her mug and suggests that we both go to bed. She squeezes my hand and says that I look like I need to rest. We both begin to yawn and stretch. She gets up to take our dirty crockery to the kitchen and I notice for the first time that the place has emptied out.

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It's Wednesday and my brave face is slipping. It's one of those days where everyone sees my sadness. Before we walk into our first class, my high school co-teacher pats me on the shoulder and tells me to cheer up. I turn to her and offer a half-smile. When I take my position in front of the board and my co-teacher instructs the kids to greet me. Their sing-song-y hello resuscitates something in me and the performance begins. I come alive during lessons because it feels like taking on the dramatic role of who I used to be - straight from the script of the woman I was a month and a half ago. Each lesson is a very short production where I only need to put on a shiny face for an allotted period of time. When the bell rings, I wring the sweat out of my cheery disposition and let it breathe before the next show.

When lunchtime comes, I pack that countenance away and drape my layer of impenetrability back over both shoulders. The staff chitchat asks more of me than the minimum and I can't give that right now.

The class after lunch is one of my toughest so I brace for impact. I play-act at being stern, hiding behind folded arms and pursed lips. They throw things and themselves at each other until the Head teacher makes a half-assed attempt to hush them. I introduce the grammar game that we're starting the lesson with. I bribe them with the promise of candy for the winning team. Some of them participate but there's still trouble flitting around the room. I hulk up in defensiveness and disappointment. I work with those that are willing to speak.

When the game is done, I jump into textbook lesson and leave them to complete the exercises.

The Head teacher waves me over to the corner of the classroom. He whispers a story to me that shouldn't be mine to hear. He tells me that a student in one of my classes raped another student who is also in one of my classes. They were drinking Soju and he overpowered her. It sounds so much like my story that I blurt out what happened to me. I leave the conversation for a quick walk around the room to glance over the students' work.

As I brush past the student's desks, the words "fuck, I've made a mistake" keep echoing in my head. I see the Head Teacher watching me and I turn around to look over their work again. When the bell rings, I grab my things and walk out the door. I move quicker than my normal pace but the Head Teacher falls in step with me. He badgers me with questions all down the corridor, up the stairs and into the staff room. His voice booms in the muted shuffle of our office space. I respond in a hushed tone because I know that he underestimates how much English our co-workers understand.

After the interrogation, I sit behind my cubicle and reprimand myself for slipping up and sharing my truth with someone I don't think deserved to hear it. I turn the interrogation inwards and ask myself why. The answer is there in two words "me too". I wanted to make sure that if she needed someone to say those two magic words then she would have me.

## Chapter 15

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It's Thursday morning and I'm sitting on the abandoned staircase that leads to the library. Back home in South Africa, It's a good friend's wedding day. Here in South Korea, I'm waiting to hear whether I contracted any STDs. I'm holding a cell phone that isn't my own. My high school co-teacher came to rescue when my phone died. She contacted the hospital and let them know that they should phone her number.

When it finally rings, I feel almost too weary to answer. But I do, I put the phone to my ear and my voice says: "Hi this is Dela speaking". The doctor tells me that he has some test results for me. He says the good news is that I don't have chlamydia. He tells me that my HIV test came back negative but that I have to test again in a couple of months. He tells me that there's a chance I could have other STDs but so far so good. All my tests have come back negative so far so this is happy news. He asks me if I've gotten psychological help?

I tell him that I have an appointment with a local counsellor tomorrow and that I've had Skype appointments with a trauma counsellor in South Africa. He asks me if my period has come yet. I say no I'm still waiting. My unasked questions waft around as he keeps talking. Could I be pregnant? Am I carrying the child of a complete stranger? Will I have a permanent tie to the man that raped/violated me? Am I ready to be a mother? Could I go through with an abortion?

Some tentative answers clamp the questions down for a few moments. No, I'm not ready to be pregnant. I don't want to carry the child of the stranger and raise the baby of my rapist. No, I don't have the emotional strength to think about abortion right now. Last week, I felt a rumbling down there and I got excited at what I thought was a sign of oncoming period pain.

By the end of the day, my unused pad was still in my handbag and I stopped clutching onto hope.

Here I am, a week later, still on period watch. I keep the phone on my ear with one hand and place the other on my lower abdomen. For a moment, I imagine being 6 months pregnant in the dress I'm wearing today. I imagine my stretched belly being held by the black-purple-blue material. I wonder if they'd fire me for being a single mother - pregnant out of wedlock. I wonder if I could stay just until I'm showing and save up a bit of money then take my growing belly home to South Africa. I nod my head and a few "okays" escape my mouth as the doctor keeps talking.

I start fantasising about a different plot line. In this one, my stomach remains baby-less and flat-ish. In one hand I'm holding my luggage and in the other I'm holding a boarding pass for a flight to India.

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It's finally the end of the school week. It's 6:30 am and I'm stationed behind my laptop - cocooned by the quiet of the office. I leave my little cubicle and grab a paper cup. I throw a sachet of instant coffee into the cup and do a faint jig whilst the water boils. When I'm back at my seat, I pull up Facebook and head straight to my inbox. I type a quick message to Jarryd:

I know that this is too much information but wanted you to know that my period came today. You will not be raising some stranger's baby.

I smile as a quick response pops up:

I am grateful to hear that. It's not too much information

I log off and get back to planning my lessons for the day. An hour later, the other teachers begin to arrive. Bit by bit the quiet is engulfed by a stream of feet and greetings that become steadier and steadier. When the head teacher arrives he gives a curt nod to the room and heads to his desk. My high school co-teacher arrives and squats next to my chair to chat with me. She tells me that there are no lessons today because it's Sports Day. She leans closer to me and whispers that my counselling appointment is at 3 pm. She tells me that she will come to get me when it's time and drop me off. I thank her for everything. After she's gone, I murmur to myself in both annoyance and relief about the class cancellations.

All the teachers pass a few hours chatting on the side lines of the sports field. I shift from butt cheek to butt cheek in the boiling sun and pretend to be engrossed in the makeshift soccer game happening in front of me. There's a block of students cheering close by who are being out-cheered by another block of students further away. I don't understand any of the fierce chants but there's a whisper in them that takes me back to my high school days and our sports day war cries. I start to mouth "sliding down the banister and landing on a cactus, we think the other team needs more practice". I'm cut off by an internal voice that taunts: "that girl is gone". I put my ear on my shoulder and listen out for the teenage girl with the thick braids and titanium-framed glasses.

I miss her - her innocence, clumsiness, naivety and the sincerity of her over-eagerness. There were so many parts of her that were easy to love. She's attached to one of the periods in my life that I like the least but the angst of her time is better than the trauma of now. I feel like I owe her an explanation about how she (maybe we) got here. But there's a violation that separates us. There's a clear line that puts her into the realm of 'BEFORE' and me into the realm of 'AFTER'. We share a face but I'm not sure if we sat down to chat we'd recognise each other. How do I say that I shamed her - that I lay there whilst someone stole the magic of her universe. That I was there when someone took that burning belief that all would be well - that the cosmos would always take care of her.

At 3 pm, my co-teacher collects me from my cubicle and we slip out of the office together. Her car is like all the others. It's a white Hyundai wedged between many others that look just like it. She throws her stuff into the boot, whilst I take my place on the passenger seat and strap myself in. We don't drive very far. It's a quick spurt past a blur of fields and then we pull up to an office building. We walk in and two women walk up to meet us. One of them introduces herself and says that she will be translating for me today. She says that her name is Judy and then she introduces the counsellor. My co-teacher says her goodbyes and we move into a nearby room. I'm sitting on a cushioned chair facing the two of them. The counsellor speaks, I look at her and then to Judy who asks me to tell my story from the beginning.

We go round and round slowly, halting for to fill out details and clear up misunderstandings. I speak with damp eyes and a practiced clarity. The emotions storm at the corner of my eyes and on the edge of bursting they're held back by the language barrier. When the counsellor is waiting for a re-telling, Judy is the one taking the first blows of my trauma. She bows her head slightly and her eyes droop with concern. Her hands are tucked into her lap like mine are. The counsellor nods her head and pauses to write as Judy speaks. As she scribbles down some notes, she sometimes looks up to gasp and shake her head. I just sit there and watch them. I gaze at my hands then at a far corner in the room then back at them. I feel like I'm watching an episode of someone else's life - peeping into a conversation between strangers. I feel like the least important person in the room so when the counsellor ends the session, I know that I won't be coming back here.

Before I leave, Judy hands me her card. She explains that translating isn't something that she usually does and that she did this as a favour for a friend. She's actually a journalist. She asks for my phone number and invites me over for dinner with her family. I say "yes, of course" out of politeness and slip the card into one of the black slots of my yellow purse. I wave a quick goodbye and rush to a nearby bus stop.

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I wake up to a Saturday morning where I'm not expected to be anywhere. I stay in bed and coil further into my chest. Misery, exhaustion, disappointment and disconnection keep my eyelids shut. I start to fantasise about all the places I could be. My mind conjures up phantasms of Jaipur. It projects hazy scenes of powder-coloured palaces. Fantasy-me is sitting on the checkered floor of an ashram. I'm scrubbing the floor in contemplative meditation. My imagination has stolen the plot line for Elizabeth Gilbert's life. It's furnished

my yearnings with someone else's story. It's a narrative that I want for myself. It's a narrative of healing.

I shift my head on the pillow and decide to stay in the dark of my imagination for a little while longer. I picture myself packing my bags. Something in me knows that this is the scene after I quit my job. My neighbour's voice echoes through the hallway and my mind rushes back to its immediate surroundings. I remember where I am. I remember that without my salary, I wouldn't have the money to travel anywhere. I remember that I'm stuck here and the only other option is to go home.

Daylight floods through my makeshift curtain and tugs at the corner of my eyes. The brightness nudges at me until I eventually decide to sit up. I pull my legs towards my chest and yawn into my knees. I stretch out an arm to grab my laptop and hunt for an antidote to loneliness on the internet. I type 'famous rape survivors' into the Google search bar. Listicles with titles like "You probably didn't know it but these brave celebrities are rape survivors" or "15 Celebrities who survived sexual assault" or "Famous Rape Victims". Oprah Winfrey keeps coming up, and so does Maya Angelou.

After scrolling through the short paragraphs in the listicles, I start to hunger for more fleshed out stories. These pangs for connection take me to Oprah's official website. I type 'rape' into the search bar. I click on the one search result. It's a story written by a woman who was assaulted in her bed at knifepoint. It doesn't sound like what happened to me. She is the 'perfect victim' - the one who did nothing wrong. The one who didn't get drunk and leave a club with a stranger. Her testimony is drowned out by the gremlins of self-blame that have taken up residence in my thoughts.

Next, I turn to Maya Angelou. Google leads me to her episode of Oprah's Master Class. I snuggle up under my lime-green blanket, I click play and breathe. Maya Angelou's smile comes to life and her laughter pulls her whole body forward. Her eyebrows and her red lips dance. Her dangly earrings stay in place and keep the tune. Her black ensemble catches the edges of her shoulders and the deep V of the top leaves space for the dainty necklaces.

Watching her speak feels like being held, being rocked back and forth - being told that everything is going to be okay and actually believing it. Watching her unfold her stories and unpack her wisdom, I know that there is something beyond *THIS*. The *THIS* being the tired young woman in her early twenties clutching at and grasping for a life that no longer felt like her own. Every time Maya smiles and laughs, I know that there would be an 'other side' to this experience.

I hold onto every second of those forty-two minutes like every word is a spiritual revelation. But, it's about 10 minutes in, when it feels like Maya is really speaking just to me. She spins her experience of sexual abuse into poetry. She speaks of the time after the death/murder of her abuser when she stopped speaking. She explains how she filled that silence with books and recalls reading Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 and being convinced that the English Bard must have been a black girl from the South, because how could he just know? How could he just know her story?

When Maya Angelou's Master Class ends, I click on to the next video on the playlist. It's a two-part telling of Oprah's life story - her Master Class. I sit through both parts with tears

streaming down my face. What really sets me off comes in the second episode - the moment Oprah speaks of discovering Alice Walker's book, *The Colour Purple*. She describes waking up on a cold Sunday morning and going to the bookstore to buy the book - with her pyjamas still on. She'd read about the book in a *New York Times* review, and knew that it would speak to her. When she finally got her hands on the book, she started reading it in the bookstore. The first two lines were, for her, a perfect summary of her experience of falling pregnant at fourteen because of sexual abuse.

I tuck my chin into my chest and weep. I want nothing more than to open up a book and think "that's my story". I gulp in some air and something in me speaks. There's a part of me that knows that I can't find my story because I have to be the one to write it.

## Chapter 16

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Judy's husband picks me up at a bus stop that's close to my one room apartment. As I get in, I make a comment about how the whole street is staring at us. He laughs it off and launches into an anecdote about his first experience of prying eyes whilst trying to pick out some fruit when he first arrived in Korea. He's a white Italian man with dark eyes and dark hair that is tinged with grey. His voice booms around the car and his joyfulness ricochets off the car windows.

We turn one corner and it no longer feels like the neighbourhood I thought I knew. We head down a long road sheltered by trees and surrounded by mountains. We pull up to a little street where cottage-like homes seem to mushroom out of nowhere. All the low walls outside the homes are made of cobblestone or a rustic brick face and just behind them are neatly trimmed bits of greenery. Marco opens a little gate made of dark wood slats. We enter and a back garden much larger than expected emerges. We make our way through a glass sliding door and the first thing we meet is toddler crouched over a toy on the floor.

Judy steps out of the kitchen and greets us. Her husband hands me over to her and heads to the counter with some groceries. Banter about who does the cooking springs out of thin air. Marco takes up his customary station behind a cutting board and Judy takes a seat next to me. There's a little distance between us and him but Marco's voice thunders around the kitchen. We skip the small talk and leap straight into the heavy stuff. Whilst Marco stirs the spaghetti, we tackle the sexism we've heard of or experienced in South Korea.

As Judy puts the salad together, we speak on the unflinching stares some of us get for existing in this place. As food starts making it to the table, we talk about the racism and insular-ness that makes certain things okay here that shouldn't be. After cajoling their son to the table, we say grace. As we pass bowls of food around, we speak on the Korean education system. As soon as I say the name of the school where I teach, a look of alarm crosses their faces. Judy attempts to console me by saying that not all schools in the city are like that. Her husband counters with the fact that this might be true but in general Korean schools are too tough on their students. He explains that they can be environments mired in misery and too happy to sacrifice the well-being of their students.

They both look at their son and say that's why they want to move to another country. I follow their gaze. Their son is so beautiful but he looks different - that's a liability here. It's a

calling card for bullying. They ask me about South African schools. I swallow a mouthful of spaghetti and reflect on my own schooling experience. I start with the founding story of our nation - that we are an immensely unequal and deeply divided society. That there's a wide spectrum of what it means to go to a school in South Africa. On one end there's kids like me, who went to a good public school (former model C schools) or to a private school where we had access to everything we would ever need. Then on the other end, there are many South Africans who went to schools where they didn't have basic amenities. I put it down to the legacy of racial segregation and a present government that hasn't done enough to put the pieces back together.

We chew on my nation's context for a bit then we move on to something more personal. I ask them how they met. Like true nomadic souls, they did not meet in either of the countries of their birth. They met at a university in Taiwan. Like many couples, they fight over the nitty gritty details of that story. They also interrupt each other when telling the story of their wedding. I sit and I watch and I dream. I've always wanted my own little travelling family. A family brought together across continents. A man I could do this weird life journey with and a child to love.

## Chapter 16

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It's Sunday and I'm somewhere I didn't quite expect to be - church. One of my colleagues invited me to the service and I said yes out of my particular brand of door mat politeness. So here I am, sitting through an hour and a half service completely in Korean. There's an older Korean woman sitting next to me pointing out the English verses in her bilingual bible. I'm scanning the words but I'm not seeing anything. I'm nodding my head - not in agreement but out of a sense of duty.

I want to say to her that I'd rather dance to feel the presence of God. That I'd rather look for God in Rumi's poetry. That I'd rather shut myself in an Ashram for a couple months and try to find God within myself than ask other people for my salvation. I want to tell her that I'd rather cultivate my own direct line to God than need an equally flawed mediator.

I say nothing but my mind steps out of the room. A voice is still booming from the pulpit but I'm surrounded by the stillness of water. I'm back where I was last weekend, in a yellow raft sailing down a river. I'm wearing a blue helmet, a life vest, a pink t-shirt and sporty grey shorts. We're white water rafting but we've hit a peaceful stretch. We breathe. We listen. We watch. We're cocooned by mountains but dread begins to rise. I know that Monday is coming and I don't want it to. I want to stay here where I feel like I have the ear of the universe.

For a moment last weekend hangs in the air like an untethered fantasy. But other memories begin to reign it in. My thoughts drift back to the night before the trekking, rafting and bungee trip. It's Friday night and I'm at the bar where all the foreign teachers hang out when trips out of town don't work out. I'm telling my new friends the story about the social studies teacher whose cubicle is next door to mine. I tell them that he's always offering to

buy me ice cream and how some of the women teachers jokingly told me to be careful of him. They laugh, and one of them says that I should make sure to walk to the store with him just in case he laced the ice cream with a date-rape drug. It's funny haha for everyone except me. I want to open my mouth and let them know that their joke is my lived reality. Instead, I leave and cry myself to sleep.

My mind ruminates about how I thought bungee jumping off a bridge would make me happy. I thought that leaping into nothingness would jolt me into connection with something larger than myself. I stood there with harnesses around my chest, crotch and legs hoping that this would be the moment when I feel fully human again. I hear the three second countdown and I know that I need to step off the edge without hesitating. When my body hits the air, a scream bundles itself out of my mouth. For a moment, my body pulls the bungee cord taut and then I'm whipped upwards. A sickly sensation creeps up my stomach and throat before my body begins to descend again. I hang there for a little bit staring down at the face of the Inje river stream.

The priest's voice pierces through my recollections and for a minute my eyes follow the fingers of the older woman sitting next to me. She flips to the next page of her Bible and my thoughts side step out of the room again. It's Sunday afternoon, last week, and I'm getting on a bus in Seoul to go home. The emotional pain is knocking over any fuzzy memories of zip lining across the sky or trekking through the river in beautiful pockets of silence. My card tower of positive thoughts has come tumbling down. I no longer feel brave - I just feel lonely.

I sit down and turn my body towards the window. I'm used to Koreans being shocked or unimpressed that they've been seated next to a black foreigner and I'm not in the mood to engage with that. My seatmate arrives and I catch a glimpse of him when I reposition my neck. He's young - maybe my age or a little older. I close my eyes and pretend to sleep. After a few moments, I feel his arm fall on my leg. I shift my body a little and my closed hand is resting palm up on my thigh. He places his hand on my upturned fist and tugs at my fingertips to open up my palm. He wraps his fingers in mine.

My t-shirt sleeve has slipped down my shoulder so he pulls it up with his other hand. He lays his head on my newly covered skin - placing his ear on my now invisible bra strap. I smile because an attractive, kind-hearted stranger is holding my hand. I start to imagine what this could become. I've hated having to do this journey on my own and I've been praying for someone to hold my hand through all of this. For a few seconds, I can take a break from having to be brave.

But then he moves his hand up to my breast and pushes my hand towards his penis. Not again, I think, and pull away. He gets off at the next stop.

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It's Monday afternoon, I'm wedged behind the desk of my little cubicle doing what I always do on weekday afternoons. I'm on the Waygook site - the community forum geared towards EFL/ESL teachers - looking for interesting language games, lesson plans and activities. I'm scrolling through the forum topics when I see a thread labelled "foreign teacher raped". Before caution catches my fingers, I click the folder and all the comments pop up. First, I read the news article that kicked off the thread. I'm struck by how it happened close to the

neighbourhood where I was sexually assaulted. When I'm done with article I begin to sift through comments in the thread. It only takes a few to hit the goldmine of fear - victim-blaming.

In response to the article, one of the community members states "5 % of rapes in South Korea were provoked". This comment is preceded by a stream of Why Why Whys directed at the victim/survivor and women in general. Why was she there alone? Why was she not mindful of her surroundings? Why aren't women walking in groups or making sure their being escorted home by a man they can trust? Be careful and be vigilant is repeated over and over again like some kind of talisman of protection. As if scoldings and tepid warnings about the dangers of the world are enough to keep you safe from them.

I am fuming. I log out of the account that I normally use to comment and create a temporary one. I sit in my cubicle and type out my pain, my tears and my hurt. I ask them if they know what it's like to scream in pain at 4 in the morning during an emergency gynae appointment. If they know what it's like to spend your days waiting around to find out whether you have chlamydia or HIV. I want to know if they know what it's like to sit in a cold room with strangers and have to explain how a man took everything from you - your virginity, your joy, your belief in your hopes and dreams, your normalcy and your connection to people that you love.

I tell them that every day is a fight that I didn't ask for. That on most days I doubt that this is a fight that I can win. I tell them that there are survivors watching. That they shouldn't think that we don't see these conversations - that we don't see them pointing the finger at us for something that was done to us. We are always there - sharing workspaces, lunch tables, beds, buses and bar stool banter with you. We hear you when you choose to blame us. We also hear you when you don't - when you take the more humane path. We're there when you step to help hold the pain - when you believe us, acknowledge what we've been through but also still see all of us.

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Tuesday evening finds me wrapped up in my lime green blanket and waiting for a Skype call. South Korea is 7 hours ahead of South Africa, which means I get to curl up in bed for my weekly counselling sessions. A few minutes after 8, the blue icon dances across the screen of my Samsung. I let the ditty complete 6 beats of its tune before I pick up. A couple of seconds later, a face comes into focus. Her hair is tucked back into a ponytail and she's wearing a headset with a microphone. We iron out the technical difficulties and deep dive straight into my emotional stuff. She just asks how I am and how this last week has treated me but that's enough to unplug a torrent of feelings.

I tell her that I keep thinking about the same moment from over a week ago. During my last weekend away, we were trekking through the mountains of Gangwon province. I was taking it slow, sloshing my feet through the water of a stream and when I looked up, the rest of the group had disappeared around a distant rock face. During that temporary abandonment, I felt so at ease and at peace. It felt like a hug from the universe. I began to pray out loud - asking the universe for Monday to never come. I begged to not have to go back to my normal life in that little rural town in Gyeonggi province. I ask my counsellor if this is what

being a grown up is like? Is adulthood about living for the weekends, for future plans and for grand visions that feel out of your reach?

She reminds me that whether I stay or leave that those are both brave decisions.

I think I decided to stay because I won't let a stranger in a white t-shirt take everything from me. I say to her that there's a part of me that still brims with optimism - I feel it when I listen to Sarah Kay recite her poetry. I'm earning my happiness back like a merit badge. And I think that the stupid belief that I deserve a happy ending or at least a joyful ellipsis will outlive any bravery or courage I feign. It's my inability to let go of 'childish' or fearless hopes and dreams that will keep me here.

Basically, it's Ansan Valley Rock Festival that will keep me here. It's dreams of a Sonic Summer Festival in Japan that will keep me here. It's unrealistic aspirations of teaching my students to be good people that will keep me here. It's that foolish belief that mutters the words of Mumford and Sons. And cries out that I won't decay on my dusty floor. That believes Marcus Mumford when he says "There will be a time, you'll see, with no more tears." That sees a Facebook wall post about love, travel and happiness and still believes that I will get all three.

It's not bravery, it's my fuckin' inability to give up the fairy tale.

She asks me about my day.

I tell her that I don't know how I got through the day. I keep expecting to drop down on my knees in a quivering mess. That my will to live will suddenly give in and there will be tears – lots of them. Like the other day in the school library.

I tell her about the one thing I never saw coming. No one tells you how expensive it can be to get raped. He not only chipped away at my sanity, he did a great job on my finances too.

She tells me that money shouldn't be the only reason I stay. A plan can be made if I really want to leave.

I think about what it would mean to go home. I remember my mom asking me if I would be safe here and I told her that I would be safer here than in South Africa. Now I know there's nowhere that I could go that isn't marked by sexual violence.

I wonder out loud if Rumi and the other spiritual teachers are right - if suffering is really a gift?

The counsellor says no matter how I make sense of it she's here to support me through that journey.

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It's the end of the work week and I have a coffee date but it's not one I'm looking forward to. I'm meeting the Canadian teacher from *THAT* night at Tom n Toms. I arrive first and park myself in a corner that you can't see from the door. I order a smoothie. I don't know what to do with my hands so I pull my bejewelled diary out of my bag. After fishing out a pen, I try and leave my anxieties on the page:

*I'm about to meet Mandy for coffee. I don't know what to think. I don't know if seeing her will mean flashbacks. She is attached to the memory of that night. I don't know her in any other context. I really wish I could fly Jarryd here. I could hold his hand, it would make the staring more bearable. In the state I'm in to have to deal with the constant sniggers as I walk by cuts into every part of me. Am I a zoo animal on display? Dance monkey dance? It reminds me of the lessons I teach with the Head teacher. I turn up and I'm expected to be the entertainment.*

*I wish that friends like Jarryd or Rio were physically present in my life. Jarryd to share a bed with and for Rio being the constant presence that pulls me through. How do I explain to my counsellor that going home to Centurion would be of no use. The people I need are either in Cape Town or India. I'm trying to imagine living like this for a year when making it to Friday feels like a bad leg of the Amazing Race. I used to watch that show and dream. I remember looking at Seoul and thinking that I was looking at my life. Or thinking that I would see it all, after screening of Gagnam Style in Media. The girl who used to attend Media tuts – what happened to her? I have a feeling I lost her.*

*Can I make it a year? Can I do it? I keep hearing 'I must' in my head but I'm trying to actually see the finish line. I can't believe I've only been here two months – each day feels like a small century. An hour, a decade. I'm starting to be in disbelief about the fact that I voluntarily signed up for this. It's starting to feel like an elaborately set trap packaged as an opportunity of a lifetime.*

I shut my journal when I see Mandy approaching the table. She apologises for being a little late and I get up to play my part in an awkward hug. Both of us cautiously sit down. Neither of us know where to start so I begin by re-hashing what I already said via Facebook message.

Me: Again, I just want to say that I don't blame you for what happened. I blame the person who did this to me. I just wish you hadn't left because I keep wishing that it didn't happen. But it did happen - a part of me is trying to accept that.

Mandy: I wish I hadn't left either. I have been consumed with guilt ever since then and I wish there was something I could do to fix it. I want nothing more than to take it back and continue the amazing time we were having together before I did that.

Me: I appreciate that.

Mandy: I can't believe that you stayed in Korea. I think it's brave of you to stick it out. I don't think I could have.

Me: Sometimes I wonder if it's courage or stupidity. I don't feel very brave right now.

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It's Saturday and I'm waiting at the bus stop. He greets me first. He's one of the kids in my 3-1 class. He's on the way to his part time job and I'm on the way to a water park. It's the first time I've seen him in glasses - he looks adorable. I want to say more to him but I'm not sure what to say. As he walks away, I realise that I want to say more to all of them. I want to make a more concerted effort to be more vulnerable - to say hello first, to smile more, to ask more questions.

The bus to Yongin passes through my little town. It starts in the main city where all the other foreign teachers live. By the time I climb on, the Wisconsinites and the random South African have occupied the back seat. I find a seat next them as the bus lurches forward.

We chatter as the countryside gives way to the city. The Americans poke into South African politics. I tell them that our current president is polygamous and that shocks them into silence. I continue on to fill the vacuum. I say that we are nation of diverse legal freedoms. I give the example of gay marriage and say that for us it's been legal since 2005. I struggle to sum up the political complexities of a country teeming with over 50 million people. I end off by stating that South Africans don't necessarily agree with, like or condone the behaviour of those who lead but we allow their personal choices. The other South African on the bus chimes in to complain about corrupt politicians and the cost of Zuma's many wives and children.

We get off at the bus station and find the next bus - the one that will take us directly to Caribbean Bay. We line up with everyone else, pay our entrance fee and make our way to the locker room. We briefly say goodbye to the other South African, as the only man in the group he heads to the locker room opposite ours. When we walk in to change, we are fully clothed in a sea of nakedness. We put our bags away and keep most of our clothes on.

We pick up the other South African and rush towards the water of the wave pool. A staff member stops us and says that we have to go and rent life jackets. A couple thousand Won later, we're strapped into our floral detailed safety contraptions and we plunge into the crystal blue water.

For a decent period of time, I forget about what happened to me. I am just running from slide to slide, lapping up the sun and inhaling copious amounts of water.

## Chapter 17

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It's Wednesday morning and the usual tap-tap of fingers on keyboards is pulsing through the office. I'm writing notes for a lesson plan when my co-teacher crouches down next to me. She tells me that this afternoon the teachers are going to have a staff lunch at a restaurant nearby. She says there will be plenty of makgeolli and Korean style seafood. She asks me if I've tried both of these things and if I'm okay with the spiciness of Korean food. I assure her that I'll be just fine. She lets me know that I can ride with her to the restaurant.

There's lots of chatter-y excitement in the office as we all pack our things. I grit my teeth in a half smile and attempt to fake enough enthusiasm. I know that shared meals like these means that I will have to grin in every direction whilst everyone around me exchanges jokes in Korean.

When we get to the restaurant, we remove our shoes and place them into the shelves that line the wall. I wonder about when I last clipped my toenails and if my feet smell then shuffle through the entrance in my now not-so-secret tan socks. The table is close to the ground and surrounded by plush cushions. I grab a spot next to my high school co-teacher. I tightly cross my legs in, hoping that my stretchy lace pencil skirt is not revealing too much. I watch the men pull up the legs of their formal pants, collapse onto the ground and tuck their legs into a seated position.

As expected, a buzz of conversation erupts around me and sometimes a snippet is thrown my way via translation. Some of the men try and engage, nudging my co-teacher with the insistence that she translate their questions and my shy answers. Pieces of octopus are piled onto my plate and my silver tumbler is re-filled with makgeolli after I take a few sips. I try to stay sober enough to use my chopsticks but Korean hospitality is making that difficult. I manage to get a hold of a few bite fulls and pat my tummy to symbolise that I've had my share when the teacher across from me insists I have more.

When the plates are cleared from the table, there's a playful but determined argument about who's going to pay the bill. It's a toss-up between all the older men at the table. My age, foreignness and gender means that I have zero stake in the fight. Eventually, the principal takes care of it. We all amble up in slow succession. I want to leave but politeness has me hanging around conversations that don't even involve me. The computer teacher notices my discomfort and encourages me to go home. I say my goodbyes and follow his advice.

I keep repeating the word "home" under my breath as I walk back to my little one room because this place isn't my home. I wake up every day and fight the urge to book a plane ticket back to South Africa.

As soon as I get back to the little apartment, I pull off my skirt and get into bed. The silence of being on my own is unbearable so I reach for my laptop on the side of the bed. I find Season 2 of New Girl and press play on the 23rd episode. I sing louder than Zooey Deschanel as the theme song kicks off. A couple minutes in I realise that the plotline is how all the characters lost their virginity. I fight back tears when it dawns on me that someone stole my story. All the characters are able to have a casual chat about how they lost their virginity. What do I say when that's asked of me? I was raped and left bleeding somewhere in Hongdae?

I close the laptop and put it on my side table. I finally take off the last piece of my work attire - I toss my tan peplum top onto a chair. I dig up an oversized t-shirt from my drawer, throw it on and get back into bed. I put my head down on the flat-est pillow. I wait for the kind of sleep that I know won't come - the un-medicated kind. I think about love. I contemplate a different kind of love than the one I've always desired - an un-romantic love.

I want to be in love with God like Rumi was. I want God to be my soulmate so that I'm not chasing men or something outside of myself to be okay. Sometimes I wish I could turn off the taps of sexual desire and instead be filled with self-reflection. I wish that being on my own and with God was enough.

Instead, I chase phantasms of men who never existed. I give them kind eyes, nationalities and interesting back-stories. I give them everything I need. I replay the joy they bring me, the way they touch me and the intimacy that saves me. Their faces and skin colour changes but their purpose stays the same - my special kind of escapism. The only thing you can do when you've never experienced the real thing.

You have to make-believe when you've never been in love – in a romantic, loving relationship. You have to make it up and you have to use it to dream of one day. The one day you thought would come when you were 8 or in your teens but hasn't arrived even though you're in your early 20s.

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It's Thursday morning and my head is bowed from the fatigue of white knuckling it through the week. A glint of light catches the corner of my eye. I turn towards the distraction and face it just in time to see it vibrate. I flip open my denim cover and see a text message from a number I don't recognise. The message is in Hangul so I get up to do the quick walk to my high school co-teacher's cubicle. She looks up from her computer screen. I whisper a quick greeting and ask her to translate the message. She tells me that it's from the police. She says that they'd like me to come in for a second interview tomorrow. I do a swift scan of the room to see if anybody heard. Everyone is facing away - swallowed up by their own responsibilities - but I know that they understand enough English to get what she just said. My co-teacher hushes her voice a little and tells me to meet her and the Vice principal in the nurse's room after lunch.

The next few hours smudge together in a haze of the school bell, chalk dust and shouts of "tea-chaaa". I walk to the cafeteria buffered by my own little cloud of silence. Get in line - shuffle - shouts/screams - shuffle - grab a lunch tray, spoon and chopsticks - shuffle - soup - shuffle - kimchi cubes - shuffle - burger and fries - shuffle. I walk to the teacher's table, take a seat and tuck into the uncharacteristic lunch. I guess this American style lunch is a rare treat but I miss the sticky rice, seaweed and bulgogi beef. There's laughter and chewing and laughter and chewing. I bide my time until my co-teacher gets up. When she makes a move so do I. We discard our leftovers and place the dirty tray plus utensils in the correct pile.

A few minutes later, we're gathered around the nurse's desk. The VP's taut face is angled towards my co-teacher as she explains the situation. The nurse is facing her too, her head leaning to the right and her chin nodding up and down. After they finish their conversation, my co-teacher turns to me and says that the nurse has volunteered to drive me to the police station. I thank her and tell her that I just need to grab my things. The hum of post-lunch procrastination is filtering around the office. I try to be discreet - packing whilst seated so that few people see me. When I make it back to the nurse's room, she grabs her car keys and her bag. The passage way is filling up with students so we duck through their flailing bodies. One of them calls her name and she gives them an affectionate tap on the cheek. One of the girls from one of my more disobedient classes shouts "Tea-chaa, where you going?". I wave her off and say that I'll be back tomorrow. Eventually we make it to the car park. I get in, click in my seat belt, and the vehicle comes alive. She stares into the rear view mirror as we reverse and begin the hour-long journey to Seoul.

When we arrive at the police station, the school nurse unlocks the doors and gives me an encouraging smile. I thank her, grab my things and climb out. I head to the enquiries desk, there's two men idling behind the window. They stare at me for a few seconds before I work up the courage to greet them. I say I have an appointment and show them the message. I hope that I don't have to state in detail why I'm here - that I don't have to fire that missive that makes me want to cover my ears. I don't want to say the word 'rape' to these strangers in uniform. Even with the text message, they're struggling to understand. The nurse comes through the entrance with something I left in her car. As she hands it over, the policemen flag her down. They burst into conversation while I just stand there. They gesture, they laugh, they nod, they smile and point at me sometimes. I just stand there, moving my eyes from face to face wondering when any of this will finally be over.

They instruct the nurse to tell me that I need to head upstairs. I follow them up to the next floor. I'm passed on to another policeman and introduced to yet another translator. This time the language go-between is a really attractive man. I'm guessing that he is in his mid to late twenties. We all walk together to another statement taking or interrogation room. I look at the side profile of the young interpreter's face and I wonder if in another universe there's a version of me flirting with men that have such kind eyes. But I remember that in this universe, he's going to help me etch out the details of my rape case.

When we get the room with all the cameras, I take a seat on one end of the table. The policemen take the seats on the other end of the table. The interpreter sits in the space between us - across from me and in my eye view but it feels like he's closer to them. There are three of them when the interrogation begins but one wanders out the room early on and the other is on his cellphone texting or playing a game.

At first, they jibber jabber between them like I'm not there but eventually they start laying into me. The first police officer delivers the first blow via the English speaking mouthpiece. He speaks and then the interpreter turns to me and repeats what he said: "he's saying that they found DNA on your leggings. But they didn't find a match which means the guy who raped you was not a criminal – just a normal guy". I sit there stunned for a moment as "just a normal guy, not a criminal" echoes in my inner ear. The next blow comes soon thereafter. The translator turns to me and says: "He's saying that you gave them some wrong information and that you are under investigation".

He goes on to tell me that they think that my story doesn't match up. Apparently, they tracked down the cab driver through my T- money card and he said he didn't pick me up close to the Nambu bus terminal. Somehow, they've gotten it into their heads that the rape happened close to the terminal. That's something I never said - I wasn't sure where I was when I got into the cab.

They move onto asking me how much I had to drink. They ask me how much alcohol I can handle and how much I usually drink. One of the officers says I couldn't have been that drunk since I remember parts of it. Then they move on to questioning my reactions: "Why didn't you kick him?" The anger creeps up my neck but I'm still stunned by how much I want to scream. My fingers clamp into two tight fists and my lips squelch together. They notice and cajole me into calming down. I gulp it in and keep answering their questions. I tell them that I ask myself the same questions every day. I tell them that I did what I could.

After they're done treating me like a criminal and a liar, they communicate that they want me to come back again another day. They toss this instruction at me like dropping everything is just second nature. They've forgotten that I have a job and that I have emotions - that I'm a human being. When they're done, the translator slinks out of the room while withholding eye contact and with only the breath of a goodbye.

After we leave the room, they take the time to chat to the nurse about what I assume are the details of my case. I stand there and I know. I know that it's not the trauma of what happened that kills you, it's the aftermath. It's this right here.

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It's the first Tuesday of July and it's starting to dawn on me how furious I really am. If this week and a half had a title, it would be "the period of unbearable anger." Rage has swallowed me whole and left nothing else. Frustration has consumed all of my softness and willingness to be vulnerable so I know I need to ask for help. I sit on the chair next to the TV, balance the laptop on my thighs and type an email to my counsellor:

*I am still in two minds about going on medication. I called around to find a psychiatrist that can prescribe medication but all the medical centres I was referred to are booked up this weekend or don't open on a Saturday. My mom informed me that the meds that I take to help me sleep are also offered as temporary anxiety medication so I'm thinking of waiting. I've always thought that meds should be the last resort. I think I need to re-introduce some exercise and meditation into my life and see if that helps.*

*I realised that I've acknowledged my sadness and my pain but I haven't dealt with my anger. This week, I have blown up at the police, the embassy and a friend. My co-teacher talked to the police yesterday about my interview and they apologised for how they came across because they said it wasn't their intention. I could tell that they are doing everything to assist with my case but the shuffling back and forth between the two police stations seems to be causing a lot of miscommunication. Then I get stuck in between. They explained that their frustration wasn't with me but the difficulty with finding him. I'm still undecided about what to do with my case.*

*I decided to contact the embassy via an e-mail and they just sent me a link to a big legal firm that deals with all the legal issues of foreigners. I sent them a pretty heated e-mail asking why they don't have measures in place to deal specifically with this problem instead of palming it off to a large corporation.*

*Can you suggest an exercise to deal with all this pent up anger and frustration?*

A couple of hours later, I get a response, it's three paragraphs of affirmation with a writing exercise to release anger attached. It's supposed to be done over a 4 day period and consists of 5 steps. It's three days of stream of consciousness style writing and the fourth day you burn it all away. Your fury is supposed to soak the pages like paraffin and then dissipate when you set the words alight. I wonder if I can watch the embers of my bitterness die down and truly let it go. Wrath is a more beautiful flame than the gasping and painful sputters of depression.

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It's the tail end of the week and I make an emergency Skype call to help push me over the finish line. My best friend (Riola) and I dive into the wrecks of our lives. We surface for a few laughs before delving into the muck again. I talk her through the back and forth that's plaguing my mind - do I go or do I stay. If I leave there will be a level of shame and a sense of failure. I will feel like I gave up on myself and them. But if I stay my unhappiness could (and probably will) multiply tenfold. They deserve more than a husk of a human being and I deserve a shot of actually dealing with what happened to me.

I say to her that there's already a rumour that I'm leaving - one of the kids asked me if I'm going home because of the whispered chatter going around the school. I don't know where

the gossip mongers got their information from but they couldn't be more close to the truth. After the rape, I promised myself that I'd at least stay until the end of July. This commitment came from my refusal to miss Ansan Valley Rock Festival. I'd been dreaming about seeing Foals, the XX and Vampire Weekend live before I even left South Africa.

Well Ansan is now 2 weeks away and now the decision I postponed is looming. Ri and I end the call but there's something that she said that I can't shake. Again and again, she said "I don't need easy but I cannot have this hard". It's the same for me too.

## Chapter 18

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I'm sitting on the outer edges of my tent with my feet submerged in the grass. I'm squinting at my cellphone screen and trying to pick the right filter. I decide that I like the picture as it is so I focus on coming up with a caption. I can't think of anything witty so I go with "Tenting it up. Greetings from Ansan." I look at myself from a few minutes ago - captured standing by the tent with a close-lipped smile. I revel in the festival bands wrapped around my wrist and the pink lanyard with site info hanging from my neck. I'm wearing a short dress that I bought at an Indian market in Cape Town. The olive green pattern that dominates the kurti matches the canvas of the tent that I have one of my hands on. My other hand is resting on my hip and one strand of my locks has the others tied away from my face. I look like myself for the first time in months.

I click post and throw my phone back into my tiny briefcase style handbag. I gather my things and the people that I came with so that we can explore the festival site. Our first stop is the Big Top stage. There's a decent sized crowd milling around the grass. On stage is a band in psychedelic garb - the curly writing on the screen says that their name is 'The Polyphonic Spree'. We meander our way out of the crowd and head to a drinks stall. We pick up some wine cruiser cocktails and are given free giant foam hands. After a few Insta snaps, we slosh through the mud moving from stall to stall and make our way through the market's wares.

We hover around a stall where an artist is using paint, glue and toilet paper to create zombie blisters on people's skin. The person on her chair is getting the fake wound on her arm. We decide to get in line. When it's our turn, my friend gets the bloody muck put on her face whilst I opt for my arm. We walk around for a bit scaring strangers. We get stopped by a blogger with a professional camera who asks where we're from and wants to take some pictures for her fashion diaries. I pose with a cheeky confidence I haven't felt in months then we move on to find a dance floor and the other South African - the third member of our group.

Late afternoon ushers in the first chance to see a band that I love. I'm glued to the barricades when the Vampire Weekend steps onto the stage. They're in preppy collared shirts and standing in front of a black backdrop painted with gigantic pink flowers. They introduce themselves and then the revelry begins. I hop around as songs that I used to listen to in my university res room come to life. I sing along as my arms swing around and my feet swivel in the grass.

After Vampire Weekend exits the stage and the sun begins to set, we move over to the stage next door. As the dark settles and the stage lights go up and down, three figures in

black clothing walk onto the stage. My eyelids close shut and I put my fingertips over them. I take a breath, drop my hands and open my eyes again. I can't believe that I have just witnessed The XX taking up their instruments. The siren-like wail of the music fills the air. The backdrop of the stage remains dim whilst the stage lights in the foreground begin to roam all over the crowd. The beat kicks in followed closely by the bass, guitar and the vocals.

An hour later, I bundle up all my emotions and make my way back to the tent.

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I wake up damp on one side and feel like I never went to bed. The early morning rain has crept into my tent. Part of my tog bag is swimming in a puddle. I scoot myself away from the little pool of water and snuggle the part of my sleeping bag that is still dry. I shut my eyes and listen to the startling silence. The music from the electro/dance tent has finally died down. We're in campsite A - the one closest to everything - all the action and unending noise. We chose it over campsite B because we didn't want to do a 15 minute trek in the night back to our tents. Now I understand why some people chose the inconvenience - they're going to be the only ones getting any sleep.

After a few minutes of willing sleep to take me in, I decide to sit up and do a bit of journaling. I dig around my wettish bag and retrieve my black notebook. The pages are moist and splotched. I pat them down with a t-shirt and fan them out to help the process along. When the waterworn pages are dry enough, I pull the pen from the notebook's spiral spine and try to write last night into remembrance.

*Last night, I saw the XX, Vampire Weekend and part of the Cure's set. The XX were mind benderingly amazing. Every time she spoke/sang, she chilled something in me. Something stymied in me, something made me want to cry and dance. They played everything I hoped to hear. I can't believe opportunity like this came my way and I might have to leave this behind because of some unruly teenagers.*

*I hate that I have a tent for 2 all to myself. That I couldn't hold someone's hand when I sang "I found shelter". That I'm spending this weekend with a couple. I shouldn't want/prioritise rinky dinky human love but it over runs my thoughts. I need to find a new job.*

Sleep deprivation prevents me from going on. I wiggle out of the sleeping bag and unzip the tent. The rain has created a marsh around the taps outside and the toilet stalls. I retreat into the tent and put the muddy shoes from yesterday back on. I fish around for the plastic poncho my festival mates had the foresight to buy and head out to brush my teeth. The little portable bathrooms are still empty. There's one or two people stumbling back home but most of the festival goers are in their zipped up tents. I step around the muddiest puddles and head to the closest row of taps. I feel the drip, drip of drizzle on my face, put the toothpaste where it needs to be and thank everything in the universe that I'm here in this moment.

I go back to my tent and wait for the couple next door to wake up. After a little while, I hear the neighbouring zip open. I stick my head out of my little front door and say 'hey'. The American is still drowsy - gathering herself from sleep. The thin black wings on the corner of

her eyelids are smudged. She tells me not to expect the South African to be up anytime soon. I wait for her to do her bathroom run then we head off in search of breakfast.

We eat then idle away hours watching bands whose fame peaked in the late 90s and early 2000s. We bob our heads to a few songs by these ex MTV heroes then we weave our way out of the crowds. We head back to the food stalls and get into some rainbow coloured hammocks. I flop into it without much effort whilst the other two struggle to tuck their long limbs into a flimsy piece of material. They nap and I lie there with my eyes closed.

A couple of hours later we trudge through the mud that leads to the Big Top stage. It's unrecognisable, there's a spaceship like structure and standing behind it is the DJ of the moment - Skrillex. We sink and dance to dubstep in the dirt. There's a group of friends standing close to us. One of them is a man wearing short shorts, a bow tie and a construction hat. We look at each other once, then again and then again. I point him out to the other two and they encourage me to go up to him and say something. What am I supposed to say - I like your bow tie?

A robotic voice pings around the open field and I continue to slide around in the grassy filth. I want to kiss someone so bad - maybe just to prove that I am normal. I don't want my last kiss to belong to my rapist. Maybe an Ansan romance/hook up could help me forget it all for a couple of seconds. Maybe for a few moments I wouldn't have to think about all the decisions waiting for me in that little rural town. It feels so good to feel 22 again and not like a 55 year old atlas struggling with my burden.

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I help my festival companions pack up their tent and wave them off when their done. They are heading back home a day early because their summer school programme kicks off tomorrow. I take one more look at the now empty patch of grass next to me and climb back into my tent. I feel the tears coming so I lie down for a bit. When the weeping begins, I sing out loud to self sooth. By the time that I accept that I'm on my own, the tears are dripping off my ear lobes.

I hate that Loneliness feels so familiar. Even in this sacred period in my life, the same reel is playing in my head. What am I going to do? How can I stay here? Do I want to stay here? I was raped? Where to from here? What does going home mean? I'm scared.

What now? Can I get a six-month contract? Can I move town/cities? Who is this girl crying in a tent somewhere in Korea? Who is this girl whose life is run by the perception of teenagers? Are Alt-J worth going home for? Should I return home for Rocking the Daisies? Will I ever be able to have a normal relationship with a man? Where is the person that should be sharing this tent with me?

I'm feeling so beat up – I haven't slept in 2 -3 days and there is no hope of me getting any tonight. I need to hold it together to watch Foals – they are the only reason I'm staying the extra night. I'm going to have to pack up this tent on my own and find my own way home.

I interrupt the brooding by digging up my wrinkled notebook. It's different from the one I reached for yesterday even though it looks exactly same. Its pages have also been dampened but you can still make out the smudged writing. It's a gratitude journal. I'm only on the fifth page. The first few pages are filled with sentences of thankfulness. These

sentences are numbered - my hope every day is to get to ten but sometimes the gratitude dries up after five or six or seven.

I look at the list of thank yous to the universe I've written since I got Ansan:

1. *I'm so grateful for the opportunity to be here.*
2. *I'm so grateful that my life will be filled with music festivals.*
3. *I'm thankful that this notepad is wet and I'm wearing this festival t-shirt - mementos of Ansan.*
4. *I'm grateful that despite everything there's still a part of me that's willing to flirt.*
5. *I'm grateful that I have the means to tell this/my story.*

After adding a few more points of gratefulness, I exit the tent then head back out into the world of mud and jollity.

Eight hours later, I crawl back into my tent and sit on top of my sleeping bag - hunched up and breathless. You're supposed to let the dust of experiences settle before you reminisce but I can't wait that long. I flip open the denim cover of my phone and look through the blurry images and snippets of shaky footage. There's one image where the word **FOALS** is projected on the dark screen in screaming red capitalised letters. In the foreground, there are multitudes of bleary hands in the air. The distorted outline of their arms look like floating orbs of light. It sparks a fresh memory, the crowd with limbs pointed to the sky and chanting the anthem "ole ole ole". I'm chanting too but my words are a little different. I'm shouting "Allah Allah Allah" it's the original version of this chant of praise.

Another memory floats to the surface, this one of Yannis, the lead vocalist, leaping off of the stage and the crowd rushing forward to catch him. I'm almost crushed by all the bodies surrounding me but I'm more amused than scared. Up until now, the Ansan crowds have been well-behaved and tame. This sudden gush is unexpected. It feels like a hug which squeezes a bit too tight - a cuddle of uncontrollable spontaneity.

I keep scrolling through the memory banks of my Samsung and come across a picture of the frontman of the band 'Hurts'. His enlarged image is projected on the screen but the left side of his body is shrouded in shadow. I start to sing the haunting chorus of their song 'Water' then tuck myself into the dank sleeping bag with my arms around my chest.

C

## hapter 19

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It's been a week since Ansan ended but I still have my festival wristbands dangling around my forearm. I'm already on another long distance bus but this one is going to Busan. One of the South Africans said that this seaside city is the Cape Town of Korea. I don't get my hopes up for a glimmer of home but I do yearn for the healing that being close to the water might bring.

I can't stop thinking about failure and Thich Nhat Hanh. I've just ploughed through a few days of English Summer Camp that left me floundering in disappointment. Not all the activities I planned got the approval and enthusiasm I craved. Each day felt like an endless

battle to get them to participate. Each day ended with me stalking the empty hallways of the high school like a lost phantom - a sleepless ghost riddled with anxiety.

I want to be like the Vietnamese Buddhist Monk who they call "Thay". Who spins narratives of social justice rooted in kindness, understanding and love. I want to live with peace, joy, presence and compassion. I want to not only understand my suffering but be able to deal with it - to not be disturbed by every situation, irritation and frustration. How do I do this? I want to be taught to do that. I want to learn to not be so hard on myself and to let go of the control that I pretend to have.

I flip open my journal and find the page where I've written down the 4 mantras Thich Nhat Hanh recited during an interview on YouTube.

"Darling, I'm here for you"

"Darling, I know you are there"

"Darling, I know you suffer that is why I am here for you"

Darling, I suffer. I try my best. Please help me" (Hanh, 2013)

These mantras are meant to be repeated between loved ones - they're supposed to fertilise mindful living in relationships. I tear up when I first hear them because these are the things I want to hear. These are things I want someone to say to me but these also the things I want to say to myself.

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When I open the door to my hotel room, I'm taken in by the stark white of everything but what holds my eye is the black writing near one corner of the room. There's a poem scrawled across the wall in a cursive-like font. The title reads "A Little Song of Life" and the author's name is written underneath "Lizette Woodworth Reese". I skim through the first two stanzas but I read the third and final one over and over again: "All that we need to do Be we low or high, is to see that we grow nearer the sky"

It feels like a direct message from the cosmos - like God is leaving me words of comfort/encouragement everywhere. It feels like a shield from all the streetside stares it took to get here and the loneliness/ the anxiety of going on holiday by myself.

I switch on the TV to fill the silence. I flick through the channels trying to find an English one. I land on the Style Network. After watching a few models/celebrities being interviewed, I reach for the remote and switch the TV off again. I turn to the internet. I drift onto YouTube then off and back to the Google search bar. I ask the search engine to find me the kind of wonderment and joy that's currently missing in my life. I type in 'ashrams near Jaipur' and scroll through the results. Next, I eye

out the spiritual hermitages in Rishikesh. In my mind's eye, I see Jarryd telling me to buy a ticket to India. I know that's what I'm going to do - I'm just not sure when.

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I wake up to my first morning in Busan with an ache of emptiness. I wrap my arms around the pillow I didn't sleep on and let the tinge of sadness linger. Eventually, I psych myself up to go eat breakfast in the hotel café on my own. I take a book with for extra reassurance. I pack up all my doubts, fears and shoulda, coulda, wouldas. I carry them with me as I lock the door, walk down the hallway and get into the lift.

I haul them with me as I walk by the reception desk and the popcorn machine nearby. I reposition them around my shoulders as I walk to the mini buffet. I pour myself some cereal then plop my anxieties in the chair next to me. There's a smattering of people in the room. I look at them without really looking at them. I stare at a random pocket of air and know that this is what's right for me at this point in my life.

When I get back upstairs, I climb into bed and do my morning meditation. I'm on day 4 of Deepak Chopra and Oprah's 21 day meditation challenge. For the last few days I've hoped that every undistracted 'om' would bring me closer to the part of myself that still understands the world to be miraculous. Before the meditation begins, Deepak breaks down the philosophy behind it. He explains the centring thought of today's offering - I am a radiant, spiritual being. It's not too long into the intro when the tears come. Chopra says that there's a part of us that is unchanging and not able to be broken. I know there's a part of me that will forever remain the same.

"So hum" - I am. In my mind, I see this Sanskrit mantra written on the sand of a beach. Fifteen minutes later, a soft bell rings to signal to let go of the mantra and come back to my surroundings. When my eyes open again, I wrestle with what I'm going to do today. Will I go to the edge of the ocean and carve out some affirmation in the wet sand or will I shut myself in and just read. Either way, I promise myself the mercy of no guilt or judgement.

A half an hour later, the sunshine lures me out of my bed. I pack my journal, a book and a towel into a beach bag then strap up my sandals then head out. I walk along the wall that hides the hotel from street view and turn the corner to the main street. Head and eyes bowed, I do the short journey to the wind, waves and surf. I swat my way through the summer humidity and slip into every patch of shade that pops up.

When I finally get to Haeundae beach, I can't really see the shoreline. It's obstructed by the mass of red and white umbrellas that seem to mushroom out of the ground. It's as overcrowded as a Durban beach during December. I last a little less than an hour before I leave in search of ice cream and air conditioning.

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The next morning, I'm awake before dawn creeps through the window. I retrieve my laptop from the desk and settle back into bed for my morning meditation. By the time I'm done it's 5:45, I decide to beat the humidity plus the crowds and go for a morning walk along the beach. I make the journey down the stairs, passed the slushie machine, through the hotel doors and down the main street.

As I cross the street to the sandy pavement before the sea, two men try to get my attention. They make approving comments and noises about my body. They attempt to reel me in with words like 'sexy'. I notice for the first time how empty the streets are and I pick up the pace until they disappear from sight.

Once I'm on the beach, I kick off my shoes and let my feet enjoy the coolness of the tightly packed grains of sand. I dig my toes in and face the swell of the ocean water. I breathe in a sense of gratitude and giggle at the sheer wonder of this moment. I decide to walk a bit further. There's someone else there and his strolling towards me. He's wearing trainers, running shorts but no shirt. The closer he gets the more I can see the fuzz on his chest and lower abdomen. He's attractive in a goofy kind of way. When we're close enough to each other he greets me and reaches out for my hand.

I let him shake it and then hold on to it. He says "Please have coffee with me". I shake my head and say "I can't. Thanks for asking but I can't". He responds by asking again; "Please". I say no thank you again, retrieve my hand and walk away. A part of me wishes that I could say "yes". A part of me wants to run off with him and have him lying next to me in bed later this afternoon. Your early twenties are supposed to be a time of sexual exploration and casual dating but I know that I have to sit that game out for a while. I need this period of solitude - everything is as it should be.

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Two days later, I'm back on a bus that's hurtling towards my little town. My handbag is on my lap and there's a toy dolphin bought at Busan aquarium clipped to the strap. I cup the blue stuffed animal in my hand and squeeze it for comfort. I remember looking into the dolphin tank and wanting to be free like them but they are just as trapped as I am. They're caged in by glass. I'm fenced in by financial and contractual obligations. As the kilometres, ebb away and we draw closer to where I live, the dread in my stomach drums louder.

I don't want to be back in that tiny one room because it means the countdown to a new school term - to a job that's brought lashings of both misery and joy. I block out the present by plugging earphones into my ears and raising the volume of the Veer-Zaara soundtrack. I know that I can't hide in the romance and tragedy of Bollywood music forever but right now, I just want to nuzzle in whatever mysticism exists in the notes of 'Aaya Tere Dar Par'.

This tale of love torn apart by family and fate gets a bit much after an hour so I look for a new hiding place. I watch Fine Brother's reaction videos until it's time to change buses. In transition, I'm brought back to the world around me - to a bus station I know too well. My feet take me from one end of the station to another. At the same time, my mind walks me through some difficult conversations. My mother has been the biggest advocate for me to stick around - no matter the challenges. How will I say to her that I want to pack my bags and head to India with no real concrete plan?

I still can't fall asleep on my own so I'm also going to need another prescription of Alzam from her. My whole life I've been taught to have a healthy suspicion of medication - to be vigilant and never develop a reliance on anything. Now I rely on a little white pill to gift me rest. I can't face the terror of shutting my eyes on my own.

## Chapter 20

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It's the last weekend before school starts. This Friday morning, I have a choice to make. I can lie here, worrying about the next 3 months and the next chapter of my life or I can get up and go see Sognisan Mountain. I could spend tonight in a temple or I could stay here tossing

around to keep my angst at bay. My mind keeps telling me that I could use this time more productively i.e. preparing for class next week but no part of me is up for that.

Fear almost keeps me home but stubbornness/ curiosity/ courage rouse me from fretfulness and set my feet on the path to Seoul. When I get there, I'm told that I've missed the morning bus. I'm told that the next one is leaving from Nambu bus terminal in less than an hour. A voice in me starts to scream turn around and go home - that I'm not worthy of this experience. Yet, I keep moving in the direction of the giant golden Buddha waiting for me at Beopjusa temple.

I make my way to the subway station. I jog past the storefronts of the underground mall and find what I think is the right line. I stand in front of one of the closed glass doors and cast my eyes around for something to fill up time. I catch a glimpse of the demo video explaining how to use the gas masks in the vending machines close by. I face forward and give the plastic surgery ad nearby a cursory look. I guess whatever you see often enough becomes normal - whether it's the possibility of chemical and nuclear warfare or someone with a completely new face. The rapid train comes speeding down the track and halts outside the automated doors. There's a beeping noise and then they open. Some of the people on-board spill out onto the platform and those of us who've been waiting pile in.

Nambu bus terminal is one stop away but I grip the hanging strap with intense nervousness. My lacking sense of direction makes the subway intimidating. Usually I'm fine with meandering through life only half knowing where I'm going but I don't have time for that today. The announcement reassures me that for once I know where I'm going. When the name of the terminal flashes on the screen, I stand in front of the doors and exit when they open.

It's my first time back here since the rape. Last time, I was sitting here in the early hours of the morning in an almost empty terminal with bloodied clothes on. This time, I'm drifting through during the crowded mid-afternoon with a backpack on. It looks/feels like I different place but I know better.

Before long, I'm staring out another bus window. I see flashes of dull green that remind me so much of the place I'm running from. I can't even put into words the fear, dread and anxiety I feel about going back to work. I simply wish I didn't have to. I need another month off somewhere beautiful. A couple hours later, I get off at Sognisan. I'm greeted by a quiet street where the roadside vendors don't even look up to stare. I walk in the direction pointed out to me by a staff member at the bus terminal.

It's a straightforward walk amidst tall trees and even taller mountains. When I arrive, a monk ushers me through a registration process then escorts me to my room for the two nights I'll be here. The room is spare with a light mattress on the wooden floor and crisp bedding. It's stark white walls and light wooden panelling add to the calm of its cleanliness. I dig my toiletry bag out of my backpack and stash it near the sink. When I re-emerge from the bathroom, I hear the sound of the giant bell being struck and the beginnings of a drum pattern that gets progressively louder.

I leap through the door, put my shoes on and follow the sound to the main hall. Someone at the door points to where I should sit. When the monks begin to chant, I shift between awe and paranoia. I forgot to take my phone out of my pocket. The anxiety that it will go off

soaks through the magnificence of the moment/ what I'm experiencing. I know it's on silent but something in me won't loosen the grip of panic. Still, there are moments still when I slip back into the room and let the spiritual wall of sound overwhelm the ego sense of who I am.

At 3 am the next morning, I'm standing outside the main hall again. I'm in my temple assigned vest and loose fitting pants. This time I'm watching the drumming live and standing next to a fellow foreigner whose name I don't know yet. Once we enter the temple, I'm bombarded by the contents of my own mind. Am I following the chant closely enough? Am I too loud or too quiet? Am I bowing at the right time? Am I present enough? Where do I put my hands? Is cross-legged okay or should I be sitting on my haunches?

After a few hours of self-flagellation, it's time for breakfast. It's leftovers from last night's dinner - soybean tofu soup, rice plus veg and kimchi sides. After washing up my plates, I walk out into morning sun and bump into the other foreigner on this temple stay. As soon as he says his name, I know he's South African. We chat a bit about home. We talk about the cities we've lived in and how we ended up in Korea.

We spend the last few hours of our stay walking around - not with each other but in each other's eye line. I toy with the idea of a temple romance - of meeting someone in the heart of the Sognisan Mountains. I quickly snatch that fantasy out of the air. I'm finally at a point in my life where I know that not every man I get along reasonably with is my future love or husband. I'm getting really good at being my own boyfriend and best friend. Not only have I been okay on my own, in so many ways I've thrived. I've amazed and scared myself in equal measure.

When it's finally home time, I get on the bus and try to fall asleep. My one hand latches onto the other - a small offering of self-compassion. My next act of self-love will be quitting my job. I am grateful for all the voices that have encouraged me to leave. I appreciate all the Skype sessions - they gave me hope and unlocked the mental chains I had trapped myself in. I am running towards something, not running away.

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