

Comet's Snowball

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Comet sat and put the pages of the children's book in order. Comet was her English name. The one the school had given her when they hired her as secretary. They asked her if she had any preferences, but she said no. Comet was okay. She even looked it up. It meant 'a celestial body'. Not exactly a perfect fit, she thought, but it would have to do.

A black page of hair slanted down Comet's face, making her appear shy, submissive, Korean. She focused on the pages in her hand, on the numbers on the bottom so she wouldn't get them mixed up and place the picture of the butterfly before the caterpillar. Not that it really mattered. Was it important for children in America to know what she called a butterfly? To know that girls here too like to stop while out walking down a country road to watch the erratic bounce of a butterfly in flight. To know that a grasshopper is not a grasshopper but a *matdugi*. No. They didn't care. And why should they?

8,500 *won*. That's how much she made an hour at the *hogwan*. About seven of their U.S. dollars. And for what, she asked herself. To sit around and listen to these overgrown babies whine about their teaching jobs. They think they have it so rough. She heard they made more than twice her pay rate plus a free apartment and free round trip airfare. Then there was the one-month salary bonus if they stayed an entire year! And why? Because of their precious language. Whoever heard of being hired just because of the language you speak. English. It even sounded like money. The syllables were just dull coins, the words faded dollars.

Dan came into the room laughing. He was always laughing. He was American. Everything was funny in America. Like everyday at 3:50, he sat down next to Comet and waited for her to lift her head and smile at him. Then he would practice whatever Korean phrases he had picked up in the bar the night before to impress her. It was a sort of game they played.

"*A-ti-joung haseo*," he said, his teeth exposed in a blinding rictus.

"Hello Dan," Comet said, trying hard not to look directly into the two inner-tubes he had for eyes. He always had dark circles from the night before, though he'd never say exactly where he'd been. "English, okay?"

"*Wae?*" He seemed proud of himself for this, for remembering the Korean word for why.

"*Mol-la.*"

"I don't understand."

"It means 'I don't know'." She looked at him quickly, at the pointy chin and the bright green shirt that was hard to look at.

"Okay, English it is."

Dan gave up on the Korean lesson and went back to scanning his lesson plan for the next class. The school only gave the teachers ten minutes in between classes to prepare so he usually spent it out on the balcony smoking or talking to Comet about the World Cup. If he wanted to have any lengthy conversations in English he had to go into Itaewon. The foreign district. A forty-five minute bus ride from the school. Most of the time he didn't mind, he was too busy teaching to have the energy to be lonely.

"You seem different today, Comet. Do you understand 'different'?"

"Yes. Not the same." Her written English was better, better probably than his. She bet he didn't even know the difference between count nouns and mass nouns. Or exactly why

the plural of fly is spelled 'flies' and not 'flys'. Most Koreans know the rules of the English language. It's sort of like knowing all the notes to a fugue by Chopin but never hearing it played. All they needed was the record player. They already had the sheet music.

"Yes, good. So why are you so glum? Do you know 'glum'?"

Comet smiled and brought her hand to her mouth. "No," she said from behind her fingers.

"It means sad. Are you sad?"

"Not sad. Angry."

"Angry? Why angry?"

"*Mol-la.*"

Comet knew she was different from most other Korean girls. She had the same perfectly raked black hair, the same petite features most Korean girls had, but there was something else hiding behind her calmly averted eyes. It was this gift, as she thought of it, that Dan was most likely after.

"*Chal mocha soom nida.*" He was showing off now. It was obvious. She could care less whether or not he'd had a good meal.

"Big deal." It was a word he'd taught her the day before.

"*Mooja?*" Dan said and reached out his hand to touch the watch on her wrist.

"A cow," she answered, wondering why he'd asked that what it was. He was always underestimating her. She had studied his language while he was still mastering his own and yet he thought she didn't know the word for 'watch'. Some teacher.

"*Ki-op-ta,*" he said. It meant cute. He probably learned that one from the kids. Everything was '*ki-op-ta*' in Korea. Comet wouldn't be surprised if one day they incorporated the Hello Kitty dolls you saw everywhere into their national flag.

The bell rang. Eighty more minutes and she was done. The big game was tonight. Dan would most likely be going into Seoul to watch it along with all the foreigners.

"Hey Comet. You should come watch the game with me after work tonight."

"I don't think so. I no drink." I don't drink, she said again to herself. Why do I get so flustered around him?

"It's okay. We can sit outside. You know the little chicken place down the street, by the bank? I'll buy you a coke."

"Yes, Fm . . . I understand. Maybe."

"Okay. The game starts at six. *A.n-joung-he-kaj-seo.*"

"Yes, goodbye Dan."

Comet already knew she wouldn't go. Like she was going to be seen in public with a *meegook* after what had happened. Suppose an *a-jo-she*, a respected business man, saw her talking freely with an American. It wouldn't go over well. What did he want anyway? To be friends? Maybe. But maybe not. If he had asked her two weeks ago, before the accident, she might have gone. Then it wouldn't have been such a 'big deal'.

When Comet got home that night there was a note on the table. It was from her mother. Her parents were at Samsung Plaza watching the game against Germany. Comet was to call when she got home. Her parents would find a nice spot in the grass and meet her after she'd eaten something.

Comet thought about Dan. About his green shirt. Would he wear that tonight? Then she thought about Ahn-jung-wan, Korea's star striker. The golden boy. There was no contest. Ahn-jung-wan with his rock star good looks, his rock star long hair, and those legs

like a horse's. Then there was Dan, with a face like a horse! Comet tried to picture him in her home, on the 33rd floor of their honeycomb like apartment building. He probably grew up in a house. She didn't know anybody that had grown up in a house. All her friends grew up in these cardboard cut-outs. That's what they looked like from the street, something built out of Legos by a child with no imagination. What would he think of her small room with the paint peeling by her bed and the small metal desk she used for studying? Or the pictures hanging in the front room of her grandparents wearing their traditional *hanboks*? It was silly to even think about. Her parents, who owned and ran a restaurant together, would never allow it anyway. Dan, this is my father, a prominent *soju-man* in the area. You may have seen him staggering through the streets, bowing grandly into his cell phone. Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, this is my mother. She serves what I've heard you call 'dog soup' at our restaurant. Oh and don't bother to bow now, it's too late. She's a *meegook* vulture, she's already picked apart every move you've made since you came in. You never even had a chance.

Comet was smiling to herself imagining the catastrophes that awaited such a decision while picking through the *bibimbop* her mother left for her. There were no carrots. Good. She hated carrots. Her mother must have left them out for a special occasion. The World Cup! She'd almost forgotten. Comet grabbed a few slabs *ofgimchi* and ran into the living room. Dan would like the giant plasma television set they had. Her father had bought it last summer when the restaurant was doing well. It was the nicest thing they owned and it stood out like a diamond necklace on a *hanbok*.

She was about to call her parents when she saw the photographs sticking out from under the table. It was the two girls. Her mother must have gone to one of the protests that morning. The photographs were taped to a piece of cardboard with the Korean word for justice hand written in red across the top. One of the girls looked like Comet, only this girl was younger. Six years younger and the smaller, thinner of the two girls. The resemblance was probably what had affected her mother so. She had never gone to a protest before this. None that Comet knew of anyway.

On the top were the school photos. The two girls each posing in their own frame, wearing their gray school blazers, while a stick of incense stood like a sentinel alerting the viewer that the girls no longer existed, that they too were smoke. Then there was the other photograph. It provided the necessary contrast. like Mickey Mouse up alongside Auschwitz.

The bodies lay side by side pressed into the dirt. You could see their brains squeezed out like black toothpaste onto the road. It's what you saw. You couldn't help it. It was gruesome, but somehow not as gruesome as you would expect when a 60 metric ton tank rolls over two fourteen year old girls. It's almost too neat looking. Maybe because of the tank's speed. Like using a roller pin on freshly made dough. The faster you went, the more it stayed together. The school uniforms probably acted just like flour.

Comet could see them. Fingers in their ears. Looking at each other and giggling nervously at the large rolling sound behind them. They were used to the Americans and their tanks. There was nothing to be afraid of. They would pass by soon enough. Then one of them falling. Or not falling, more of a snapping down. Or maybe one of them seeing the large jutting steel nose of the cannon over their head just before. How long did it take? A full minute for the tracks to ladder them down. Wars feet walking over two anonymous blades of grass. Did they pass out? If so, how much of it did they have to endure while conscious? Did they even have time to cry? The questions came spilling out of a big bundle all at once whenever she saw the photos. But that's what they were for. To remind people that something had to be done. Not to forget.

The phone rang. Her mother. She wants to know if she's coming. No. Why not?

Because she's going to meet a friend from the school. What friend? She names one of the other secretaries, a girl she's known for years. No drinking and come home after the game! Okay, she tells her, though she knows she's old enough to stay out as late as she likes. The lying part makes her feel uneasy, but if she knew she was going to watch the game with an American she'd never hear the end of it.

It was summer. The cicadas were out. You could hear them, nature's ventriloquists, casting their big voices across the river. So near it felt like their legs were scraping against your earlobe. Day had already closed up shop and brought down a corrugated night, providing protection to those gathered to watch Korea advance into the finals. Dan was sitting alone at a white plastic table in a plastic chair with wobbly foal like legs and working on his second beer outside of Kentucky Fried Donkey.

The crowd gathered outside had increased in number, most wearing red shirts with the words 'Go Red Devils' written in Korean across the front. Dan hadn't had time to go home and change after work and so was still wearing the green shirt that seemed to pulse when you looked at it. It didn't matter. He would have stood out anyway.

Twenty minutes into the game a penalty was called against Korea. The table next to Dan was working themselves up over the call while the player writhed on the pitch, rocking and holding his knee like someone had just told him the entire leg would have to amputated. The table was spitting profanities at the referee, profanities Dan desperately wanted to understand but couldn't. From behind him, a bird was announcing itself in smooth short chirps.

"Hello. Nice to meet you." It was Comet.

"Hey! I didn't think you'd come!"

"I did not also."

Because of the ted t-shirt she was wearing, Comet looked younger than she normally did. It made her look like she was still in high school.

"Do you want a coke, maybe a beer?"

"A coke, please. Beer makes, uh how can I say, my face goes red." She wasn't kidding either. The last time she drank a full beer her face went a deep splotchy red in a matter of minutes. People always thought she was angry when it happened.

Dan went and bought her a Coke, came back to the table and poured it into her glass. In Korea, you never poured your own drink. It was considered bad luck. Something to do with marriage and never having children.

"You came alone. How come?" Dan spoke in loud bursts while leaning across the table so as to avoid being drowned out by the heckling going on next to them.

"My family is at Samsung Park!"

"You didn't want to go?"

"I want to go. But I want to go here also."

"We can go to the park during halftime if you want. I'd like to meet your family."

"We will see," Comet said and smiled at him with her nose.

"Okay. Your call Comet."

She wasn't quite sure what he meant by 'y^{our} call', but at least he hadn't guessed at the reasons for her vagueness. She could just see her mother's face cracking into a smile along the fault lines of tradition. Even though she'd want to scream at this benighted meegook, she'd bow politely and welcome him with milk and sliced Asian pears; just like she did when Comet brought over her Korean friends.

There was a shot on goal by Korea. A miss. Everyone was focused on the pitch, jumping at any slight advance Korea made towards Germany's defender. You could tell many of them hadn't watched a soccer match before by the way they were prematurely reacting to things. It was like rushing up to tap somebody on the shoulder only to realize they weren't who you'd thought. The entire country was doing this every time Korea advanced the ball an inch towards the German goal.

The Korean team had beat the odds to make it this far and everyone was hoping that Korea would advance into the World Cup Finals, that Korea would finally take center stage, that their hermit kingdom would finally shed its past and embrace the world. Believing so much, in fact, that many of them were acting a bit over-confident. Even obvious penalty calls were now being boisterously disputed. It was starting to get on Dan's nerves and as a result, he had begun to silently root for Germany.

"Comet. What's that big guy saying?" Dan did this often. Used Comet as an interpreter. Sometimes she obliged, sometimes she didn't. The man at the next table was hacking out his syllables in long guttural thrusts. A technique used by older Koreans to emphasize a point. To add an exclamation mark. "He is saying I really like Korea sports!"

Dan smiled. Not because it was funny, but because she was obviously lying.

"Very funny, Comet. Do you understand the word 'sarcasm'?"

"No," she said sarcastically. "What is that?"

"I'm serious. Tell me what he really said."

Comet knew the large egg shaped man in the expensive suit was a doctor at the hospital down the street. He had stuck his fingers in her mouth once during a check-up. She remembered. His fingers had tasted like cigarettes. The doctor was telling his table full of friends that Korea would wipe out the Nazis just as they had taken care of the Americans a week before. After saying this he had turned and looked at Dan, though Dan hadn't noticed, and added '...the world's new Nazis'. Comet could see that the doctor was drunk, something publicly acceptable, even expected of Korea businessmen. There was no point in telling Dan, though for a second as she looked at him, at his gelled hair and eyes sharp and cold like from a magazine, she could see him as the heir apparent to Hitler himself. But only for a second.

"Something about the game. Nothing," she said and left it at that despite the dramatic frown he was giving her.

Halftime came and Comet called her mother. Her mother was disappointed to hear she wouldn't be joining them, but also too wrapped up in the patriotic chanting going on around her to give it much thought. Good, Comet thought, now I don't have to worry. Maybe I'll even have a drink to toast our Korean team. After all, we have to win. We've had too much bad luck lately.

Comet didn't know much about soccer, but it seemed to her that Korea was spending a lot of time at the wrong end of things. Every time they brought the ball back the other way a German player would come along and kick it back over everybody's head toward Korea's keeper. Suddenly, Korea was losing. Germany 1 Korea 0. A melancholy was settling over the crowd outside of Kentucky Fried Donkey. The egg shaped doctor was still gesturing at the television screen, though now he was directing his comments into his cell phone, rather than to the crowd in general.

As the game neared its climax everyone was on their feet, some clasping cigarettes between their hands as if in prayer, the smoke twisting upwards like incense. Dan however remained seated, leaning forward in his seat, his elbows rubbering along the table top in anticipation.

Ahn-jung-wan. Golden boy. Rock star. Long black flying hair. Legs of a horse poised to kick Korea into the finals, into history, into all the sunshine promised them. For one long second you could hear breaths being held across the country as Korea awaited their destiny. Even the cicadas had shut up, crossed their legs, antennas, whatever. Then, just as quickly as hope had risen in the throats of a country, it was swallowed back down with a familiar resignation. Ahn-Jung-Wan had passed off to a teammate, Park Ji-Sung, whose shot veered wide from inside the box and missed. It wasn't even close. You could hear a collective sigh stereo out from the surrounding parks and just like that, it was all over.

Then it happened. Had the words been uttered during a church sermon, they would have seemed less offensive.

"You stupid cunt!" It was Dan.

Comet counted six heads turn in Dan's direction. Again, he was oblivious. He was apparently under the assumption that nobody there spoke English, or at the very least, that nobody would understand his unfortunate word choice. Comet knew the men at the doctor's table were all high-ranking business men in the area and as such, used English daily.

"That's too bad. I doubt they'll get another gift like that." Dan imparted this bit of knowledge to Comet and then left to get another beer. If he felt ashamed, or embarrassed about his earlier comment, it was anything but apparent. He was smiling his half smile like always, abundantly satisfied with himself. Casual. American.

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Dan hadn't been paying much attention to the doctor next to him. Only giving him a bemused look whenever he seemed to be overreacting to a call nobody in their right mind would question. But now, as he returned with two yellow beers, Dan clearly saw the large man standing and speaking in a severe tone over Comet, who was sitting with her head bowed. The rest of the place was silent but looking on with what looked like angry approval at whatever the man was saying.

The doctor gave one penetrating look in Dan's direction, letting him know he should stay put, then turned back to Comet again to bark one last sentence at her. Satisfied, the doctor turned back to his table to receive solemn pats on the back and a call for a congratulatory round of Soju. Comet raised her eyes, two thin and bulging dams, in a useless attempt to convey something Dan couldn't possibly understand.

He hesitated then walked across the frozen space between the door of the restaurant and the table where he set the two beers down. He didn't offer Comet one. Then, without a word, Comet reached across the table and took a sip from one of the beers.

"What was all that about?"

"It is nothing." Her eyes were drying up now.

"What was he saying? Is it because you're with me?" Dan looked confused. He knew Korean women weren't supposed to smoke in public. That's why the women's bathrooms were always overflowing with cigarette butts. But Comet hadn't been smoking. He had seen plenty of other Korean girls out drinking so that couldn't be it. He looked at her. Her face was a shiny red. He couldn't tell if that was from the beer, or from embarrassment.

"Yes. It is because I am here with you." She hoped he wouldn't ask anything more. How was she going to repeat, let alone translate, what had just been said to her? How was an embarrassment to all of Korea, how the Americans were occupying their land, how the Americans hadn't given them a true apology for what their tanks had done while the bodies of two young Koreans grew colder day after day. As cold, the doctor had said, as the two

beers her American boyfriend was now holding in hopes of stealing away yet another one of Korea's young women.

"I need to go home now," was what she said instead.

"Yes, of course." Dan reached for his beer and took one last drink before leaving. Comet had already started to walk away when Dan spotted the large man making his way towards him. Before he knew what was happening, the doctor had grabbed him by the arm. In very deliberate English, the man spoke out;

"You should be more careful! Many of us Koreans can speak your English very well. You should watch what you say. For your own health!"

With that, he released his arm with a push and swayed back to his table. Dan said nothing, only turned and walked unsteadily towards Comet. She watched as the table full of grown men took turns giving Dan the finger behind his back. You could tell they were pleased with the gesture, fully aware of the irony behind it.

"What did I say?" he asked as he came up to Comet, making sure to keep a respectable distance between them.

"Nothing. It is because you are American. *Meegook*. They are angry because we lose the game."

Comet didn't want to go directly home, so she offered to walk Dan back to his apartment. She was curious to see where the teachers lived. Plus, she was angry. She was angry with Dan for being so careless as to think he could say whatever he wanted in front of Koreans, in front of her. She knew what the word he had used meant, they had a word for the same thing in Korean, but she had never spoken it out loud. Then there was the doctor. Talking about the two girls like they were a couple of cheap beers. Who was being disrespectful now! Comet was chasing these thoughts around when she realized nothing had been said for some time. They had each been walking in different worlds and when she looked over at Dan, his brow still crumpled together like an old paper bag, she could see another question waiting where the half smile used to be.

"Why don't you ever tell me what people are saying?" He wasn't looking at her, it was like he was directing the question to the couple walking just a few yards ahead of them.

"It is too hard sometime."

"But I want to know."

"And I think sometime it's not okay. Too hard for me to speak it. To tell."

Dan shook his head carefully, as if something fragile inside might break.

"In your country," Comet went on, "You think people are a snowflake."

"I don't understand, Comet."

"You Americans. You think you are a snowflake. Only one snowflake. Only one you. I read this in a book. I remember."

"I think I know what you mean. Everybody is an individual, unique and different. Just like a snowflake. Right?"

"Yes. Not same."

"Right. Not same. So?"

"So. In Korea it is different. We don't think that way."

"Okay."

"No. In Korea we think like snowball. Everybody snowball." With her hands, Comet packed an imaginary snowball in her hands and then offered it to Dan. "You see? Snowball."

Dan reached out and took the offered snowball in his hand and he didn't

understand. He wouldn't for years to come. They were at his apartment now, standing outside his door, both of them looking at his hand holding nothing. "Yes, yes. I think I understand," he said and then fumbled into his pockets for the keys.

"Will you come in? I promise no funny business." He opened the door.

Comet was about to ask what he meant by 'funny business', but decided not to. She was too tired to care.

"No, I have to go home. To my family."

"Okay, but right this minute?"

"Yes. Now."

Before leaving, she stopped and looked at Dan. At his ugly shirt, his face that looked like it had been bleached, his pointy chin and his unhappy mouth. And she pictured him sitting in that tank, listening to head phones, or reading a Rolling Stone magazine when the call came in telling him what had happened. Then she hurriedly attempts to think of an excuse, some reason why he didn't see two fourteen year old girls walking down a deserted country road in South Korea. It wasn't fair, but it was what she was thinking.

Dan turned to enter his apartment and noticed a small puddle at his feet, like something had melted.