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Why a birthday cake when there's jjamppong?

The calendar marked 9/2/22 reminds you of the looming anniversary of your 20th trip around the sun, which would normally be something you'd look forward to. This birthday is different. This is the first time you have to plan a celebration for yourself. You decide to worry about the details later, as you first need to focus on finding people to celebrate with. After all, what's the point of celebrating if you have no one to celebrate with? You have exactly one week to make a few friends who will be close enough so that they will want to celebrate with you, but more importantly so that you will want to celebrate with them. Other students, like yourself, are beginning to settle into their new host country. Time is of the essence!

Your first task is to arrive at the Incheon Memorial Hall at 8:30 am and use the Exchange Student Orientation as the first opportunity to scout for friends. Forming immediate connections is of utmost importance. These people may be of assistance during important times, like your birthday.

The alarm begins its anthem at 7:15 am but is immediately snoozed. The pattern repeats within ten-minute intervals until a *ping!* from your phone disrupts the current dream you're experiencing. A new text reads *Hey Hani, it's dad here. Have a good time at Orientation! Love you always.* You eventually get up after failing to return to the elusive dream— you were the 5th member of Blackpink, the most favored in the group, and the most popular across the globe.

Nearly tripping down the stairs, you leave the sharehouse en route to campus. The dense humidity causes damp circles to form throughout your gray shirt. You forgot to put on deodorant. *Well, it's too late to turn back now!* The show must go on.

You arrive at the campus at 8:25 am but realize your plan had been foiled. All the other exchange students were already diligently seated in the Memorial Hall, while you now needed to plan the route. You haven't figured out how to translate your Naver Maps¹ to English, and the giant campus map is only in Korean. Facing the vast campus, you scan for any lingering students around the area. You spot two male students exiting a building and approach them.

“Hi!” you put on your friendliest face, “can you help me find the Incheon Memorial Hall?”

One looks to the other in confusion and crosses his wrists together, forming an X. “아니요,” he says and walks away before you can say anything else. Browsing the campus, you see a girl walking into a building across the quad.

After sprinting to catch up to her, you puff, “Anh yang ha seo.”²

Startled, she replies “안녕하세요, 뭐 필요한 거 있으세요?”

“Uhh...” you feel blood rush to your cheeks as you begin to scrounge your pockets for your phone. It's in moments like these when you regret ignoring your Korean heritage for the past 20 years. You show her the email detailing the exchange student orientation.

“Oh, you need to get to the Incheon Memorial Hall?” she asks in a perfect English accent. “It's just up the hill and past the fountain on your right.”

You begin walking but she faintly says “The hill is that way,” while pointing in the opposite direction. She starts walking, gesturing with her wrist to follow. “I can show you.”

It's a much longer walk than expected. Orientation started 10 minutes ago. People probably started introducing themselves. Everyone always latches onto the first people they meet, especially when in a new environment.

“So where are you from?” the girl inquires.

¹ Google Maps is not very effective in South Korea

² Supposed to be pronounced “Annyeonghaseyo” meaning “hello”

You turn to her and notice the glittery pink eyeshadow reflecting on her eyelids. Her permed eyelashes were in a neat half-moon shape. Perhaps the surgical mask she's wearing brings more prominence to her eyes. The carefully woven blonde balayage blends seamlessly into her natural dark roots. This must be where Barbie got their inspiration for their Asian American doll.

"I'm from the States, California specifically."

"Oh, I can tell," she replies, "I actually studied abroad in the States during high school." The Korean girl points out significant buildings along the way, explaining how the rounded windows on one building have a different impact than the rectangular ones on a different building. You let her keep explaining although most of what she's saying is going way above your head.

"Sooo, why did you go to the States in high school?" you sigh in disappointment at your sad attempt at changing the subject.

"I want to travel the world and see all the cool buildings. KU is amazing and all, but there's so much else out there. Hehe not to mention all the different foods out there."

Personally, you prefer beautiful landscapes to buildings, but you can relate to the sentiment.

"What about you? Why did you choose Seoul?" Seong-ah responds.

"Korea University is actually where my parents met!" you explain, "my dad studied abroad in Korea as well. He's Chinese American."

Seong-ah stops in front of an imposing building with a sign on the ground saying, "EXCHANGE STUDENT ORIENTATION."

"Ah," you stop before heading into the Memorial Hall, "what's your name by the way?"

"I'm Seong-ah! And you?"

“My name is Hana.”

Upon shuffling through the stuffed lecture hall, you find an empty seat in the middle of the front row. The narrow walkway to the seat invites only the closest proximity to the people you make past in your row. These are all potential friends, but physical closeness wasn't so much desired as emotional closeness. You notice some people turn to each other and wave their hands across their noses from your peripheral. *Wow, okay. Maybe these aren't potential friends then.* It's not even like you can help it at this point. Upon sitting down, the lanky blonde boy next to you asks, “Damn, didn't your exchange program tell you to bring deodorant?” with a squeaky voice. It's known that Koreans lack the key gene that produces armpit odor so there's a finite amount of deodorant in the country. After orientation concludes, you beeline to the nearest Olive Young.³ While searching for a strong-scented body mist, a *ping!* from your phone brings your attention to the new message: *Hey Hani, it's dad here. Are you settling down well? Have you met any nice people? Give me a call when you get a chance, love you always.*

Soon after Exchange Student Orientation came the first day of classes. Your first class is an Architecture class at 10:30 am. Unfortunately, when you finally recognize the alarm's futile ringing, it's already 10:10 am. You keep the spaghetti strap tank top and shorts you wore to sleep on but make sure to brush your teeth and spritz the new body mist before leaving the room. NaverMaps says it's a 30-minute walk to campus but you're determined to reduce the walk by half its time. This should have been a pleasant morning walk, but it's now an unwelcome workout. When you finally enter the engineering building you beeline to the bathroom, washing away the sweat covering your body with sink water. One last spritz of body spray for good luck.

³ Korea's version of Sephora

Satisfied, you find your lecture room and tip-toe through the open door. Unfortunately, though the professor was in the middle of talking, she notices you sneaking in and hands you a paper.

“Sorry I got lost” you mumble.

You begin to fill out the sheet, as it’s only asking for basic information like name, major, strengths and weaknesses, and birthday. The girl next to you points her pencil to the upper left box of the paper and asks, “What’s your name?”

“I’m Hana” you reply as you turn to her. “Ah!” Those unmistakable round, doe eyes with glittery pink eyeshadow. “You’re Seong-ah, right? We met a few days ago on the main campus, you walked me to the Memorial hall, remember?”

“Oh yes! ㅇㅇㅇ⁴ you look like a Californian again.”

You realize your tank top completely breaks the conservative, covered-shoulders Korean fashion standards. The other students in class bore lightweight t-shirts. *Crap.*

“Wow, it’s so funny how we’re in the same class though,” Seong-ah continues, “let’s have a good semester!” while making an encouraging fist. The classic “fighting!” pose that you’ve seen in all the Kdramas.

Before the lecture ends, your professor makes one last announcement:

“Everyone! After quickly looking over the surveys you’ve just turned in, it looks like our first birthday in this class is Hana’s on Friday! Make sure you all attend on Friday!”

Seong-ah turns to you with widened, almost glistening eyes. You can tell through her mask that she’s excitedly smiling.

“What do you have planned for your birthday?”

“Do you want to perhaps wanna talk about it over lunch?” you suggest. “Anywhere is good with me, but I’d love to go to one of your favorite spots.”

⁴ Sounds like “Kekeke.” The Korean equivalent of “Jajaja”

“I have the perfect place. Is it okay if one of my friends joins us too?”

Seong-ah takes you to a quaint, yet lively hole in the wall, sandwiched between two print shops. Middle-aged adults and college students pack the restaurant while a few customers seem to be freely roaming around the premises. You let Seong-ah lead the way as she seats herself at an empty table while making eye contact with the waiter to let him know of her presence. Seong-ah already knows what she wants to order, but you whip out Papago⁵ to read the menu hanging on the wall. Scared of what “ox entrails tender bone soup” could be, you decide to order the same thing as Seong-ah. A girl with sharp winged eyeliner and diagonal bangs beelines through the restaurant to your table.

“I’m Joey,” she says as she plops next to Seong-ah. Despite her American-sounding name, her English isn’t as smooth as Seong-ah’s.

“Hi, I’m Hana,” you reply.

“Like, hana, dul, set⁶?”

Growing up in a predominantly Asian neighborhood, having a name like yours was not uncommon. A name that camouflages as the common “Hannah” but inserts its meaning for those only able to understand. Hana means one in Korean. The name chosen by your dad, whose lack of Korean heritage never stopped him from enjoying his share of K-pop and favorite dramas. Not only did your father give you a Korean first name, but also his Chinese-Korean last name Kang. You’re often asked about your Korean descent, due to your rather generic Korean full name, uncanny round cheeks, flat eyebrows, and pale skin. This was the one thing your mother left you before leaving the family: a distinctly Korean face. Despite this, your dad would never let you

⁵ The Naver equivalent of Google Translate

⁶ “One, two, three” in English

forget that you were his one. There was no one like you. So when you played your lineup game with your kindergarten classmates, you always sought to be first. You never understood why they chanted “first is the worst, second is the best, third is the one with the treasure chest!” They would shove and fight for the second and third spots and thank you for always being first. You were still able to hear the soft snickers of those in the back of the line “she must know she’s the worst.” You considered joining the tussle for the treasure chest spot next time.

You all end up ordering the same meal. The waiter shouts it to the kitchen while promptly returning with 9 small dishes neatly displayed in rows of 3. You recognize the kimchi and marinated bean sprouts, but the rest of the dishes are foreign.

“So what everyone likes about this place is that the food is cheap, fast, and yummy,” Seong-ah explains. “These are appetizers called ‘banchan’ and once you finish you can bring the dishes to the self-service bar and help yourself.” You’d never find this in the States.

“Yup,” Joey agrees in a monotone voice.

“So... Hana, your birthday is coming up this week! Do you have any plans for Friday?” Seong-ah inquires.

You ponder this for a bit. To be honest, you haven’t done too well in branching out. When you were younger, your dad was always so proud of how quickly you were able to make friends, constantly warning new homeroom teachers of your “chatterbox” tendencies. It was like that all the way until your junior year of high school. Because you lived in the next town over, your dad, loving as he is, never let you spend time with your school friends who lived in a rougher neighborhood. So when they got to the age to throw high school parties, they assumed you had no interest in going. There was another girl who lived outside of the island, a friend of yours since 8th grade. You were in the same friend group in high school. At the center of this group

was a girl named Jeanine, whose aura somehow always wanted you to receive a compliment from her. In your 11th grade English class, you overheard Jeanine whisper to another one of your other friends, “watching Boku no Pico⁷... haha...no wonder her mom named her Kinki.” Your 8th-grade friend had an unfortunate name, especially as her English name, but you knew she wasn’t like that. You watched anime together every day during lunch for all those years. During your senior year, those lunches together were just a memory.

Poking at your slice of kimchi, you meekly respond “Honestly, no...”

“It must be hard, you only got here a week ago? I had a hard time abroad too, *and* I had a host family...” Seong-ah contemplates, “why don’t you spend it with me? I can show you the fun spots around Seoul. Joey, would you like to join too?” Her eyes widened excitedly while punching her toes against the ground.

Joey puts her chopsticks down and frustratingly responds, “성아야. 정말로 나를 곤란하게 만들 필요가 있었나요?”⁸ She turns to you and says, “No thanks.”

“That’s alright...” you trail off, “Seong-ah, this better be the best birthday yet.”

—

On Friday, you show up to architecture promptly at 10:51 am. By then, the professor is already lecturing on the differences in mood between orange versus purple walls. She stops her lecture upon noticing you walk through the door and gestures you up to the platform.

“Everyone!” she says with a touch of grandeur, “it’s Hana’s birthday today.” Expectantly nodding to the class, they begin to sing “Happy birthday to you~~” It’s always funny when people get to the “Happy birthday dear _____” because people never actually know who they’re singing for. Your eyes perch from the ground as you hear two clear voices sing your name, one

⁷ Author’s note- please don’t look this up (still a bit scarred from freshman year)

⁸ Rough translation: “Seong-ah, did you really need to put me on the spot?”

coming from right next to you, the other coming from the center of the room. Seong-ah sways her shoulders while gleefully waving at you. *How is she so energetic? It's so early*, you ponder.

“Have you been to the Gwangjang Food Market?” Seong-ah asks as you both exit the classroom.

“No, but it's actually one of my dad's favorite spots in Seoul!”

“Let's go then!” Seong-ah insists, “this is a local hotspot for traditional Korean food.”

After a short subway ride, you're greeted by a wafting aroma of fried sugar. A mass of 5-foot tall middle-aged women eagerly waiting block the subway exit. You watch Seong-ah mow through the elderly. She turns to you and shouts “follow me!” Meandering through the narrow alleyways and clusters of slow-moving bodies, Seong-ah leads you to the first destination. She warns you not to eat too much of the spicy rice cakes and marinated glass noodles she's just ordered, there's so much more food to try. After paying, she spots two empty seats at the stall across the aisle and runs to snag them.

“This stall serves my favorite food!” she exclaims. “짜뽕 하나 주세요,” she tells the woman running the stall.

“What is it?” you ask as you observe the arrangement of seafood she is tossing in the bowls.

“It's called *jjamppong*, a spicy seafood noodle soup! My mom makes it the best though.”

You try a small spoonful of the scarlet-colored broth. There's an explosive spice that hits the back of the throat. “I've never had this but it feels familiar somehow,” you can't quite pinpoint the where and when you've had this before.

“It’s a Korean-Chinese dish,” Seong-ah explains between slurps of noodles, “there’s a lot of other dishes that are a Korean-Chinese fusion from some historical stuff.”

“Ahh, is that so” you contemplate. Maybe during the rest of your time here, you will better understand yourself as a Korean-Chinese fusion. Maybe you too will fall in love with Korea like your dad.

After finishing the *jjamppong*, she shows you the adventurous food: the squirming legs of a freshly chopped octopus. Eventually, you finish with a Korean fried pancake– *hotteok* Seong-ah instructed. As you wait in line, a clean, middle-aged man in a suit taps your shoulder and asks, “당신은 신의 빛을 본 적이 있나요?”⁹

Seong-ah overhears and her posture stiffens. “저기 아줌마가 그랬다고 했어요,” she insists while pointing far down the alley. He nods and leaves.

Seong-ah grabs your wrist and pulls you out of the *hotteok* line. “What just...?” you start.

“That guy tried to recruit us to a cult. We better leave,” Seong-ah whispers while guiding you away from the market. She brings you to her favorite walking trail by the neighborhood. People of all ages are enjoying the space along the river: elderly women with their short perms conversing on the benches, children jumping onto the crossing stones while their parents warn them to be careful in that distinct strict but loving tone.

“*Actually* this is the Cheonggyecheon stream, not a river,” Seong-ah corrects. “But I think we can walk over to a *noraebang*– I’ll treat!”

“A ‘no ray-’ what?” *I hope there are no more run-ins with a cult* you think.

“It’s a small private karaoke room! It’s really popular among locals here. I think you’d enjoy it.”

⁹ “Have you seen the light of God?”

She continues for a few blocks and then walks down a dimly lit stairwell toward a basement. “Most *noraebangs* are underground since Seoul is such a dense city” she explains. You can hear traces of different music genres from the main room. A butchered high note sung by what you assume would be a broken-hearted man pierces your ears. You jump in shock and notice Seong-ah in a similar state.

“*Aish!*” she exclaims. *Finally! A Korean word I actually know*, you gloat. You accidentally let out a snort when you realize the first word you recognize is the Korean version of “*aiyah*¹⁰.”

“You know ‘*aish*’?” Seong-ah’s surprise broke her English accent.

“Haha yeah, people always say it in the Kdramas I watch with my dad.” Seong-ah’s eyes light up.

“Which is your favorite?” she asks, curiosity overtaking her face.

“*My Love from the Star!*¹¹ The male lead is so cute hehe~” you squeal.

While in the *noraebang*, you surprisingly discover that Seong-ah is not a Blink.¹² Instead, she prefers listening to American R&B. The final song she selects is “I Feel Good” by her favorite artist PinkSweat\$. You’ve heard a few of his songs before, but this may be your new favorite.

Seong-ah spots a store called “Photoism”¹³ when exiting the *noraebang*. “Hana! Let’s go there!” she exclaims as she breaks off into an excited run. By the time you catch up to her, she’s already browsing the props. She hands you a sunflower headpiece.

“I heard Hana also means flower in Japanese,” she says.

¹⁰ A common phrase used by Chinese speakers when frustrated

¹¹ A classic K-drama about an alien who’s stranded on Earth falling in love with a fellow Earthling

¹² The name of the Blackpink fanbase. Essentially, a Swiftie but for Blackpink.

¹³ A popular self-service photo booth studio in Korea

You spot a red strawberry and hand it to her: “fine then, you’re a strawberry so we’ll be in the same season.”

“ㅋㅋㅋ¹⁴ deal!”

You print 3 copies at the photo booth. One for Seong-ah and one for you. The last, you mail to your dad. On the back, you write

09.9.2022

This is my friend Seong-ah. We celebrated my birthday together and ate so much good food at the Gwangjang Market that you love so much. The jjamppong was my favorite by far. Please don't worry about me, I'm starting to adjust well here.

Love,

Your one and only Hani

¹⁴ “Kekeke”