

A New Beginning

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The smell of fresh air was tingling my nostrils as I waited to get off Korean Air Flight 402 on June 15, 2010. As the passengers on the plane started taking out their phones to call their loved ones, I had a Nokia cellphone which didn't work other than in America. Nonetheless, I wasn't worrying about the phone, I could only hear the beat of my heart thump loudly as I rushed to get my baggage in the overhead bin. "This is going to be a new beginning for me," I thought to myself. My boyfriend said he would be waiting for me on floor B2, where I was headed to get the baggage I checked in. Since my cellphone wasn't working in Korea, the only way I could contact my boyfriend was at the nearest payphone. Unfortunately, I only had American dollars and I have never used Korean won, so I was very unfamiliar with the foreign coin usage. I had no choice but to head out and just hope that he was waiting there for me with open arms.

That was the start of my life here in Korea. I have lived more than twenty-five years in the United States of America. I was born in Korea, but my parents decided to immigrate to the States when I was only seven years old, so most of my memories of Korea are cloudy. At the age of twenty-nine, for some strange reason, I was caught in the moment with a Korean mainlander and we hit it off. We knew that after he came back to Korea, one of us had to fly out to be together, and I chose to be the courageous one.

Although I was familiar with the Korean language and some of its cultures, I was very surprised to realize how different Korean mainlanders were from Korean Americans. Their thoughts on life, the casual expressions they use, and just South Korea itself, was not what I believed it would be like. I only knew of Korea from Korean dramas and movies. I always assumed that the clean Kangnam neighborhood that was shown on media was all of Seoul. In my mind, clothes hanging on the lines to dry were thought to be only in the rural areas. Oh boy was I wrong!

My boyfriend had leased out a studio for me in Bongchon, Seoul. It was newly built and very clean, but boy was it tiny! The sink in the kitchen and the laundry machine were stuck together on one

wall. The bathroom didn't have a tub! Not only that, when I turned on the water to the showerhead the water landed on the toilet! I hated that! However, my boyfriend's facial expression was at its best and he seemed to be proud of finding a brand new building for me when I first walked into the room with pink flower wallpaper. My reaction-too nice? I gave him a big hug and thanked him. I didn't want to hurt his feelings so I gave him the benefit of the doubt because I knew that his attempt to find a good place for me was enough.

Unlike my profound knowledge of Korea's buildings and laundry culture, my Korean was good enough to speak out my thoughts. I didn't have too much trouble asking around for directions, but it was difficult when it came to pronunciation. I still remember the day I went to Mc Donald's and the pretty young lady at the register couldn't figure out what I wanted to order. "주문하시겠어요?", she asked. I answered, "네, 스파이시 상하이 콤보 주세요." Of course I didn't use the "Korean pronunciation" because I didn't know how. Also, in the States they use the word "combo" not "set" for the burger, drink, and French fry combination. She didn't seem to understand and asked me about four times what I wanted to order. Eventually, she understood after the person behind me ordered for me, asking at the end, "상하이 세트 맞죠?" I didn't know what was going on, but I felt terrible that the person behind me had to wait so long in line, so I just said, "Yes." I did get the burger that I wanted, but I didn't want to go through that experience again.

One of the many Korean cultures that I don't understand even 'til this day is when Koreans say their goodbyes with, "Let's meet up next week!" but not really mean it. Why would you say anything that you don't mean? How is that a nice way to say goodbye to anybody? However, after concentrating myself into this strange culture for seven years, I use that same expression nowadays (I do want to meet you next week, but not really meet you. I'd like to meet you sometime soon, maybe). Strange, odd, and ironic right? You know that saying, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em?" Well, I'm definitely at a point where there's no point in trying to understand the culture. If I can't understand, too bad. I'm going to have to accept this culture the way it is.

Learning a different language and accepting its cultures can be very exciting. It can also be stressful and may cause anxiety for many of those who are not very open minded. Thankfully, my

parents have raised me to be susceptible to new ideas and experiences. My spontaneous, enthusiastic, and positive personality is helping me to accept the Korean culture, its language, and people. Living with a “조선시대” husband is unmistakably making me adjust to Korean life. Hopefully in a few years, I’ll have more admirable things to write about this country. As of now, I’m still hanging on to my two precious toddlers to help me through this life of Korean sin.

