The Divided Korean Peninsula

The Divided Korean Peninsula:

A Window into Everyday Life

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For Cha Hyosun

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CHAPTER ONE

IF YOU WANT TO GIVE GOD A GOOD LAUGH

"If you want to give God a good laugh, tell him about your plans". I can't recall who penned this saying, and yet it has been on my mind since I stepped into the Milan airport earlier this morning.

Only a few short months ago, the idea of boarding a plane to Korea would have made me chuckle, and I would have given a hard time to anyone suggesting I would do such a thing. Yet here I am, flying to Seoul. Well- Doha, where a six-hour layover awaits me.

My first and, until now, only experience with the Far East consists of my travels ten years ago, when I went to Seoul armed with the best intentions of moving there and living my life with my Korean girlfriend, Jon.

Discovering Korean culture in all its aspects as a Westerner turned out to be traumatic. I didn't hold out- after four months, I gave up and went home with a rather negative view of the country and its inhabitants. It was in Korea that I experienced racism for the first time in my life- that horrible feeling of being avoided by others solely because of your physical features. Often in public places I was not approached by anyone, and Jon and I were regularly eyed with a suspicious, questioning gaze. I kept wondering how it was possible that a modern nation, so progressive in other ways, could reserve this sort of welcome to foreigners. How could someone from Seoul, one of the world's most populous cities, seem rattled by the sight of a Westerner- even one who admittedly looked a bit unusual (at the time I had dreadlocks halfway down my back)?

I had a hard time grasping their idea of relations with others, their concept of society, work ethic and simple life choices. The rules most Koreans around me followed did not make sense to me- they appeared absurd and inapplicable to a civil society. My disappointment and my faulty expectations shook me so deeply that I rejected everything the nation had to offer as a whole, even the language, weather, food, habits, art and landscapes. This is not to say that I could not still appreciate someone's

company or the taste of some fine tea, but I started to view these moments as random flowers in a sea of garbage.

I felt deeply hurt and frustrated by how all my efforts to break through the Koreans' impenetrable attitude seemed absolutely useless. I would set goals that seemed simple enough in my country, such as building a network of friends, going out, attending parties, meeting new people my age, and so forth. Initially, I could not wait to discover a big metropolis like Seoul, which I imagined would have so much to offer, even beyond my expectations. It did not take long at all for me to come to the conclusion that I had built up a non-existent scenario in my mind.

This is an email I sent to a friend, who thankfully forgot to delete it:

> "*I've been here in Korea for almost two weeks, things aren't going well and I don't think things are going to get any better soon. I'm opening up about this in the hopes you'll listen and understand what I'm going through [.....] things aren't going well, and I couldn't have imagined all this. Korea is an incredible place, but it is so absurd that it's this hard to meet people. I have yet to meet anyone. Sure, I've met her friends but no guys, everyone is super shy and there is no way anyone will get chummy with you, especially if you're a foreigner. The house I'm in is full of young people but no one has given me the time of day or really responded to my attempts to get to know them.*
>
> *What a far cry from London...* (I had lived in the British capital up until a few months before moving to Seoul) *I realize what a huge difference there is and how impossible it is to blend in here. My girlfriend understands this and she knows I'm not doing well here [.....] I'm really trying but I can't take this situation [.....] What can I say? Did I screw up deciding to come here? It's too early to tell but I don't think things are gonna change and right now I have serious doubts I can have a future here. I so need a friend to share coffee and a couple laughs with. Speaking of which, in addition to being so shy people here don't laugh... it's crazy but I haven't seen anyone laugh [.....] I miss you all so much ...*"

This was my state of mind. As time went on, I began to feel Korea was breaking down my youthful enthusiasm and causing me to waste my energy and willpower. Basically it was responsible for my first great post-adolescence disappointment. This far-away country had taught me a few harsh life lessons and my feelings towards it could not help being remarkably resentful.

Soon my mood was at an all-time low and Jon and her friends' attempts to show me a different side of Korea were ineffective. They tried their very best to cheer me up, taking me around to a million places and attempting to show me the best their country had to offer. I did my best to seem like I was okay, but, as much as I appreciated their efforts sincerely, I kept the real problem hidden because I could never had resolved it with them. As a Westerner I was, and would always be, excluded from their society. My physical features and my origins prevented me from being seen and treated normally. For this, there was no remedy I could fathom.

Due to a series of circumstances that are not relevant to this book, after ten long years in which the Far East had simply disappeared from my thoughts, I met up with my Korean ex-girlfriend and we ended up rekindling our relationship, opening up the chance for me to return to her country. Over time, the ill feelings I carried with me from my previous experience had dissipated, and there was newfound space for some positivity in my memories. Shortly before leaving, I had managed to befriend a few people who treated me almost like a younger brother and helped me with everything I needed. Surely they understood my pain, and maybe they were even the slightest bit embarrassed by the way their country had welcomed me- but this did not change the fact they were good people and the beneficial effect they had on my stay.

With Jon by my side, I traveled across the country to Buddhist temples and interesting museums; I visited Jindo, which is famous for its dogs and music- and, best of all, I spent a few days on the small Southern island of Bogil. There, I savored good tea, a slower pace, and the generous spirit that Koreans can show once they become better acquainted with a former stranger.

Reuniting with Jon now sparked my curiosity. I wondered how it would feel to wander around the streets of Seoul- streets that still called to mind memories of bitter cold and exclusion. How would I feel upon seeing old classmates and generous friends? I ask myself whether a new experience would allow me to develop a new, different and perhaps less emotionally charged opinion of the place compared to the terribly negative one I had formed way back in 2000.

CHAPTER TWO

ARRIVAL

The first three days are hard to wrap my head around. Too many factors, like changing time zones, mood and weather overlap and it's as though I can't get a clear picture of what's going on around me. Jon is waiting for me at Incheon airport; after a long embrace with no words exchanged, she brings me to her house in the *Hapchong* area, a tiny (tiny by European standards, pretty large by Korean ones) attic where she lives by herself with her musical instruments and her books- a rather unusual thing for a girl her age here. Her quiet and peaceful neighborhood is made up mostly of small streets and short buildings, many with traditional Buddhist roofs.

This is a perfect residential area, separated by just a couple of streets from one of the most modern and changeable neighborhoods of the South Korean capital: *Hyongdae*. That's exactly where we head after I drop off my luggage and get a little rest. We stroll down the street hand in hand, stopping here and there to embrace. I notice with some surprise that she does not shy away from me; she smiles and does not hide her joy about being here with her western boyfriend. In this part of Seoul we can afford to act this way: passers-by don't seem to pay much attention to us, unlike what happens in the rest of the country. In Korean culture, public displays of warmth and affection are viewed as morally repugnant, and the only thing that is not frowned upon is holding hands. Since I was used to showing my affection for my girlfriend more directly, I remember getting a plethora of dirty looks of accusation from the locals, especially older people, during my first stay.

Jon updates me on how this part of the city is changing. It's one of the country's modern hubs, one of the most western- influenced areas, and it is dotted with cafés, restaurants and night clubs that seem to pop up continuously, offering entertainment to the young and not so young alike. Like the restaurant owner tells us at the bistro we stop in for dinner, it's a place for extravagance. He's a jovial, stocky man in his fifties; he shares with us that his restaurant had almost gone out of business in a more

conservative neighborhood where his specialty, lamb meat, was not appreciated. In Korean culture, lamb is barely considered food. Almost nobody eats it regularly, unlike in Europe or the Middle East, and many find it repugnant and foul smelling.

Nevertheless, in *Hyongdae* business is booming and his little "*Yang Yang*"[1] has become a hot spot for demanding and adventurous palates. Even though Seoul is one of the largest cities in the world with over 10,000,000 inhabitants, and in spite of the fact we are in one of the few areas in town where different races can be spotted, I only see very few non- Asians and even fewer non Koreans. In this regard, Korea has not changed much- just like 10 years ago, the population is extremely homogenous. Forget the great metropolises of Europe or the Americas- in Korea, even in the capital where most westerners can be found, the faces are all rather similar. The only change I can see is the novel presence of ethnic restaurants and establishments. Apparently, over the last 10 years Turkish or Indian immigrants have chosen to take advantage of the country's economic growth to export their homelands' specialties. Thanks to this, nowadays you can dig into a kebab on the streets of Seoul, which would have been unthinkable back in the year 2000.

A central neighborhood named *Itaewon* is famous for being a western ghetto. Here, foreigners are a large minority and it is not unusual to hear other languages being spoken on the street besides Korean, mainly English. There are stores selling all sorts of goods and flags from many countries are displayed. There is even a tiled path picturing the countries of the world and the words "good morning" re-written in various languages. This is the only place in the city with an international flair, but it is small drop in a compact Korean sea.

Outside of a few hubs in the capital, the country looks similar- not only in terms of its inhabitants, but also its buildings. The country's tragic history over the last 100 years has brought about the destruction of older architecture and radical changes in the look of its cities. In an effort to optimize space in light of the exponential population growth, enormous, similarly colored apartment buildings have risen up in droves. Each city has its traditional neighborhoods with smaller residential and commercial buildings, some even with classically sloped roofs, but these are actually far and few between, having mostly been destroyed after the Civil War. The most important and populous cities, in fact, look so similar that a

[1] Yang means lamb

visitor may not notice many differences when walking around, for instance, Incheon or Busan. In contrast, in Seoul, I look up at buildings that seem similar yet different from one another, just like I remembered they were 10 years ago. Aside from the hot and humid weather that is a far cry from the bitterly cold winter of 2000, I can't make sense of this perception. Jon helps me resolve this enigma as we stroll down the street by asking me if I remember where we are. "I couldn't tell you" I reply absent mindedly. She surprises me with the revelation that we are on the street which connects her old university and my *Hasuk*[2], which I used to walk down on daily. I'm shocked! I can't recognize a single thing. "And what about this?" I say, pointing with my finger.

"It's been there for long time, five years already."

Apparently five years is considered a long time for a building. I remember laughing with Italian friends when, during my first visit, we read signs proudly displayed on stores like "Since 1995", chuckling at the idea that a business would brag about being open for that short of a time.

There is incredible turnaround in construction in South Korea; buildings are demolished and rebuilt incessantly in a frenetic spiral which mostly affects average citizens and poorer municipalities. This policy has created some serious problems and led to protests by many building tenants pushed aside by large or rather gigantic Korean companies. The area I used to live in is unrecognizable. The building I lived in was in good condition, and yet it has been rebuilt, just like its neighbor. The stores I used to shop in have all disappeared and been replaced by new ones. I wonder where all the people who used to live and work here have gone – such an overhaul would normally take a long time in the sort of society I am used to living in.

The stores as I remember them have all changed and street vendors have tripled in number and specialized their offers. One in particular attracts my attention with his products: dried octopi of all species and sizes are displayed in various stages of drying and curing, while he roasts a couple of fresh ones for a group of students. Almost hypnotized, I stare at a bunch of tentacles over a meter long. After a few minutes, my visibly annoyed girlfriend takes me by the arm and leads me to the entrance of the university, giving me the second shock of the night. It has been impossibly expanded, and a police guard stands in front, watching

[2] Student dorm

passersby; it looks more like the border between two nations than the entrance to an academic institution. Inside, the Cambridge style architecture I so love is dwarfed by a huge building almost entirely built in a dugout tens of meters deep. Both Jon and I agree that it is disturbingly indicative of a sort of megalomania. We go inside, and I'm surprised to see a self-sufficient structure with every amenity a student could need or want. Besides the obvious libraries and study halls, the facility includes restaurants, gyms, swimming pools, travel agencies, theaters and modern movie theaters- all clean, modern and but in perfect condition. A flier catches my eye: it depicts a smiling student, and an English phrase pops up amongst the Korean words: Be number 1. In this country, the push towards competition and achievement accompanies Koreans from a young age, sometimes in ways that are almost grotesque. I remember seeing a television program in which cutthroat competition among students glorified kids who managed to do better than their peers. Those who advanced in their position were met with glory and respect, while those were left behind were shamed. After school, things are not much different in the world of employment – perhaps they are worse. Success at work determines everything: the respect of family, friends and society. Failure is associated with such shame and embarrassment that it is hard for anyone to recover from it. Mercy and understanding of mistakes are not contemplated; responsibility falls entirely upon the individual, so much so that the system is never called into question, even when it is irrational not to do so. The same exact level of productivity is expected after brutal work shifts –the idea that a human being may become tired and consequentially not perform at his best is not contemplated. To give an example, if a factory worker makes a mistake after 12 hours at work, Koreans will likely blame this on the worker's carelessness or lack of work ethic, while his/her less than ideal physical and psychological condition is barely taken into account.

Life is a continuous rat race, with everyone not chasing success but rather aiming to outdo his neighbor, keep his job and thus his place in society- because, after all, this is the very basis of life. The common stereotype of the tireless Asian worker with only a handful of days off a year reflects reality not only for the Japanese and Chinese, but for Koreans as well. The number of hours in a work week is drastically higher and vacation days far fewer than anything we are used to in the West. This state of affairs has a dire effect on society, evidence of which can be seen everywhere. For example, Plexiglas barriers are placed at every metro stop in an effort to discourage some of the frequent suicides. Each year, tens of thousands of Koreans have jumped to their deaths in front of oncoming

trains at Seoul and Busan stations, sick of their lives and of the crushing system. The suicide trend does not spare the elderly, some of whom feel purposeless and unable to contribute to their communities once they stop working, as well as defenseless in a society which has no preventive or pension funds. Health care, schools and retirement funds are not guaranteed by the state; financial breaks for the poor are non-existent. The general sentiment here is that individuals work for the community and expect nothing in return. The mere idea that the state owes something to its citizens is viewed as deeply shameful. When I jokingly told Jon that they took themselves too seriously, I got a clear albeit harsh answer: "Life is hard here. Had you been born here you would actually understand". Clearly, my girlfriend was right – she had proven her point by showing great determination to find me a few students who wanted to learn Italian in Korea. Even before I got there, she had scoured the internet, exploring relevant sites, publicizing my services, and working tirelessly to fix up my resume to make it more palatable for the locals.

It's not that she made anything up, but some things were emphasized and others even removed. Fitting into society's expectations is crucial for finding work. She knew what she was doing, and I never had a shortage of students who had an interest in Italian and Italy. I only gave private lessons, and the experience gave me a good glimpse into the Korean mentality and way of life. A teacher approaches students from a position of absolute authority, almost sacred. Interaction is not the chief concern, as the student's main role is to listen, absorb, and not to ask questions- even if he or she doesn't understand something. In the typical Asian worldview, the student is the teacher's subordinate, and calling his or her authority or facts into question is unthinkable. Teaching Koreans taught me a lot about their society- from the way they simply accept injustice to how they seem to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders without even questioning if it's right or wrong. In addition to preventing the development of alternative ways of thinking, the obsession with following rules creates fertile ground for colossal companies to thrive and absorb the nation's energy. Samsung and LG, to name two, employ thousands of family breadwinners and have dealings in goods as well as in the insurance sector, which gives them financial power that far surpasses political influence. Small companies barely impact the economy and, unlike what occurs in some European countries, they have no weight in politics. The giant companies essentially do as they please, forcing citizens to work long hours and sometimes for inadequate pay. Back when I first visited, and even now, I had a hard time understanding how it was possible for people to live in an extremely expensive society with sky-high rent, costly

schools and unaffordable health care with minimum wages of only 3-4000 *won*. In spite of this "inhumane" society, Koreans do make it. They manage to send their kids to expensive universities, pay their mortgages, and take care of their expenses- albeit at the price of very hard work.

There are ways to let off some steam, with the most visible being alcohol consumption. After work, when people have a little free time, stores and establishments are overtaken by crowds of people determined to drink large amounts and get drunk as quickly as possible. Commonly consumed alcohol is not of the greatest quality, mostly beer and *soju*- a strong, slightly chemical-tasting liquor. Drinking brings out a different side of Koreans, as they use the bottle to leave the pressure of work behind and let loose a little- and they come off as more pleasant when they do. As far as I can recall, most of my conversations with locals took place with ones who had been drinking- being sober makes people much more reticent about interacting. In 2000 I often found myself with the few friends I had made sharing nights of drinking in the city's overflowing clubs, learning about Korea and those feelings they found so hard to express. We'd stay up late into the night, and I always wondered how these same people who were getting drunk with me would get up a short few hours later and face another hard day at work. My intention is not to sing the praises of drunkenness, but I see it as one of the few ways people can temporarily take a break from a merciless system and push their troubles aside.

CHAPTER THREE

POLITICS

I arrive during the electoral campaign for administrative positions, including the run for mayor of Seoul and other important government positions. Politically, South Korea has developed into a Presidential democracy similar to those found in the West, particularly the United States, but the results we can observe today are fruit of a rather painful process. Right after the civil war (1950 - 1953), the looming threat of communist and the fear of a second invasion by the North Korean army weighed on the country enough to halt economic and social progress- these had to be sacrificed in order to focus on not becoming part of the communist bloc. Much like in Europe after World War I, the antidote to the red virus was championed with dictatorial and military based methods. The conflicting ideologies took center stage in politics during the decades in which the international scenario saw the world divided into two distinct blocks. Until the late 1980s, South Korea endured a series of regimes, some quite repressive and violent, culminating in the sixth republic under the leadership of General *Jeon Du-hwan* (1980 - 1988), who perpetrated a massacre against the people of *Gwanju*, guilty of rebelling against the imposition of martial law and dictatorial policies. This is one of the darkest pages in the country's history. This political atmosphere long overshadowed Korea's human potential, which, not coincidentally, boomed after the Soviet regime fell and *Deng Xiaoping* brought about liberalist changes in China as economic growth became more of a priority than the revolution. It is true that there were signs even as far back as the second half of the 1980s, with the great success of the summer Olympics in Seoul and the 1987 elections. However, it would not be until 1992, the year of Korea's rebirth, that a nonmilitary president would come to be in power. Without the threat of communist contamination, not only did the nation rise as an economic power, but it also adopted democratic policies for the management of public affairs, with resulting improved conditions. Freedom of expression and assembly, which had long been kept under strict control, heralded a new wave of democratic politics characterized by parties, associations, and normal turnaround in political power. Since the

crucial year of change, 1992, Koreans have elected four presidents (each with a five year mandate), one of whom went down in history for his open attitude in dealing with Pyongyang, which would have been unthinkable even just a few years earlier – even earning him a Nobel peace prize. Nowadays, politics have changed, and the head of government is the conservative *I myung-bag* (often mistakenly transcribed as *Lee myung-bak*), leader of the Great National Party, who tends to oppose the trend towards openness his predecessors were setting. The more progressive factions in the nation consider this to be a semi fascist president willing to sell his soul to Korea's ultra-powerful multinationals, a leader who shows little interest in human rights or in improving the lives of the disenfranchised and who is willing to use force against antigovernment rallies. A young international politics student, Daham, with whom I enjoy sharing opinions on our respective nations, actually believes that his president has been inspired by mine, Berlusconi, in wanting to own or at least control most media and communication channels. This depressing picture painted by many people in my presence is not an accurate one. While it is true that this government's conservative attitude runs quite deep, the nation generally enjoys freedom and growth, and even social issues have not been so neglected. There's also a lively vein of sarcastic humor that is evident in the press, web and television, where politicians are routinely mocked and compared to animals like dogs or cockroaches. President *I* is derided for his rat- like features and his name is changed to make it sound like the Korean word for 'stupid'.

"I really just believe that the Korean people wanted to overhaul the political class in power after having experienced a single one for about 10 years –it's actually a sign of a healthy democracy which can choose to change when it wants to". I share my conjecture with my girlfriend Jon, who fears her country is running the risk of seeing all signs of progress achieved over the past few years disappear. These days, Seoul is blanketed in electoral propaganda: loudspeaker trucks make their rounds, publicizing various candidates and girls hand out fliers out on the streets. I don't understand the slogans, but with the help of Jon's translation I make some sense of what's happening around me. One week before voting day, we receive a packet in the mail from the city of Seoul containing a brochure from each political party along with a concise report of each political program as well as voting instructions. To make a long story short, it is virtually impossible for a Korean citizen to remain unaware and uninformed on Election Day. The likely outcome is no mystery: the governing party's candidate (from *Han nara dang*, the great People's party) will win by a landslide and take several government positions. This

candidate, who is running for a second term after his first win in 2006, is nicknamed mayor of Gangnam. *Gangnam* is a neighborhood in South Seoul, a financial hub with many banks and an impressive avenue lined with skyscrapers built so close to one another that they give the illusion of two solid, infinite barriers lining the street. This is where those with power, the decision-makers, congregate. These are the people who are seen as having priorities and interests that are far removed from or even conflicting with those of their less wealthy fellow citizens. This politician's nickname reflects a theme which has been object of discussion for the last 20 years, since Korea's rise into the world's top twenty economies. It suggests that he is far from having the common good as a priority, instead favoring the rich part of the city- if you listen to his opponents.

On June 3rd, I go with Jon and wait outside as she stands in line to vote in a large building in *Hongdae* set up with voting booths. Everything runs smoothly and quietly. It only takes a minute for Jon to exercise her right and duty as a citizen. As we walk home, I comment that I didn't see much of a difference between this and voting in Europe or the USA, and that in fact here things were better organized and some services they enjoyed, like receiving political information packets in the mail, did not exist back home. From the outside, it looks just like a well-oiled western democracy, in contrast with the picture Jon and her friends painted for me. Just like in a western democracy, the results are in quickly, and the next day I see my girlfriend's shock as she takes in the news. The mayor-elect is indeed *Oh Se-Hon* from the great People's party, but only by 0,6 % of votes more than *Han Myeong-sok*, a female candidate from the opposition. The majority party has lost ground in other areas as well, for instance in the Ministry of Education. A referendum that according to some ought to have been a triumph for the government has turned into a setback which demands its attention. Another noteworthy analysis of the situation points to the partial move away from territorial voting (wherein people do not vote based on political agenda but rather in accordance with specific areas they are from or influential families they belong to). Surprisingly, in this election, the main parties have obtained fewer votes in areas traditionally aligned with them, which instead have been won over by the opposition, much to the surprise of political analysts. Jon and I are pleasantly impressed. After having pointed out the positive aspects of Korean voters and of the political system, it is only fair to highlight some of the negatives as well. First off, only about 55% of citizens cast their vote, showing rather poor participation in the political process. Moreover- and I say this as an objective fact without any judgment attached- the burden of the

unresolved issue with the North weighs down any attempt at freely developing policies, essentially maintaining an American-like bipartisan system wherein moving too far left of center is simply not possible. I believe that as long as there is a North Korean government with its current setup, the innocent South will pay the price of not fully blossoming like other nations undergoing democratization.

CHAPTER FOUR

KOREA AND FOOTBALL

The relationship between Korea and the West is not so easy to understand and interpret, and anyone who is acquainted with this country continues to be surprised by how two cultures that are so distant- and in some ways irreconcilably so- can intertwine and give rise to phenomena that are frankly spectacular.

Though the sport was obviously already present in Korea, it was the 2002 World Cup- which it hosted along with its Japanese neighbors- that put football (soccer) on the forefront of national attention. In 2000, many of Seoul's buildings were adorned with gigantic photos and ads featuring European and South American football stars as well as countdown clocks showing the time remaining before the start of the competition. Many Koreans rooted for European or South American national teams. I personally recall how several people openly supported Italy and genuinely felt sad about the heartbreaking loss suffered against France in the 2000 European final. I have a vivid memory of a sweet potato vendor I was buying produce from one frigid night in the city center of Seoul who asked me where I was from. When I replied, he responded by miming a free kick, smiling and repeating the word "Italia".

Nowadays, ten years later, things have changed. The above-described sentiments are seldom expressed, as they have been replaced by fandom for their own players and national team. Now it's uncommon for anyone to support a lineup other than the South Korean one.

When I arrived in Seoul in mid-May, one of my main curiosities was seeing how the Koreans would experience the South African World Cup.

Even before the actual competition began, stores and vendors displayed red shirts (the national team's color) and a variety of gadgets; on TV you often saw football stadiums, and players were ubiquitous in the media. As a football fan, I knew I would try to see as many games as possible, but I was also looking forward to observing how this international sporting

event would be perceived by the locals. I saw all four of South Korea's matches and each time I witnessed scenes halfway between fanaticism and joviality.

June 12th: Greece-South Korea. Around 7.30 pm, my girlfriend and I intend to go out to watch the game, but end up falling asleep instead. We are woken by a loud boom around 8.40 and quickly realize something has happened in South Africa. We quickly get ourselves together and go across the avenue to the *Hongdae* district, looking for a place to watch the rest of the game. All the establishments are jam packed with people who stand in front of the screen as if hypnotized, yelling out encouragement at any attempt at offense by the Korean team and crying out in despair anytime the Greeks advance beyond midfield. Everyone- and I mean including the waiters and cooks- leaves their work stations at every possible opportunity to watch a bit of the match. Jon and I keep searching for a little corner to enjoy the temporary home advantage (it doesn't take long to learn that the scream that woke us was a reaction to *Lee Jung-Soo*'s goal). Any establishment without a TV is deserted. The Japanese restaurant we often eat in is usually so packed that a long line forms at the entrance. Tonight, the waiters are sitting outside, smoking cigarettes, while the owner paces around, waiting for a client to appear. It's the same scene at any other place that isn't broadcasting the match. We finally find a tiny bar with just a hair of standing room. There's a happy go lucky and relaxed atmosphere, but at the same time everyone in the place is glued to the screen. Many customers are wearing red jerseys and carrying scarves or bandanas featuring the *Taegeukgi*; everyone yells out *Dae Han Min Guk* (note: when Koreans refer to Korea, they say *Han Guk*. *Dae Han Min Guk* is South Korea and when they refer to the national team, this is the term they use in order to distinguish it from *Puk Han*, i.e. North Korea). The second goal, scored by *Park Ji-Sung*, leads to a scene of mayhem: everyone runs out of the bar yelling, waving balloons and gesturing wildly. In Italy, such a level of intense celebration would only have been appropriate in moments like Rossi's goal in Italy-Germany (1982 World Cup in Spain) or Grosso's penalty kick in Italy-France (2006 World Cup in Germany). On this night, it takes much less to paint Seoul red like the team's jerseys, with fans everywhere sporting scarves and little horns (the team is nicknamed Red Devils). It's just too joyful of an occasion. They won the match- of course they want to celebrate.

June 17th: Argentina-South Korea. My girlfriend, some friends and I meet up to watch the game at a small place near the university. The scenario is similar to the one I observed at the previous match, but this time the

opponent is simply in another league. The Koreans resist the Argentinian onslaught for quite a while, but then the technical supremacy displayed by Diego and his team becomes too much to handle: it ends 4-1, no argument there. In spite of this, the mood is not somber, everyone seems to take it with a jolly attitude (albeit not as enthusiastic as the previous time), which is clear both in the establishments and on the streets. It makes me stop and think about how, though the sport has been embraced with a similarly fanatical passion, unlike in Italy this has not come with a lowbrow cultural tendency to insult the players, referees and coaches at will.

In Korean culture, the idea of yelling out insults is basically unheard of- they have not imitated us in this regard. What they have emulated, on the other hand, is a strong identification with the team, the nation and the patriotic sentiments tied to this. This is a bad thing, argues Jon, because it's a way for the government to shift the people's attention away from more pressing issues and, worse, to somehow take credit for sporting successes, citing them as evidence of sound political policies. In addition, it makes the people proud and allows them to forget or ignore the nation's problems and contradictions. I reassure her, pointing out that these things happen back home too, just like after our victory in 2006, when everyone swelled with national pride and acted as though Italy were the best country in the world.

June 23rd: South Korea- Nigeria. Yes, 23rd, not 22nd. Due to the time difference, the match is broadcast at 3.30 am of June 23rd. I had announced my intention of watching it anyway to Jon, and she had said she would keep me company. I had my doubts. However, we do end up both waking up and sleepily watching the final (well, for them it was a sort of final) in streaming. Nigeria scores- if the score stays the same, South Korea will be eliminated from the competition. Jon is surprisingly concerned. 38 minutes in, Lee *Jung-Soo* ties the game and we hear cries of joy from the neighbors. There are no bars or restaurants in this residential area- Seoul must have risen early for the occasion. A local TV channel is broadcasting footage of streets overflowing with people wearing red and celebrating wildly. I'm tempted to throw on some clothes and go join them, but Jon stops me. I don't argue. We hear cries from various neighbors for the duration, and it is indeed a tense game. The Koreans cause a foolish penalty; the Africans miss every opportunity imaginable; in the end, the tied score and the Argentinian win in the other match means they qualify to the next round. The ref whistles three times, signaling the end of the match; in addition to our screaming neighbors, we hear cars honking in celebration until 5.30 am. It's no different than scenes I've seen

in Europe or Latin America. Journalists interview fans decked out in scarves and gadgets, their faces painted red, blue and white. They keep repeating a significant expression: "This is the first time". The media emphasizes this: it's the first time South Korea has qualified for the next round of the competition. Wait, didn't they already do so in 2002? Yes, but this time it wasn't on their home turf, and this is very important. Let's first clear up the fact that in this country they hold the belief the World Cup hosted by Korea and Japan was fair, that Moreno refereed appropriately, and that the scandalously unjust victory against Spain was well deserved by the Koreans. More than once I tried to criticize that competition and point out the less than fair victories of their national team, but each time my arguments were dismissed with "We scored one goal more than they did".

Not that they admit it, but maybe unconsciously they know that the difference is that this time they advanced fairly, maybe with a little push from lady luck, but at least not with a big push from the refs and linesmen. The players are crying, fans are going wild, and the general atmosphere would make one think they had actually won the World Cup. Like my Korean teacher says (and of course she too is watching the match late at night), whether they advance or not, *Kuintzana!!* (it's all good).

June 26th: The match is due to kick off at 11 pm, but before we look for a place to watch it in, Jon and I go for a walk along the Han riverbank. It's an hour of peace and quiet before stepping into the chaos of Hongdae. Unfortunately, the rainy season decides to remind us of its imminent arrival with a thunderstorm which forces us to seek shelter under a bridge and try to hail a cab. This turns out to be unsuccessful- traffic is intense and walking is much easier. My girlfriend always carries a little umbrella with her (sometimes to shield her from the sun) but it is hopelessly inadequate for the two of us together, so we opt for a run in the rain, with pauses under trees and awnings along the way to the city center.

We are abundantly early (it's still 8.30 pm), but all the establishments we walk by are already full and finding seats is impossible. The rain starts to die down as Seoul is once again painted red, excited fans all around and cries of "*Dae Han Min Guk*" everywhere.

After searching for over an hour, with a little luck we find a nice table with a clear view of the TV at a restaurant specialized in meat. We're just in time- every last spot is soon taken by other customers.

We order some *Sanjopsal* and a bottle of *Paekseju* which we sip on while they serve us an assortment of appetizers like Kimchi, tofu, spicy peppers, lettuce, and freshly sliced carrots. The restaurant is small but cozy; the two waiters smile pleasantly and, as is the custom here, rush to our side at any sign of need.

Meat restaurants here have a common characteristic: tableside grilling of your food. The clients normally take care of the cooking themselves, but the occasional lazy or inept guest is quickly rescued by the staff. We're eating greedily (I'm even more enthusiastic about it than my girlfriend), when the TV comes on and start broadcasting from Port Elizabeth. The reporters start discussing the national team's previous world cup performances, recalling how in 2002 they eliminated Italy against all odds in the round of sixteen, pointing out the challenges ahead in tonight's match, and getting the fans riled up with slogans in support of their heroes. Amused, I listen to my girlfriend's translation.

The match starts, and as the action gets going on the pitch, it dies down around me. Everyone seems to be eating, drinking and smoking more slowly; the waiters have one eye on the customers, the other on the game. Emotions get stirred when Korea hits the post on a free kick and the whole restaurant erupts in a collective cry. Soon after, the atmosphere becomes icy cold because the Uruguayan forward Suarez puts the ball in the back of the net. For a moment it looks as though he's offside, but no one moves or makes a sound, a strange tomb-like silence falls all around. A replay on the screen shows clearly that the goal was legal, yet no one shows any emotion, as if frozen. I think about how in the West an analogous situation would have led to a loud eruption of protest and disbelief; in Italy in particular, add a series of insults and expletives yelled at the screen, and you'll get the picture. Here, the Koreans endure the moment with passive resignation.

Unlike the fans, the team has a strong reaction and shows many good plays that threaten the Uruguayan goal more than once, earning my admiration and support. Half-time comes along to wake us from this football-induced hypnosis and we order more meat and wine. Everyone in the restaurant also seems to resume their leisure or work activities- that is, until the start of the second half brings everyone's attention back to South Africa. In between glasses of wine, I wonder out loud why no one moved a muscle when the goal looked offside at first- a knee-jerk reaction anywhere else in the world I've seen- and I'm dismissed with a simple "we just don't do that here".

The second half of the match begins with the Asian team pressing the opponents so effectively that it feels like they may tie the score at any moment. Indeed they do at the 68th minute, after several missed opportunities. There is unbridled joy all around: this time everyone rises to their feet (myself included) in celebration, looking at each other in delight, or running outside to light firecrackers and wave team flags and scarves. Jon and I watch the scene, our arms around each other. The tie is well-deserved, but the match is far from over. Nevertheless, the goal of showing off good gameplay and allowing 50 million fans to dream a little has already been accomplished.

The dream is shattered ten minutes later when the *conejo* Suarez scores his second goal, giving his team the lead once again with only a few minutes left in the game. From that moment on, I see two very different, interesting reactions. On one hand, the Korean players are undeterred and try to give everything they've got on the pitch, attacking furiously, and putting on one of the best shows the World Cup has offered so far. On the other hand, time and everyone around me seem to stand still in nearly religious contemplation. A petite lady emerges from the kitchen and sits next to me along with two waiters; I can see the *Ajumma'* (a word used for a not so young woman who cooks and cleans) is particularly pained by this turn of events, and she looks to me for a comment, apparently oblivious to the fact I don't understand a word she's saying to me. One of the waiters gestures to a couple of patrons who ordered beers as if to say "hold on, there's only ten minutes left ". Football has captured us all, and this might just be the most communion I've felt with the Koreans in my travels so far.

The Red Devils fight till the end, but in spite of their efforts, they're out of time, and the South American team advances in their place. For a good ten minutes after the ref's final whistle, I see disappointment and shattered hope all around me, even on my girlfriend's face. "I totally get it", I reassure her "in my twenty-some year career as a football fan, I've been there more than once, I know how it feels". I stop there, sparing her my sob stories about all the times Italy has been eliminated at the final, cruel penalty shoot-out or at the very last plays in a match. I share in those ten minutes of sadness that follow games like this before eventually snapping back to reality.

About a half hour later we're done with dinner and wonder back out on the wet streets of *Hongdae*, and the red-tinted enthusiasm of the last couple of weeks seems to be dying down already; the sights and sounds of excited fans give way to normal city routine that returns after the football craze.

You can still hear a whistle or chant here and there, but the fire of collective passion has basically burned out.

It almost feels like we experienced a religious holiday like Christmas or Ramadan. Soon, all signs of celebration disappear, and while the competition continues on, the same places that overflowed with fans while Korea was still in it are now semi-deserted, except for a handful of patrons and owners who barely seem to pay attention to the matches being broadcast.

Just like in Europe, the football drug loses its efficacy once the supported team is out of the competition. Paraphrasing Marx, someone once said that football is the opiate of the people, and what I saw here in Korea seems to confirm the quip. Even total strangers with vastly different cultural backgrounds come together and behave similarly on these occasions, and there are few other things that have the same power.