Roundeye

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gomanifesto

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Published 2004
Printed by cafepress.com in the United States of America
DIY. PFR.

www.gomanifesto.com

For Kristin.
my razzle-dazzle

Roundeye

ONE

“Two-faced,” I shout, shaking my fists with rage, “Weasel!”

“Two-faced,” they shout back, raising their fists in fierce imitation, “Weasel!”

“You’re nothing but a two-faced weasel!” I yell at the ceiling, my head thrown back, as if to challenge God himself.

“You’re nothing but a two-faced weasel!” they scream back at me, still shaking their little fists.

I glance at my watch, confident I’ve frittered away another class period. We still have five minutes left.

“Mr. T,” one of the kids says. “Play a game?”

“Which one?”

“Shimmy, shake and stop!” several kids call out.

“Everybody up!” I yell.

With a clattering of chairs, all the kids leap to their feet. For the next five minutes, I shout action verbs and the kids carry them out, often with my own erratic behavior serving as a visual aid. Popular verbs include shimmy, shake, swim, pogo and spin. Stop is added to maintain order; there are no more verbs until everyone is still. The kids police themselves. It's a lot like 'Simon Says' except without Simon and all his demanding rules.

The students are "lurching" when class ends and I dismiss them.

"Good work! Go away!" I scream, pointing ferociously at the door.

They all point at the door, thinking I've added a new word to the game.

Comprehension ripples through the classroom.

"Bye-bye, Mr. T!"

"Have a good weekends!"

"Stay off the pipe!"

Young Koreans careen off each other and into and over furniture in their haste to escape English. In seconds the room is empty.

The fifth graders are the last class of the week and by the time they leave, the school is a wreck. I pace the room as their dust settles, gathering garbage and straightening up. In no time my hands are full of empty snack wrappers and crumpled comic books. The Happy Ding-Dong English Academy is mostly an informal place. We offer supplemental English classes after the student's regular school day is finished. As a for-hire educational facility, we have to tolerate a higher level of snacks and distraction than the public schools. Kids change academies like they change their backpacks. I don't mind it too much; I enjoy the leftover comics. And the backpacks.

"What is two-faced?" asks Reuben, peeking into my classroom. "And weasel?"

Reuben runs Happy Ding-Dong in place of our absentee owner, Mr. Sun. Reuben is Korean, despite his name. When we first met, he requested a popular American name. I suggested Reuben because he reminded me of corned beef. He liked the name and thankfully never asked its significance.

"A weasel is a kind of rodent, like a stoat or a mongoose. Do you know Rikki-Tikki-Tavi?" I ask.

Reuben shrugs. By not acknowledging he does, he confirms he doesn't.

"Two-faced means deceitful. A two-faced weasel is an accusation you make against a betrayer, a deceitful rodent or a mistrustful mongoose type." I am careful with Reuben to make my explanations complicated and confusing. He has made it his passion to find fault with everything I do. This used to a terrible, tearful problem, but now I treat it as a game. There is a fine line to be walked where sarcasm and irreverence seems friendly and charming. I'm usually one toe over that line.

"You are teaching them to be cheeky," he says, scowling. He steps into the room and I make ready for a lecture.

Reuben is thirty-five years old and leans towards fat. He has a shiny pink face, as if fresh from exertion or damp with fever. He always looks sharp, dressing in finely made suits and colorful satiny shirts. In the classroom he looks misplaced, like a pimp or car salesman. Reuben has a furious temper.

"You like?" he asks, stretching out his arm so I can see a new gold watch, gaudy and thick.

"WAAH!" I say, using the Korean expression for complete amazement. "That looks expensive."

Reuben smiles. A language teacher by trade, he is mathematical at heart. He loves numbers and cash values and manipulating the school's ledgers. "One hundred and fifty

thousand," he says. This is the cost in won, the Korean currency. Depending on the day and the exchange rate, that's almost two hundred American dollars.

"*Pisada*," I say, nodding. This is Korean for expensive, one of the first words I learned upon arriving in Korea six months ago. It's essential for bargaining.

I live in Ulsan, South Korea, a gray, industrial city on the southeast coast of the peninsula near Pusan. We are home to the Hyundai Corporation, who builds ships the size of small cities a few blocks from the academy. In many ways, Ulsan is a company town; all my students' fathers work at the shipyard or building cars and they all live in Hyundai high rises. English is not widely spoken here and I'm the only roundeye in my neighborhood, but somehow I feel at home, more at home here than I ever did in Maryland. I haven't mastered the language yet.

When I talk with Reuben I use many of the Korean words I have learned. This is an effective defense mechanism; I am either painfully simple with him or deliberately obtuse. I can plead innocence if my Korean offends and he will pretend to understand anything I say in English to avoid the loss of face that ignorance brings. I play him cruelly sometimes with language, but Reuben has made it necessary.

"Very expensive," he says, pleased.

"Does that mean it's payday?"

"Oh yes," he says, forgetting his watch.

I was supposed to be paid three days ago, but I'm happy to collect my salary at all. The Happy Ding-Dong English Academy operates at a perpetual loss. Reuben is forever complaining about the school's high overhead and parents who don't pay on time. All of South Korea gets paid once every month on the tenth and it generally takes a few days for the money to trickle down to us.

Reuben pulls a stack of bills from his coat pocket and hands it to me. Nothing is more satisfying than getting paid a month's wages in cash. I was so accustomed to direct deposit, ATM and credit cards that I got chills the first time I saw my Korean salary. It reminded me of the fat wads gas station attendants would pull out in the days before self-serve islands.

Once a month, a few days late, Reuben hands me 1.2 million won- nearly $1500- in a bundle of bills so thick I can't fold it. I store it all in my freezer, wrapped in twine, behind some frozen shrimp. Crime isn't the concern; I have nowhere else to put it. No one at the bank spoke any English the day I went.

"*Kamsahapnida*," I say, bowing crisply. I prefer saying 'thank you' in Korean; it sounds more heartfelt and thought out with all those extra syllables. On payday I am unfailingly polite.

"You are welcome," Reuben says, nodding curtly. "I am giving to you much money." I like to think that I earned it, but I won't argue now that it's in my possession.

I busy myself around the class, tossing the leftover comics in the trash and erasing the board where the word weasel is written in big block letters. Reuben stands back and watches, plotting his attack. Our Friday ritual includes cleaning the school and not making plans. Despite our constant conflicts and deliberate failures to communicate, Reuben always tries to persuade me to visit his family on the weekend. He considers my visits to be free English lessons and his son treats me like a living jungle gym.

"Taylor Mackey," Reuben says, using my full name to suggest his annoyance. "You cannot teach pupils to be cheeky."

"I don't teach them to be cheeky. They already are. I teach them to do it in English. If they ever go to America, they'll thank me for it," I say.

"Korean student always polite," he says.

I smile to myself as I straighten up the desks and chairs. I'm not falling for that one again. "Very polite," I reply, lying.

"You visit Reuben?" he asks, seeing that I am avoiding his traps.

"I can't. I've got plans."

"You doing what?" he asks. Reuben's questions are always statements.

"A movie downtown."

"You going whom?" he asks.

"Hyong-nim," I admit.

"No," Reuben says angrily. "That man is disheveled."

"You're right."

Disheveled is one of Reuben's more charitable words for my best friend. Hyong-nim is a rumpled looking man, who loves sleep and alcohol in equal measure. All Koreans do, but Hyong-nim remains an outsider; he's *baek-su*, a harsh Korean insult that means unemployed. Everyone in Korea is expected to work, to contribute and be industrious. My youngest students help their families by working in the shops and market stalls on weekends. Women raise children, tend to their homes and gardens and run small stores or sell vegetables from blankets in the street markets. Devoted students over the age of ten spend sixty or more hours a week in classes and study in academies like mine until the wee hours of the morning. The deranged and damaged sing folk songs and beg change in the street markets. Men are entrepreneurs or hard-working employees of Hyundai. And Hyong-nim sleeps a lot, sits on his stoop and smokes cigarette after cigarette. The only rung below Hyong-nim on Korea's status ladder is Japanese.

Hyong-nim quit his job as a social worker in a prison and now devotes his days to watching TV. He is content to let his wife run their tiny stationery store. Ostracized by everyone

else in the neighborhood, Hyong-nim is my closest friend. He was the only graduate in his college class of three thousand to get a degree in philosophy and is the most interesting Korean I've met. We can spend hours together walking along the beach or sitting on the stoop in front of his store, talking about girls and philosophy. We both enjoy watching his son Benny ride his big-wheeled plastic tricycle in circles on the sidewalk.

Benny is the only person in the family with a name. His mother is named after him; she is called Benny-oma, or Benny's mother. Hyong-nim is my friend's title. It means Older Brother. Koreans define their world by their relationships so titles like this often replace names.

Older men take younger men under their wing, to look out for them, to mentor and haze them. *Dong-saeng*- little brothers like me- are expected to run errands and bow to touch our toes at the whim of our *hyong-nim*. In this way, we are taught to be compliant to our elders. This brotherhood is a lifelong bond.

When I first arrived, a handful of Reuben's friends recruited me to be their little brother. Happy to have any friends at all, I went along with it until I realized they mostly enjoyed having an American errand boy. I started a passive aggressive resistance. Whatever brand of cigarettes they sent me to buy, I would return with menthols, which quickly took all the joy out of abusing me. My friend Hyong-nim has never bossed me around. I gave him the title myself because if I had to have a brother, he'd be the sort I'd want. I am twenty-five and he is thirty-two.

Reuben wanted to be my hyong-nim, I never said no, but I could never bring myself to call him "Older brother."

The classroom is clean enough now, but I still putter around, pretending to be busy. I stare intently at a notebook I've found, flipping blank pages. Reuben doesn't leave.

"He is impractical," he adds, still trying to draw me out. Though both comments are true, neither is insulting enough to bother fighting over. Reuben's contempt for my best friend is a deep well that will never run dry.

"You going why?" he asks.

"Because he's my friend," I answer. "And because I had a dream the other night that I met a girl down there who spoke my language better than me. Than I do."

Reuben sighs. "You always needing a something."

Reuben's spoken English is a strange, fractured thing. Only half of what he says makes exact sense. The other half might mean something or might be completely off base. Despite this, he is a good English teacher.

Koreans are recovering Confucians, which makes them obsessed with rules. The more oblique or annoying the rules, the better they like them and nothing is more oblique and annoying than English grammar. Reuben's mastery of English grammar is astounding and quite possibly accurate. I can't tell as I don't recall most of the rules he teaches. When the students ask me for clarification I always shrug and say, "Korean rule, not American." The reason I have a job at all is because the rules don't add up to make any sense. Reuben teaches the English. I teach the American.

"Yes," I admit. "I am always needing a something, aren't I? Sometimes I am needing a something more than other times. Right now I am needing a something very much."

"You are always lonely," Reuben says.

"Yes," I say, taken back by his direct and accurate assessment.

"Tomorrow I take you to festival. Do you know Kyungju? Ancient capital of Korea?" he asks.

"Reuben, every city, town and bus stop was once the ancient capital of Korea," I say.

Reuben shakes his head. “Real deal,” he says. “Good festival. Many foreigners to be there, with round eyes like you.”

“I don’t like festivals,” I say, which is true, especially about festivals attended with Reuben.

“You like this festival. Is for kimchi. Many foreigners to be there.”

“There’s a festival for kimchi?” I ask. While delicious, Korea’s spicy pickled cabbage hardly warrants its own celebration.

“Is for tourists,” Reuben admits. He smiles at me. “Maybe you see your Melinda. Then you not so lonely.”

Something in my chest constricts.

“Melinda?” I ask.

Reuben waves his hands. “Maybe. You can talk with her. Very likely.”

“I’ll go,” I say, resigning myself to a long day with Reuben, eating kimchi and chasing phantoms.