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Because I Hate Korea

Chang Kang-Myoung translation by Stephen J. Epstein and Mi Young Kim with an introduction by Stephen J. Epstein

Abstract: Chang Kang-myoung's provocatively titled novel *Because I Hate Korea* (*Han'gugi sireoseo*) became a best-seller in 2015 and is among the most notable literary works to address rampant dissatisfaction among South Korean millennials. In recent years, Chang, a former journalist (b. 1975), has developed a reputation for adroit and prolific fictionalized expressions of local discontent. *Because I Hate Korea* reflects a pervasive desire on the part of the nation's younger people to escape from "Hell Joseon," a coinage that has attained widespread circulation. This piece briefly introduces the novel, setting it within its wider contemporary context, and then provides a translation of the first chapter.

Key words: South Korea, Hell Joseon, Chang Kang-myoung, Korean fiction

Introduction

Over the last year, many South Koreans have taken heart from resilient democratic institutions that overcame the nation's protracted political crisis and confirmed the impeachment of the authoritarian, aloof, and corrupt Park Geun-hye. Her successor Moon Jae-in has maintained impressive approval ratings throughout the first year of his presidency: despite occasional small dips, after his successful April summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, he was enjoying his highest ever levels of support. Similarly, Korea's consumer confidence index, though also subject to ongoing fluctuations, had reached its highest level in seven years by the end of 2017. It has thus been tempting, even amidst the precariousness caused by the volatile standoff between North Korea and the Trump administration, to see improvements in the collective national mood of South Korea, a country that has languished in palpable malaise in recent years, especially after the sinking of the Sewol ferry. Nonetheless, intractable problems of social and economic structure remain and are keenly felt, above all by the nation's youth: the unemployment rate for those aged 15-29 stood at a record annual high in 2017. If one includes the so-called "sentiment unemployment rate," that also takes into account those who have stopped the job search out of discouragement, those who only find part-time work, and those who have graduated from university and are awaiting the proper moment to go on the job market, the figure reached almost 23% last year.

Below is a translation by myself and Mi Young Kim of the first chapter of Chang Kang-myoung's provocatively titled novel *Because I Hate Korea* (*Han'gugi sireoseo*), one of the most notable literary works to address rampant dissatisfaction among Korean millennials. In recent years, Chang, a former journalist (b. 1975), has developed a reputation for adroit and prolific fictionalized expressions of local discontent. *Because I Hate Korea* became a best-seller in the country in 2015 and reflects a pervasive desire on the part of the nation's younger people to escape from "Hell Joseon," a coinage that has attained widespread circulation. Se-woong Koo neatly summarizes

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salient features of this grim contemporary equivalent of the feudal Joseon Dynasty: "having to sacrifice youth for interminable education, the state and a job one does not believe in; a narrow path to financial security and an even more narrowly defined path to success; growing inequality and hereditary privileges of the haves; lack of social welfare that might cushion the fall to poverty; and elite corruption."[1] The term Hell Joseon has also been accompanied by the rise of such memes as the "spoon theory" that regards social status in contemporary Korea as inherited. The notion that, for example, a "dirt spoon" (*heulksujeo*) can never become a "gold spoon" (*geumsujeo*) emphasizes a widespread belief that opportunities for mobility have been closed off.

Gye-na, the protagonist of *Because I Hate Korea*, is a young woman who rejects the land of her birth and moves to Australia to seek the happiness that has eluded her. Her frustrations exemplify the anxieties of life in a nation where neoliberal transformations have intersected in pernicious ways with a traditionally competitive mindset. Gye-na's account critiques a dehumanizing corporate culture that has made it impossible for her to find fulfilment or economic security. Degrading work as a cog in a corporate machine foists indignities upon her and the customers for whom she approves credit card purchases under a set of arbitrary guidelines. An inability to achieve a satisfying work/life balance, poor working conditions (and even worse commuting conditions), and concerns about life after retirement all push Gye-na to dream of life elsewhere. The success of *Because I Hate Korea* strongly suggests that the protagonist's choice to pull up stakes resonated with a broad swath of the reading public, as emigration or long-term travel has become a coping mechanism: a recent survey from an employment portal shows that among job seekers in their twenties as many as four-fifths of those would move away from Korea if given the opportunity; almost half of those surveyed said they were already making plans to leave.[2]

Chang's debut novel *The Bleached* (*Pyobaek*), for which he won the Hankyoreh Literary Award in 2011, had accused South Korean society of forsaking its younger members and making suicide an option that is considered seriously by far too many. Early on in that text Chang presents a lengthy list of neologisms applied to the current generation that use single letters from the Roman alphabet, à la Generation X and Y, and characterize them by the challenging environment they face. Most damning and widespread is a meme that depicts South Korea's current youth as part of the *N-po sedae* ("the generation of giving up N-items,") where N is commonly 3, 5, or 7, and the items that must be discarded include such fundamental human desires as dating, marriage and children. Chang takes a considered approach in addressing the complex issues that have brought about such a state.

Chang Kang-myoung appears as a spokesperson for young Koreans ca. 15:40.

Chang's 2015 novella *Fired* (*Albasaeng jareugi*) dwells on the uncomfortable conflict between a part-time worker who fights back against what she perceives as unfair dismissal by the supervisor through whose eyes readers view the situation. *Fired* shares features with *Because I Hate Korea* in presenting a young female character unable to adapt to a demoralizing contemporary work environment. In the latter text, Chang extends readers' ability to sympathize with subordinate workers by making Gye-na a protagonist who speaks in a first-person voice that renders her a vivid and

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compelling representative of unhappy young Koreans; we become confidantes who hear Gye-na's story directly.

At a company dinner early in the novel, Gye-na, who has dreamed of retiring to provincial Jeju Island as an escape from Seoul, experiences an epiphany and realizes that if she is so unhappy in Korea she can move elsewhere. She notes a collective sense of being trapped and links her reflections to the cheery lyrics of the song "Bingo" (*Bing'go*) by the group Turtles. For Gye-na, the song's popularity particularly among men derives from its ability to offer them false comfort about their hard lives. The false cheeriness is placed in a harsh light, however, when she discovers that the group's leader Turtleman, who gives his name to the chapter, has passed away under far less cheery circumstances that spotlight Korea's severe economic environment.

"Bingo" by Turtles

As Steven Denney has noted on the Sino-NK blog, the uncritical reproduction of the Hell Joseon meme referred to above:

> "risks essentializing the hardships faced by young South Koreans when, in fact, there is nothing particularly unique about, say, the level of youth unemployment in the country…comparatively speaking, if any country can be said to be going through hellish conditions, it probably isn't South Korea. Try, instead: Greece, Spain, Italy, or Portugal, and that's just among the rich countries of the world."[3]

Objectively speaking, Denney has a point. In interviews, Chang himself has acknowledged that the calcification of the capitalist system is by no means unique to South Korea and that the slowing of growth there is no more severe than elsewhere. Similar issues facing youth can be found elsewhere in East Asia, including wealthy Singapore.[4] The problem, however, is that happiness is a subjective state; Gye-na's narrative offers a useful window into personally felt experience. In Chang's framing, the lack of value that Korean society places on those who do not succeed in rigidly prescribed terms causes widespread misery. Thus, although Denney is quite right to note that the term Hell Joseon may conjure its own reality and exacerbate self-defeating pessimism, most Koreans have long understood (and not a few, like Gye-na, resist) the idea that individuals are positioned locally within a hierarchical pecking order that can treat status, success, and even self-esteem as a zero-sum game.

The indignities associated with Korea's socioeconomic pyramid are brought to life for Gye-na when she endures an excruciating dinner with the parents of her boyfriend Ji-myeong, who ignore her at the table when she finally meets them for the first time. Gye-na lives in a poor section of Seoul north of the Han River; her father is a building watchman and her unambitious older sister works at Starbucks. Ji-myeong, on the other hand, lives in far wealthier Gangnam, south of the Han, and his father is an academic at a Seoul university. The social distance is intensified because her boyfriend, in a well-meaning but condescending attempt to forestall awkward questions at the dinner, reveals Gye-na's family background beforehand. His parents react to this information by snubbing Gye-na, treating her as if she is virtually invisible. Relationships that cross class barriers, especially with the male in the higher social position, are a cliché of Korean popular culture that go as far back as *The Tale of Chunhyang*, but the trope here has a realistic cast by not serving to feed a fairy-

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tale ending, as often is the case, but rather underlines the petty humiliations of daily life. Gye-na, cynical but vulnerable, reacts to the slight with outrage.

In a passage at the novel's climax, Gye-na considers the extreme tendency toward ranking in society around her. In her analysis, not only do students create elaborate hierarchies among universities based on reputation and location, but even at Seoul National University, the nation's most elite institution, students draw distinctions depending on faculty of study and high school attended, and thus resentments fester. For her, regular confrontation with disrespect because of one's position in this social food chain drives unhappiness. The sardonic, fast-moving narrative of *Because I Hate Korea* steers clear of self-pity but emphasizes that, in contrast to Korea, Australian blue-collar workers and manual laborers are not treated as "losers."[5]

Gye-na winds up experimenting with various jobs in Australia. She also experiments in her relationships with men, and multicultural Australia proves a useful setting for reflections on how South Korea positions itself in national hierarchies: Gye-na dates a white Australian and an Indonesian and notes the discrepant impact on her relationships with other Koreans in the local community. She also notes how hierarchies and enmities develop in Australia among Koreans between permanent residents, international students and those on working holiday visas, and highlights the precarity of the latter group.[6]

Despite the disquieting vision of South Korea outlined here, the novel lacks neither humor nor hope. Australia proves daunting in many ways, but Gye-na persists in her attempts to build a new life. Ultimately, Chang asks not so much what is a life well lived, as what sort of modest, happy existence can one carve out for oneself amidst the increasingly severe social and economic constraints young Koreans struggle with. Although Gye-na initially leaves Korea because of the antipathy proclaimed in the title, she returns to test whether she can commit to marriage with Ji-myeong, the most admirable of all the men she dates. By the time she leaves a second time, however, the reader realizes that Gye-na does not hate Korea. Rather, she feels hurt by the lack of compassion society shows for her and those like her; her decision to pursue goals in a wider world derives from strength and maturity.

Chapter One - Turtleman

I officially broke up with Ji-myeong at Incheon Airport the day I left for Australia. We didn't have a car between the five of us in my pathetically poor family, so Ji-myeong borrowed his dad's and gave us a lift. Getting my huge, floppy bag and trunk to the airport would've been a complete hassle without him.

I sat in the passenger seat next to Ji-myeong, my mom and dad were in the back, and the baggage was stuffed in the boot. Such was my awkward farewell to Korea. Mom kept up a running monologue from behind. "Gye-na, if it gets too hard, come home, take good care of yourself, don't scrimp on food just to save money." She repeated the same things over and over.

At check-in I ran into a problem with going over the weight allowance. I had to open my bag and remove a few books buried at the bottom. Dad tied them in his windbreaker like he was wrapping up a bundle and held them to his chest.

"You're going to come back, I know it. I'll be waiting for you." Ji-myeong hugged me in front of the international departure area. My parents gawked at the spectacle from a few steps away.

I lifted my face from Ji-myeong's cheek. I already couldn't stand him. Don't give me that

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crap. This is really goodbye. Official goodbye, I thought, and entered departures.

Before getting into the line for security, I took a quick look back. Mom was keeping up a constant wave. Her eyes met mine, and she was saying something. I bet it was "If it gets too hard, come home, take good care of yourself, don't scrimp on food just to save money." Dad stooped forward, clutching the books he'd wrapped in the windbreaker. He looked sad.

Ji-myeong stood crying at their side.

Why did I leave Korea? In short, I hate it. If you want me to expand a bit, it's because I can't live here. Don't get in my face about it, please. I can hate the country I was born in. Do you have a problem with that? It's not like I said, "Let's kill all Koreans and burn the embassy down." I'm not agitating for a boycott or to burn the flag. A lot of people would nod and say, "That's using your brain," if they met Americans who hate their country or Japanese who are embarrassed about theirs. Right?

And why I can't live here…I really don't have what it takes to compete in Korea. I'm an animal that should be on the way to extinction. I can't deal with the cold, I can't give my all for anything, I didn't get squat handed down to me. But I'm still damn picky. I think about how far I have to commute, about easy access to cultural stuff, about the chance to develop in my job.

There's this animal, Thomson's gazelle. It appears in documentaries about the African savannah and then gets eaten by lions. When you see them, you know a lion is going to come along, and one of the gazelles for sure is going to jump out of some weird spot and get caught. That's me, the gazelle who is picked off. I don't do what others do. Oh, over here it's too shady, the gazelle thinks, or the grass is too tough, or whatever. Then it wanders away from the herd and becomes a target.

I'm that gazelle, and I don't have it in me to freeze when the lion shows up. I have to run away as fast as I can. That's why I left Korea.

I know it's more attractive not to run away but to hold your ground, fight, and win. So, what should I do? Close ranks with my fellow gazelles and face the lion?

My period came on in full force when I was standing in front of immigration. I hesitated whether to head to the bathroom since I hated to waste the time I'd spent in line. But in fact there wasn't even an issue of hesitating. Something that felt like a raw oyster was sliding right out of me. By the time I had a chance to check in the toilet, the crotch of my panties was already soaked through with blood. I'd stowed a pad in my carry-on, but of course no extra pair of panties. I dabbed away as much blood as I could with toilet tissue and stuck the pad on my underwear. I didn't have any other choice.

It must have been stress that brought my period on early. Actually, I was already losing my nerve on the plane. I couldn't even understand the flight attendant's English when she asked, "Would you like something to drink?" She repeated it three times and then just handed me a Coke.

To settle myself, I mentally rehearsed for questioning: "What's the purpose of your visit?" "Is this your first time in Australia?" But the officer at immigration didn't ask a thing. A look at my passport, a look at my face, an insincere thank you, and my passport was back in my hands. Not until I'd taken it and gone a few steps did it occur to me he should have said "Welcome" or "Have a nice day." I muttered softly to myself, "Have a nice day."

And so, seeping blood, I crossed the border.

My oversized bag was practically about to burst. I tried to haul it down from the luggage carousel but couldn't manage in one go and

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almost got dragged up on to the belt with it. The wheels on that huge, floppy sack of mine sounded as loud as thunder.

I was going to take out a pair of panties and change in the bathroom, but it was impossible. The trunk and bag were too big to bring into a stall with me, and I didn't have a companion to watch them. No choice but to go through customs in damp, bloodied underwear. I walked on rehearsing the phrase "nothing to declare" to myself. A customs officer pointed at my luggage: "Kimchi? No kimchi?"

The couple who ran the study abroad agency came to meet me at the airport. I'd have been mortified to take out panties in front of them, so in the end I just got in the car without changing. They brought me to a temporary accommodation where I'd stay for a week, a two-story house with garden and garage. The houses, all clustered together with red-tile roofs, looked like a painting.

"Pretty, isn't it? If you can't find long-term housing, you're welcome to stay here. I'll drop the rent for you," the chatty wife offered as she got out of the car. I perked up a bit at last.

But she didn't go in through the front gate. Instead she opened a door to the small garage at the side of the house. They'd remodelled it, stuck a desk and bed inside and were renting it as a studio apartment. Only after some time had gone by did I discover that what they charged for this makeshift lodging of theirs was more than a night at a decent business hotel.

Before I realized I needed to leave Korea, I used to fantasize about how I'd retire around age 50 and go live on Jeju-do.

I looked at it this way: I could take the money I'd saved and buy some scruffy apartment down on the island. I'd live by a schedule, getting up and going to bed at a regular time. I'd cook at home. To go along with my rice, I'd have only two or three plain side dishes, which I'd make myself. If I felt like having chicken, I could have chicken. I wouldn't live like a monk or anything. On a typical day, I'd have breakfast and read a little while sipping my morning coffee, then go run by the beach. I wouldn't be able to afford a health club. I'd have to head outside to stretch and jog. Then I'd go borrow books from the library. I'd read lots and learn how to play an instrument. Since I'd have plenty of time, maybe I'd learn two. I'd be able to practice heaps with all that time.

I'd want to raise vegetables like lettuce in a garden plot. Think about it. You water the plants and reap the rewards. Wouldn't it be great? They say going back to a farming life is hard, but that's if you do it for a living. I'd be bent over for, like, 20-30 minutes a day, working the soil a little, and that'd be it. How hard could it be? And I wanted to learn how to swim and dart around in the water like a fish. Cut turns in the pool and stay underwater for as long as the Little Mermaid.

I'd go up to Seoul once a year. I'd only visit once, so I'd be able to stay for a week and see my family, buy stuff I needed, catch some shows, and meet friends. And after all that, I'd die when I reached 60. What'd be the point of stretching it out longer? Ten years of such a life would be enough. Consider this too: if you go through the hell of slaving away at a company, you can live comfortably from 60 to 80. But the later you retire, the more money you need. As you get older, your body breaks down and you have to go to the doctor. If you retire earlier, you can feel more relaxed and be healthier.

Anyway, I made up my mind that I'd have to commit suicide when it was time to die. The mere thought of living to 90 or 100 all frail and infirm terrifies me. Isn't killing yourself at 80 and at 60 the same thing? How about moving retirement up five years? You could have 10 comfortable years after 45 and check out at 55. What a thing of beauty that would be.

Every day that I worked in Korea I found myself

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reduced to tears, more because of the commute than the job. Have you ever taken subway line #2 in the morning from Ahyeon to Yeoksam via Shindorim? Humanity and dignity? When you're fighting for survival you come to realize at a gut level that humanity and dignity are a bonus.

From Shindorim to Sadang you're so jammed in that your bones practically ache. Every time I rode line #2, I'd wonder what sin I'd committed in a past life to deserve this fate. Betray my country? Engage in insurance fraud? I'd look at those around me and wonder, "So, what was your crime?"

People who tell women to make more babies need to give line #2 at rush hour a try. A few trips from Shindorim to Sadang, and they'd shut their yaps right up. But people who complain about the low birth rate aren't likely to be riding the subway.

The company I worked at was called W Comprehensive Financial when I was there. After I'd been rejected by all the usual big corporations, I'd applied more or less randomly and got hired. Later the firm changed its name to W Securities. Yep, the W Securities of the scandal that drove a bunch of employees to suicide. That company.

A lot of friends asked me how I landed a job in finance without a relevant degree. I don't know how I did it either. None of us knows why we were picked or passed over. Could be that bosses mostly just look at the applicants' faces and decide.

The name W Comprehensive Financial might make it sound like the company belonged to the world of high finance, but it had a lousy reputation and they paid crap wages. For people keen to work in finance, maybe it ranked a tad above a mutual savings bank? I was really grateful for the job, but honestly, my talents leave me about as special as a paving stone. I had nothing to be proud of.

Still, being hired straight after graduation was a relief. If I hadn't landed the position, I'd have taken a job anywhere. And my life might have been different. Not once did I think about my career long term. I just considered it important to have a steady income and not be lazing around.

I worked in the card division, with the so-called "approval analytics specialists" of the credit logistics team. W Comprehensive Financial had partnered with an overseas corporation and issued credit cards. They were well-known among the rich because in return for the high annual fee, they provided a card without a credit limit.

Actually, though, that was bullshit. There was a limit—the customers just didn't know what theirs was. If all of a sudden somebody wanted to make a really big purchase, our team had to decide whether to allow the transaction, and fast. Not all purchases came our way—small amounts were approved automatically by computer. But if somebody who spent around 500,000 won a month suddenly wanted to buy a ten million won diamond, the computer sent us the transaction. At the point of sale, they'd explain to the card holder, "Oh, your transaction is taking longer than expected; please wait a moment." If it took too long, the customer would either fish out another card or leave in embarrassment.

We had to decide within five minutes whether to approve transactions the system sent us. The problem was that we didn't have a manual on how to decide. It was totally subjective. There were a lot of factors to consider. For example, a purchase might be turned down for somebody who wasn't working but be acceptable for a doctor. We'd scan the record of late payments and see if customers owned where they lived or were leasing. Job, age, date of birth, address, purchases approved in the previous month, the store they were in, and what they wanted to buy all showed up on our screens

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automatically. If the store was near the Gangwon Casino and the purchase was gold or a car, I wasn't allowed to make the decision. I had to forward those cases to a supervisor.

Not until a transaction was declined did customers realize that their card actually had a limit. There'd be a protest, which would go in the first instance to the call centre. If that explanation didn't do the trick, the call came over to us. Those conversations were really tough. Most people were furious and would demand to know how a transaction could be turned down if there was no limit on the card. We'd come up with a story about some special circumstance, like how the customer had a record of a late payment two years ago, and that after a certain period passed unlimited use would be possible. Usually we couldn't win over the customer even with those sorts of explanations. Some people got really nasty, and some of them cussed us out.

I felt like my brain was on automatic when I was at work. Even if I was just a cog in the organization machinery, it'd have been nice to know where my cog fit, how it turned and what direction we were moving in. I had no idea what kind of work I was doing and why, or what my company really did. Maybe I was all confused. Actually, no. I didn't even try to find out. It was kind of like being a high school student.

So, of course, work was dull. I had no concept of what stimulating work meant. "What kind of job interests you?" The question was pointless to me. I hated hearing customers complain. I had no affection for the company, and would sit there looking grumpy. Looking back, the people I worked with were all really nice. New employees are supposed to act sweet and approach more senior co-workers first. But I didn't strike up conversation with anyone unless I was asked a question. When I think about it now, the idea that people would join me around a lunch table amazes me. I could easily have become an office outcast.

There was one interesting thing. Since our card functioned as a status symbol, a lot of entertainers used it, and I could look up their transaction history. All I had to do was put their name into the system and, poof, up popped their personal information. I'd search entertainers' real names on Naver and see what I could find out. "Hey, now check her out. Wow, she's sure into spending money." "Oh, XXX favours that luxury brand. That's the make-up that XXX uses. XXX went to a hostess bar the day before his wedding, XXX stayed in a love hotel a few days ago." "Hmm, every one of these purchases is for women's products. What's all that about? Did he get himself a girlfriend now?"

I worked there for just over three years. Every day I felt an increasing urge to flee.

First of all, there was no challenge in the work itself. It didn't seem like a promotion was in the offing, and it wasn't the kind of job that'd make you say, "It's hard but interesting." And it sure wasn't as if they paid a great salary.

But the firm was large and people occasionally did get to move to a different department after a stint in approvals. I looked forward to something along those lines. After two years or so I asked to be transferred and got an encouraging response. But several months went by and still no transfer came. Just because I asked didn't mean it would happen, I realized.

I approached my team leader for the transfer. I was vague about where I wanted to be sent. I realize in retrospect that I hadn't said I wanted to go to a particular unit and that I didn't know either what other teams did or what I'd have wanted to do.

He responded by saying, "Gye-na, approvals is a good area for women. But if you want to go to the sales division, all you have to do is put up your hand and you can go any time. Would you

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like to join them?"

I said no. I found it hard enough to talk properly when I met new people. How could I possibly do sales?

The team leader continued, "Give it a little more time. If a position opens up in human resources or general affairs, you'll be the first one I recommend."

But that didn't happen. Later, when I said I was preparing a resignation letter, the team leader called me and bought me a nice barbeque dinner, pork belly and pork neck, hoping to persuade me to hold out for a couple more months. If somebody under him resigned for no reason, his evaluation for handling personnel would suffer. I remember him asking me to hang on until his review was over. At this point, I think I could have held on longer, but back then what ran through my head was "Why? You didn't listen to anything I said." So, I brushed him off and gave a flat no. If I could do it over again, I'd have stayed another two or three months. A good evaluation was important for him in his own way.

Well, my whining at least got them to change my work schedule. There were day shifts and night shifts. Working nights could be hard on you physically but it had its advantages. First of all, there weren't as many transactions going on, so things were low stress. And if you worked nights you didn't need to worry about a uniform. That was all really positive. I'd just go to work in jeans and sneakers. There was plenty of time to study. I should have studied accounting. But back then what did I know about the value of accounting? I was stupid.

Something else nice about working nights was that at that point I was still sleeping in the same room with my older sister Hye-na and younger sister Ye-na. You can imagine what a pain it was for three grown women to share a room. But working nights meant I had the room to myself when I slept. Another good thing was that running errands like going to the bank and shopping became a snap. All those benefits were awesome.

Oh, yeah, another one. A lot of people eat kimchi stew or bean paste stew every day for lunch without getting tired of it. Every day I'd think "not again" but tag along anyway. I was totally sick of stew. Changing to the night shift meant I could eat what I wanted. I'd just pack a meal for myself or have something delivered.

That said, working at night definitely had a downside. Finance companies have all these indoctrination programs, you know, shouting slogans and so on. They do all that stuff during the day. Having to attend those sessions regardless was like walking on the sidewalk and still getting hit by a car. But if you get hit by a car and break an arm or a leg, you at least get some recovery time, right?

It was during a company dinner to relax after one of our team-building exercises that I first had the thought that I needed to leave Korea rather than just go to Jeju-do.

Most employees in approvals were women, maybe 15 or 16 out of a total of 20. But that day at the company dinner the team leader kept making risqué jokes, maybe thinking he could score some points with his staff. A few hours before, a lecturer from outside the company had had us draw charts showing how much we trusted our co-workers. The team leader was caught out not trusting those of us under him at all. He looked really sheepish.

The team leader's previous position had been managing the ladies who sold the credit cards. He'd picked up lots of suggestive lines somewhere. Do the women who handle card sales like off-colour jokes? We weren't sure whether to treat his innuendo as sexual harassment or not. Since the atmosphere moved into iffy territory and we wanted to avoid having him go overboard, we hastily wrapped up that first round and headed to a

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karaoke club for round two.

One of the few male workers in the group took the mike and sang "Confession."

"Don't the lyrics seem like they're from a wife's lover to the husband asking to be forgiven? 'I know it's not my place, pardon me for daring to want her' 'Forgive me, if you want to punish me, I'll accept it.' "

A woman sitting next to me who was a junior of mine in the company asked why guys were really into that song. I found her question so funny that I snorted out my mouthful of beer. For the next tune, the team leader chose "Bingo," another favourite of the men. Some women who were veterans followed him on stage to help him keep face.

"Fighting spirit! If I begin again! I'll be master of my fate!"

I wondered whether I should get up and join them too but stayed put. I didn't want to seem indifferent to it all, though, so I shook a tambourine as I sat and sang along.

"I love the land where I live! I've never thought to leave!"

I felt like I understood why the lyrics of "Confession" appealed to younger guys. They must be frustrated that pretty women didn't give them a second glance. They struggle over how to deal with their frustration and choose to screw themselves up. But that's better than bitching about a woman being high-maintenance or whatever because of sour grapes.

Middle-aged men sang "Bingo" because life is really hard for them. They all hate Korea so much that they secretly dream of leaving. But they're forced to deny it and want to hypnotize themselves into believing otherwise. "It all depends on your attitude." "Coasting along in life is boring." But then the thought hit me: what's so wrong with leaving?

A few years later in Australia I heard news about the singer of "Bingo." I was sharing a room with two other women at the time. Given the shortage of studio apartments and dorms in Australia, Korean international students usually rent a house and live together in a group of ten or so, three to a room. They call it a "chicken coop share."

"Gye-na, did you hear? Turtleman passed away." The girl in the bed next to mine spoke up. She was lying on her stomach and surfing the net on her laptop.

"Turtleman? Who's Turtleman?"

"Turtleman. Don't you know the song? 'Here I am again! Feeling really good! Going to sing a song, one two three four!' "

"That's 'Bingo.' The singer's name was Turtleman? Wasn't it Turtle?" The other girl raised her head and joined the conversation.

"The group's name was Turtles—the lead vocalist was called Turtleman. Anyway, he died."

"What happened?" The other girl and I asked at the same time. The girl with the laptop, excited to have drawn our attention to the news she'd read, kept feeding us details. That Turtleman had died at home from chronic heart disease, hardening of the arteries. That treatment had cost so much he died in poverty. That a financial dispute with his management led him to set up his own agency. That it hadn't gone well and the ensuing debts forced him to work as an assistant to other entertainers.

"And his songs were so cheerful…" The girl with the bed furthest on the outside was dismayed.

As the girl in the middle went on about what happened to Turtleman, I ran through the lyrics

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of “Bingo” in my head. I think the song ended, “Hope I’m smiling when I draw my final breath.” I wondered whether Turtleman was smiling as his eyes closed for the last time. Probably not.

Around that time came another piece of news that was as personally shocking for me as Turtleman’s death. A few employees at W Securities had killed themselves. In a suicide note, one of them had written to the CEO: “Sir, you can’t do this. Please give the money back to my clients.”

As the W Group’s fortunes declined, they’d imposed quotas on the employees in the securities division. They claimed that everything was sound and had the employees sell promissory notes for subsidiary companies’ stock. But that was more bullshit. Several months later those companies went bankrupt. They had turned their employees into swindlers. Is that the behaviour of crooks or what?

What really shocked me, though, was the thought that if I’d stayed in Korea and kept working at W Comprehensive Financial, I might have wound up fobbing off those dodgy notes myself. As foreign credit cards expanded into Korea, their card division had gone under. That’s why the company changed its name to W Securities. I’d heard that most people in the card division had been transferred to stock sales.

If I’d stayed in Korea, could I have resisted the turning of that huge cogwheel? I doubt it.…

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Notes

[1] See here.
[2] See, e.g., NateNews, (2016), "Han'gugin 80% 'Imingago sipda'…wae?" (80% of Koreans want to emigrate…why?"; Korea Times, (2016), "Koreans Want to Leave 'Hell Joseon'."; Korea Times, (2016). "Koreans Are Leaving Korea,"; and Lee, Minyoung (2016), "Hel Joseon talchulloseo-ui janggi yeohaeng: indo-ui hangugin janggi yohaengjareuleul jungshimeuro" (Long-term Travel as 'Escape from Hell-Joseon': A Study of Long-term Korean Travelers in India"), *Bigyo munhwa yeongu* 22.2: 291-328.
[3] Denney, Steven, 2016. "Yongusil 82: Not So Hellish After All," .
[4] Kotkin, Joel. 2016. "Singapore's Midlife Crisis,"
[5] Cf. the similar point made by informants in New Zealand in Kitchen, Margaret, (2014), "Korean Migration: The First Reason for Coming to New Zealand is Adventure," *New Zealand Population Review* 40: 111-126.
[6] On the precarity of young Koreans on working holiday visas, see Chun, Jennifer Jihye and Ju Hui Judy Han, (2015), "Language Travels and Global Aspirations of Korean Youth," *positions: asia critique* 23.3: 565-593.

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