

Eunuchs

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Natalie put down her bag, pulled out her class planner and pens, then asked her students to take out their essays on “My Greatest Wish.” Earnest, clueless Pak Jeong, was the only one to make eye contact, so she called on him to read his essay out loud. He stood, his paper held up over his smooth, bland face, as he started. “I very good want the BMW 728. I like the motorcycles.” After a few sentences, he lowered the paper and shrugged. The others stole glances at each other and rolled their eyes. Even among those outcasts, he was a pariah.

“Well, that’s a start, but you need to write more than that, okay?”

He looked back at his paper, perhaps hoping to find more written there.

“Try to write more like you talk. Read it out loud to yourself and hear how it sounds. That always works.”

A couple more students read wishes for high-end consumer goods, and Natalie countered with, “Doesn’t anyone wish to *become* something? To learn a skill?” Blank faces looked back at her, so she asked them to take out their copies of *Night*. However, only two of them had brought their books to class, and she hoped at least some of them had done the reading. Ben Lam had fallen asleep, and Xiao Deng texting a message from behind his book. When she asked him to put the phone away, he slumped in his chair and stared stonily ahead.

Getting no response on the reading, she again went over the homonyms *there, their, they’re* and the difference between *lie* and *lay*. She called on Xiao to talk about his hero, Yao Ming.

“He’s very eunuch.”

“Xiao, do you mean unique?”

He nodded.

“First, it’s pronounced u-neek, and you can’t be very unique. Unique is one of a kind.”

They stirred in their seats.

“And you need to know what a eunuch is. Hm. A eunuch is a person, a man, who has been castrated.”

They looked at her, confused.

“It used to be that in some cultures, men would be hired to watch over the harem and they would have their, um, testicles removed.”

The boys squirmed, laughing. The only girl, Oh Kyung, lowered her head and stared at her folded hands.

“In China,” Xiao said, “that was done very much.”

“Okay, so make sure you can pronounce each work correctly. You don’t want to say the wrong thing and embarrass yourselves.”

On their way out of class, she heard Xiao whisper to Jeong, “Hey, you are a eunuch.” Yes, he could learn. Unfortunately, it was at the expense of the weakest person. She wanted to help him lose the Lord of the Rings backpack and the habit of buttoning his shirt up to the top, to bathe more regularly, and, in general, to imitate the students around him a bit. Unfortunately, he was imitating the wrong things, like smoking. During study hall one evening, she had found him behind a stand of trees on the edge of campus, lighting a cigarette. “Jeong? How long have you been smoking? It’s so bad for you.” How incongruous to see him with his baby face and nerd clothes sucking on a cigarette.

He held up his pack and said, “They are my friends.”

She had been trying to get this group’s English language skills up to snuff for the rest of the curriculum at Deighton Hall, but she’d had to scrap her plans for the five-paragraph essay and work instead on basic grammar and vocabulary. It wasn’t their fault their parents had, reputedly, paid test-takers to sit in for the entrance exams back home, that they had been

weeded out from the intellectual elite, the ones who fit the Western stereotype of Asian excellence. She'd come to learn that this remedial course was her test as a first-year teacher, her trial by fire. Succeed with them, and she would be allowed to stay another year. But she wanted to prove not only that she could do this, but that these weren't throw-away students, seat warmers with rich parents back in Seoul and Hong Kong; they could learn.

And in reality, she found the "better" students more of a challenge, less rewarding. All the grade consciousness without any of the intellectual curiosity. In her Am. Lit. class that same day, she handed back essays on *Walden*. The one by Topher Adams was suspiciously well-written, as was his last paper. She'd questioned him then about plagiarism, but he'd denied it vehemently and had sicced his advisor on her, who mentioned Topher's Board-of-Trustees father with bags of money. This time, she gave him an A-, the minus a craven message that she was on to him. When she handed it to him, he flipped to the back page, swore under his breath and crumpled the paper and tossed it into his backpack. For the rest of class, he slouched in his chair and stared out the window, muttering hostile comments and snickering whenever she made a point. "Topher? Do you have something to say?"

"No." He smirked at her. "Just listening."

During her first week of classes, Topher had told her this was his favorite class and she naively believed him, thinking she had already made a significant connection. Now she realized he'd been playing her for the grade.

Why did she have to waste her time on the entitled in-crowd kids when it was students like Jeong who needed guidance? He was desperately homesick and completely out of his depths at Deighton Hall. If he didn't learn English better, he had told her, if he didn't get into an American college, then he had nowhere to go. It was a question of family honor. The minute Natalie gave him the tiniest bit of attention, he started dogging her

trail around campus, showing up at her dorm apartment in the evenings, lamely asking for help on his essays, but since he rarely brought any books, she knew what he really wanted was human contact. His roommate had moved out a week into the trimester and he was lonely. She wasn't sure if it was a crush or a displaced mother thing, but he had fixated on her. Although she tried to steer him toward his school work, he inevitably drifted toward talk of his family—his elderly father and much-younger mother—and his elaborate family lineage, which he could trace back for centuries. He worried about disappointing his parents, but all he wanted was to go back home to Korea. Natalie recognized his loneliness—after all, she felt like a foreigner herself, a rare Midwesterner among Eastern preppies—but by the end of the day, she was exhausted, her voice hoarse, her eyes red and scratchy. She needed some time to herself. Jeong would linger until she nudged him out, citing his homework and her papers to grade, the truth after all. Then she would lock the dorm, set the alarm, turn out the lights in her apartment, and sit at her window, staring across the courtyard at the hundreds of lights burning in dorm rooms, thinking how she was at once surrounded by people and completely alone.

At times like that, she wished she could redo the first week at the school, when she had foolishly slept with Greg Ryman, a science teacher/wrestling coach, who'd hit on her at the Headmaster's opening cocktail party, urging her to drink another Pomtini and then cradling her arm as she wove unsteadily back to the dorm. Now he ignored her, and she was embarrassed by the knowing smiles the other coaches gave her as she walked past their table in the dining hall. Clearly, all it had meant to Greg was the conquest of a newbie. That night, after he'd made a dismissive remark about her small breasts, she lay there, pulling the sheet up over her chest as he stepped into his discarded boxers, picked up his khakis, and left without saying goodbye.

She hadn't found any friends yet on the faculty. The women were either faculty wives, preoccupied by their young children, or other female

teachers, by and large products of eastern boarding schools like the students. They were all jocks, equally able to trade humor or to give wicked shin-checks, if necessary, with an unkind word or a field hockey stick. Not being a coach, Natalie didn't share that common bond and none of the English teachers seemed to like talking about books. It wasn't at all like Beloit, where Natalie had had friends and been reasonably happy. Herself the product of public schools, Natalie was convinced that, except for the most challenged inner-city schools, teaching was teaching, kids were kids. But at the boarding school, she found there was a whole lifestyle difference with unwritten rules that the others knew as if from birth, a kind of innate system of social cues for which she hadn't found the key. The girls in her dorm came for the most part from New York City, Long Island, or New England, and they appeared jaded, wary of anyone not part of their own tight circle. Even though Natalie was barely out of college herself and wasn't a stranger to the easy sexuality of dorm life, these girls seemed disturbingly familiar with HPV, herpes, and casual abortions.

Early on, Jessica Burnett, a senior, had made an effort to be friendly to Natalie, offering to fill her in on the inside scoop, telling her, "This place has a lot of subtext." She started showing up at Natalie's apartment after classes and Natalie welcomed the break from correcting. It was a good excuse to use her French press coffee maker and to make a full pot, which she could never finish on her own. Jessica had arrived at Deighton Hall as a freshman. Her father and grandfather were alumni, so there was never any question but that she'd go there as well. "Next stop, Yale, if I follow the family tradition," she said, winding her thick, blond hair into a coil behind her head. "But it's not a slam dunk like it was in dear ole Dad's days."

Jessica asked Natalie what she thought of Greg Ryman. Natalie blushed, wondering if news of her hook-up had leaked to the students. "I don't really know him," she said, knowing she sounded stilted.

"He's the teacher 'most likely to.'"

"Most likely to what?"

Jessica laughed and cocked her head to the side. “You know. But he’s a good teacher. You just have to know how to work him.” What did that mean?

Natalie had hoped to be able to advise the girls in her dorms about school work, boys, parents, but it became clear they were more interested in the coffee, soda, and food Natalie offered them than in any kind of relationship of trust. She also chafed under her role of enforcer, knowing that any walk down a corridor could result in discovering pot or alcohol or a boy in a room and then she’d have to report the infraction. This wasn’t why she’d become a teacher, but it was a point of honor to prove herself at the school.

Despite her resolve to keep up, piles of uncorrected papers cluttered her desk, and she found she had to value efficiency over careful attention to details. She’d lost an Am. Lit. essay and was dreading facing the pile until she could locate the missing one.

Although only October, it was already time to turn in provisional grades for the trimester. Natalie decided to base the marks on what she’d completed to date and hoped the students wouldn’t complain that the grades didn’t reflect all their work. She agonized over whether to skew the grades high as encouragement or to keep them low, to spur them on to work harder. Her eyes blurry, her head pounding, she stayed up late tallying the scores, typing in the grades, second-guessing herself, re-entering them. That night, she had a dream where she was standing at a dais in front of a cavernous amphitheater, attempting to give a lecture to students who were yelling, throwing books and pens, wrestling, making out, and because she had laryngitis, her voice came out as a wheeze. “Hey, you guys! Pay attention! Please!” When she opened up her notebook, all the semester grades flew off the pages, swirling around the room, where the students trampled on them, ripping them to shreds.

At the mid-trimester faculty meeting, Al Sweeter, the freshman dean, reviewed the new students' progress. Jeong was mentioned as one of the students risking failure in more than one class, hers being the only exception. When his grades were announced—F, F, D, C-, B+--Natalie heard a snicker from Greg's side of the room. Greg, who was Jeong's dorm master and science teacher, said that Jeong wasn't going to make it. "The boy is clueless in class and is a lightning rod for hazing."

Natalie raised her hand. "He seems to me to be a lonely boy who just needs some time to adjust. It's got to be a shock of cultures." She sat back, her pulse throbbing furiously in her throat.

Al Sweeter said, "That's why he's in the Slow Boat to China class."

She looked around the room. Slow Boat to China? Two teachers were nodding. "Excuse me?"

"We put him in your remedial class because we knew English would be a struggle. If that support isn't allowing him to do the work in his other courses, it's not a good sign."

"But it's only October."

"Time marches on. If he can't cut it, we'll have to flag him."

Greg added that if he weren't such a victim, guys might treat him better. He also said that Jeong owed him several lab reports and if he didn't get them to him in a week, it would be too late to pass the course. Why hadn't Greg alerted Jeong's advisor that he was falling behind? What a jerk.

When she returned to the dorm after the meeting, she heard raucous laughter and thought she smelled pot smoke. She inched down the hall and traced the smell and noise to Jessica's room. As she arrived outside the door, her hand poised to knock, the voices stopped. She stood there a moment, her heart in her mouth, then she hurried down the hall to her apartment and locked the door behind her.

The following day after breakfast, Natalie ducked into the dark paneled faculty room, hoping to grab a few minutes alone to correct a set of

quizzes before class. She uncapped her pen and fanned the quizzes on her lap, looking for one she knew would be good to start with. Greg walked in, gave her a curt nod, and took a seat on the opposite side of the room. He took out his New York Times and opened it noisily. Troubled by his presence, she tried to work for a couple of minutes, then screwed up her nerve and asked if he could cut Jeong some slack, given how hard it had been for him so far.

Greg said that Jeong was “A day late and a dollar, no, make that a yen, short,” then he laughed. When she pointed out that Jeong was Korean, not Japanese, he said, “A joke, Natalie?” He shook his head. “Listen. I just want him to be in the right school where he can make it. Better to know that early, so he can find a place where he can succeed.” He glanced over the top of his newspaper and said, “What you don’t understand yet is that it’s really not fair to all the other students if one drags them down.” His eyes darted to her legs, then back to his paper. “You can’t save every abandoned puppy you find in the street, Natalie.” He checked his watch. “You’ll toughen up in time.”

“I hope I never get to the point where I’m so jaded that I can throw away a person like garbage.” And she gathered up her papers, stuffed them into her bag, and rushed out of the room on shaky legs.

After class that day, even though the uncorrected pile beckoned her, Natalie called Jeong over and offered to help him with his lab reports, to get him organized and over the hump. He shrugged. “This is very important, Jeong.”

“I know.” He stood there, rocking back and forth on his heels.

“Right after classes today. Come to my apartment. I’ll get you out of P.E.. Bring all your notes and your book and we’ll straighten this out.” He turned to leave. “Jeong, you can do this.” He shuffled out of the room, his slept-on hair sticking up in back like rabbit ears held up by a bully.

That afternoon, he showed up with the plastic still covering his text book and no notes at all in his spiral notebook decorated with Korean

writing. He had no idea what to do for the lab. “Jeong, you have to help me here. What’s the assignment? If you can tell me that, you’re on the road to doing it.”

“I do not understand Mr. Ryman.” His breath was rank, his teeth mossy.

She sat back in her chair. “Did you ever ask him for help?”

“He said, ‘Do it like this.’ But I do not understand.”

She offered to read over the material with him, but he kept straying off topic. He was incensed that students and teachers never got his name right. “It is Pak Jeong, not Jeong Pak.” She told him it was hard for Americans to understand that Koreans put the family name first. “But it is an important name in Korea,” he said. “They do not show respect.”

“They just don’t know. But that doesn’t excuse rudeness,” she said, handing him a pen. “Here, let’s see if you can write down an opening paragraph.”

“My father does not think I work hard.”

“He wants you to succeed.” She motioned toward the paper. “Where’s your dictionary? Maybe we can look up some of the terms.”

“It is fucked.” The obscenity took her aback, mostly that he knew the word. He reached in his backpack and brought out a book, which he dropped on the table like a solid block. Someone had painstakingly glued all the pages together so he couldn’t use it.

“Who did this?”

He shrugged. “Some stupid person.”

“Jeong, this was a very mean thing to do. I’m so sorry. I’ll help you get a new one.”

“No one likes me. I want to go home.”

“I know, but you have to keep trying. This is the hardest time.” She ordered a new dictionary on-line to be delivered by overnight mail and she told him to come again the following day after classes. “It’ll get easier the

longer you're here." She didn't believe it herself, but she had to pretend it was true.

However, that night, a stomach bug swept through the school, and most of the students, including Jeong, were laid low. She heard that the infirmary had filled to capacity so they were turning students away. At this rate, everyone would be exposed.

Over the course of the next day, one student after another would grab books and run from the room, while the rest sat there listlessly, heads propped on their hands. By her last class, she asked anyone feeling sick to leave before they got started. Everyone left, even the ones obviously not sick. That night in her apartment, she stared at uncorrected papers, sipping ginger ale and crackers in anticipation of her own nausea, but somehow, she escaped it.

For the next two days, she marked time since no progress could be made with most of the group absent. Because the stakes were low, these were actually pleasant, relaxed classes where she felt a connection with the students. They talked about favorite books and movies and got into a great debate about nature versus nurture. After one class, a student told her this had been the best class of the year and she reminded herself that this was why she'd become a teacher.

By Friday, the illness had passed, and she planned to take up her sessions with Jeong, worried that he only had the weekend until the deadline for his labs. But he didn't come to class. Natalie called the infirmary to see if he was still there. The nurse said he'd gone back to the dorm yesterday. Or the day before; she wasn't sure. No one remembered having seen him in the past few days.

After classes that day, she climbed the stone steps to the fourth floor of the boys' dorm. As she walked down the hall, competing beats of electronic music and hip hop bled through closed doors. The smells of dirty laundry, body odor, Red Bull, and a lingering tang of pot smoke hung in the air. A student was walking toward her toting a pillow case stuffed

with laundry. “Where’s Jeong’s room?” she asked. He suppressed a smile and pointed to the end of the hall.

When she arrived at Jeong’s door, Natalie’s heart sank to see that he had affixed a dry-erase board to the door. Was he expecting friendly messages? Invitations to lunch? Instead, someone had drawn a cartoon of a buck-toothed Asian with an enormous erect penis and pendulous balls. She smeared the drawing with the side of her hand and knocked. No answer. She knocked again and called his name. Another kid poked his head into the hall and said that Jeong was probably there. “He’s always in his room.”

A wave of dread swept through her as she imagined him holed up, having hurt himself, needing a doctor. “Jeong? Are you there?” She put her ear to the door, then tapped it again. “I’m going to open the door. Okay?” She turned the knob and cracked the door open. The darkened room smelled like an animal’s cage with a desperate, coiled energy trapped inside. “Hello?” Clothes were piled on the floor. One bed was stripped down to a stained mattress. On the other bed, lurking under a tangle of quilts, she detected a curled-up form. “Jeong?”

“Go away. I am sleeping.”

She asked him why he hadn’t shown up for class. “Are you still sick?”

He said he wasn’t.

“Let’s get to work on your lab reports then.”

“Not now.”

“But they have to be finished by Monday.”

“I will do it later.”

“But, Jeong, Mr. Ryman means business.” She waited for a moment and then said, “This is really important. I’d like to help. You can’t just give up.” She heard the liquid intake of breath, but Jeong said nothing. “Jeong, really. Don’t just sit there and let this happen. If you don’t do something, it’ll be decided for you.” She listened to him breathe and then she shut the door, crossed the quad and dragged herself back up four flights of stairs, the odor of Jeong’s room lingering in her nose.

As she walked down the corridor toward her apartment, Jessica walked out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her, yelling, “Who the fuck took my tampons? Fuuuck!” She stopped in front of a door and pummeled it. “Rachel! Give me one of your tampons!” She glanced at Natalie. “Hey, do you have any coffee?”

“I can’t now. I have work to do.” Jessica turned on her heel and walked away. “Sorry. Maybe later?”

Back in her apartment, Natalie tried to correct some papers, but couldn’t focus, so she opened her laptop and started a letter to the dean to plead for leniency in Jeong’s case. She wanted to state her case in a few well-formed sentences, but she found her anger spilling out into pages of complaints about the way some students were ostracized, how teachers and the administration looked for ways to exclude those who are different. How anyone, even a teacher, who’s different faces blank walls. After writing four pages, she deleted the letter and started again. Each time, the task felt more daunting, the words more muddled. Finally, she put her head down on her arms to take a break.

She woke in the morning with a stiff neck and a headache. Outside her window, she heard a commotion. A group of students had gathered on the sidewalk outside the boys’ dorm under a sheet hanging from a top-floor window. She threw on some clothes and ran outside. As she approached the crowd, she saw empty window frames and misshapen lead mullions with shards of broken glass littering the sidewalk. Someone had obviously taken a bat and smashed all the first-floor classroom windows. The sheet had been covered with painted symbols, which, as she got closer, she saw was clearly a line of Asian writing, painted in ink. Her heart sank. *You’ve got to do something, Jeong.* She didn’t mean that. Half the students were dressed; the rest were in sleep tees and flannel pants. She also saw a very agitated Oh Kyung surrounded by a group of students pointing to the sign and talking animatedly. Natalie approached Kyung and placed a hand on her

arm. Kyung flinched and looked up. She guided the girl away from the students. “What does it say, Kyung?”

“I cannot tell you,” she said, her eyes welling.

“Kyung. You didn’t write it. Just tell me what it says.”

She shook her head. “It is not nice.”

“That’s okay. No one will blame you for this language.”

Kyung blushed, then said in a very soft voice, “Eat the shit, eunuchs. And the other word is too bad. I do not know it in English.”

“That’s okay.”

Jeong appeared above the banner, his arm raised, fist pumping. He was yelling in Korean, pointing at the crowd and then at the sky. Natalie felt her stomach drop.

A boy behind Natalie whooped then yelled, “Hey, you tell ‘em!”

She whipped around to look at a beefy, red-faced jock. “This is not funny. Have a little decency.”

“I didn’t do this.”

“No. You just make it worse by laughing.”

“This kid is hilarious.” He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Hello, dude? We can’t read freaky-deaky Korean.”

Al Sweeter elbowed his way into the crowd, accompanied by the school psychologist and a maintenance man, pushing a plastic trash can and a broom. Al and the psychologist put their heads together, looked up at Jeong, then talked some more. Greg joined them, toting a coach’s megaphone, nodding his head as Sweeter gesticulated. Jeong threw a clock radio that landed at their feet and splintered.

“Pak!” Greg yelled, “Stop now before you make it worse.” He turned to Sweeter and said that the kid had locked himself in his room. Could maintenance take the door off its hinges?

Jeong appeared at the window, this time with an armload of books. He ripped pages and sent the shredded paper over the crowd, who cheered, “No more school! Revolution!” His face was contorted and red. Natalie

could make out occasional English words mixed in with the Korean—fuck...shit...asshole. More books flew out the window, then his backpack, sailing end over end. Someone picked it up and twirled it over head, tossing it to another part of the crowd, and it was bounced from group to group like a raver in a mosh pit. Then he tossed out a lamp and was attempting to lift a chair to the window, but it wouldn't fit through the window frame.

"We can't have this," Al Sweeter said to Greg. "He's out of here." Greg nodded and took off toward the building.

Natalie stood in the middle of this group of people who had never given Jeong a moment's notice before now. Jeong was framed in the window, a tiny dictator shouting to his throngs of supporters, who had taken up the chant, "Go, Pak! Go, Pak!" As Natalie watched him face this ugly crowd, however, her dread turned to admiration. As much as she hated to acknowledge it, Greg was right in a way. This was no place for Jeong; he didn't belong here. And this was his way of going home. She wished she had the nerve to make such a spectacular exit herself, denouncing the school for its smug intolerance, the cruel treatment of outsiders. She imagined delivering her screed and then, tossing a sheaf of plagiarized papers into the air to cascade down on the heads of the chastened faculty members, she'd stalk out of the room, triumphant. She studied the bloodthirsty faces around her, turned back to Jeong's window, willing his eyes to meet hers, telepathically sending him encouragement. *Go, Pak. Go, Pak Go, Pak.*