

# GROOVE

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The future of international schools in Korea

# HWACHEON SANCHEONEO ICE FESTIVAL

Searching for the Trout Spirit



Somehow I hadn't noticed it—and by the time I finally did, it was too late. "There's a twenty-foot f\_ucking monster-fish through that fog!" I shouted.

The group of foreigners we had met on the bus stared at me, unmoved and unimpressed.

Bundled in winter gear, we had trekked from the one-roomed, intercity bus terminal, up the icy sidewalks, and onto a bridge. A pair of mutant black cats sauntered by, eyes dilated, high on something unseen. I think I felt it, something in the air—something ominous.

"Wait! You, feline, cat animal, f\_ckers! There's a monster-fish through that fog!"

But they hadn't understood.

"What is it with Korea and these mutants? Everywhere we go, it's a vegetable or makeup or some sh\_t," said my oafish advisor, Binx. He was referring to the mutants we had seen at festivals in the months prior.

"Blame it on the steroids of industrialism, man," I said.

"Steroids of industrialism."

"That's right! These cat bastards are an invasive species—the byproduct of an entertainment addiction run rampant. They didn't exist before the conglomerates steamrolled this pristine nation. Those pussycats there—they're walking advertisements, hobbyhorses of the industry roaches running this country."

Binx stepped closer. He squinted, jabbing a finger at my chest.

"Look, don't start spouting off like you did with those princess broads at the Kimchi Festival. We're here to find the Spirit and that's it, not give a Ted Talk about hipster garbage."

"Righty-o, man. Righty-o," I responded.

He was right, of course; no use getting pulled into the hydra of issues that plagued our modern-day circus—they would only serve as a bottomless time suck and another reason why we'd stand out in the crowd. Besides, we were here on an important assignment—an expedition of sorts with the sole purpose of reconnecting to a deeply rooted mysticism—the Spirit of the Trout.

It had been less than half an hour since our arrival in the snowy mountain town of Hwacheon. The town lay two hours north of Seoul by bus and a short ten-kilometer march south of a Kim Jong-un invasion. It was a risky situation, coming up here with limited Korean language and a foreign gait the locals could spot from a mile away. But reward goes to the bold and daring, and fearless travelers we were, man! Plus, the white American male was highly revered among

many. In fact, it seemed that, in every advertisement for this very festival, the smiling face of a *waygookin* beamed back at you—because if foreigners endorsed your event, then by god, it was of the divine.

We had no choice but to head into the fog. So we did, bumbling down the side of the hill to the river. But when we reached the riverbank, the magnitude of what lay before us set in. The scene was far from the mystical journey of reconnection I had imagined. No—this was anything but. In front of us lay an entertainment madhouse.

Dozens of visitors sitting on square, wooden boards that had been outfitted with enormous skating blades sped across the ice, narrowly avoiding collisions with one another. People were flying overhead, ziplining alongside buzzing drones. Human-sized hamster balls rolled around in one corner, and hundreds of holes had been burrowed into the ice below. In fact, it was a miracle the ice hadn't buckled. "It looks like Swiss cheese out there," Binx commented above the K-Pop music. (Of course there was K-Pop music.)

How would we ever find the Spirit in this mess? Did it even exist inside this madhouse? "Doesn't look safe," I muttered. "But we're in too deep—there's no going back now."

Our group headed south down the path, walking parallel to a chain-link fence that separated the ice from a stretch of white booths. Couples and families stood on the ice, looking over their respective fishing holes.

"Damn flies. They're everywhere," Binx grunted, slapping at the air.

"Flies? It's the dead of winter, you imbecile." I responded.

As my advisor continued swatting the air, I looked across the ice. These visitors were armed with flyswatters. What kind of f\_ucking circus was this? A man wearing a green trucker's hat came through an opening in the fence. In one hand, he carried a flyswatter, the other clutched a plastic bag with three, half-dead, flopping trout.

"Excuse me, good sir!" I exclaimed eagerly.

He looked up, eyes wide, face full of horror at this sudden ambush.

"No English!" he shouted back. He was quick, but not forceful enough to defend my volley.

"Where does one procure such a flyswatter?" I asked. He paused and then pointed, "Chogio."

Sure enough, behind us stood a white, makeshift booth. A sign displayed the 8,000 KRW cost of the flyswatter package, which came complete with fishing line, bait (flies

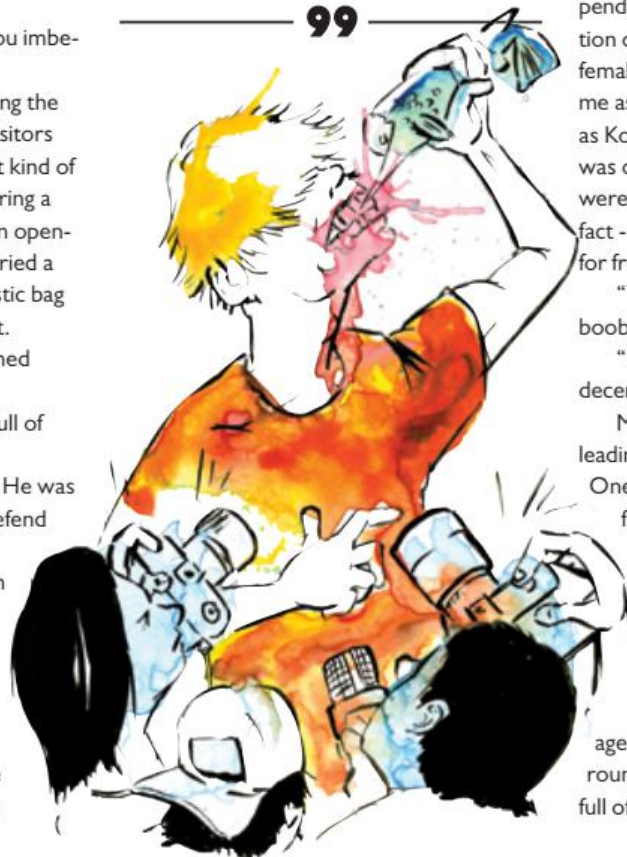
I presumed), and a pole. Foreign tourists were treated to a discount and entry to a special "tourist only" fishing zone for 5,000 KRW.

"We're going to go explore around," Michael from our bus group said. (Michael had just finished a two-week long backpacking trek in the Himalayas and still wore

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**THERE WOULD BE NO RECONNECTION OF MAN AND WILD. INSTEAD, THIS WOULD BE A GAME OF SPORT FEATURING BLOODTHIRSTY POTATO PEOPLE, PARTICIPATING IN WHAT AMOUNTED TO A GIANT CLAW-GRAB GAME. THE SPIRIT OF THE TROUT HAD DISAPPEARED—IT HAD VANISHED LONG AGO.**

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the matted beard to prove it.) We, too, had higher priorities than staring into a hole all day.

Near the equipment booth stood a wider shack where elderly patrons congregated excitedly. We wandered in.

The crackling of oil and the smell of fried food overwhelmed the room. Folding tables stood against the walls. Yellow signs hung above with food handwritten in Korean. Ajummas (older women) stood in aprons—bandanas hiding their bobbed hair. Two women laughed over a story as they dripped *jeon* (pancake) batter onto their skillets. Ajusshis (older men) tipped back shots of soju and cups of beer. We ordered the kimchi cheon and found a place next to a pair of tipplers standing in the middle of the shack. They eyed us as we ate, not in any malicious way, but in an act of camaraderie, as if we had suddenly joined some sort of highly selective club. From what I had experienced, many Koreans were quite pleased when foreigners attempted to indulge their culture—even something as trivial as eating Korean food was met with local praise and enthusiasm. At times it even felt like having a personal cheering section. Just then, a voice boomed from outside. The ajusshis picked up their fish bags and scuttled out. We followed.

An emcee yelled into his microphone from a nearby stage. We watched as his assistant, a beautiful woman in a white and blue Hite Beer cheerleading outfit, pulled back a sheet from atop a folding table, unveiling a stack of merchandise.

If there was one thing you could depend on in this world, it was the combination of alcoholic beverages, scantily clad females, and cheap prizes. Though it struck me as odd that in a country as conservative as Korea, this sight would happen at what was otherwise a family event. Not that we were moralistic or anything -- far from it in fact -- but a good set of ethics was called for from time to time.

"That's what I like to see—beer and boobs," Binx slurred.

"For f\_uck's sake, man. Have some decency."

Members from the crowd formed a line leading up the stairs and onto the stage.

One by one they approached the emcee for a game of Kai, Bai, Bo—the Korean version of Rock-Paper-Scissors. I had seen Koreans of all ages settle disputes with this game. There were five levels of prizes. One audience member, a girl who could barely see over the piles on the tables, managed to beat the emcee in four out of five rounds. She walked away with her arms full of promotional items.

When the line of contestants finally dwindled, the tables were removed, and two more women in identical Hite Beer dresses appeared onstage. They screamed into their microphones. The leader, slightly taller than the other two, raised her fist. Behind them, the mega-screen lit up on it, a beer cap sizzled open and golden beer rushed into a glass. The leader shouted, the crowd cheered, and the group burst into song. They were well rehearsed, physically perfect—robotic.

"This isn't good," I remember saying. "They're going to scare off the Spirit."

"You're right. We've gotta get 'em off the stage," Binx said starting toward the stairs.

"Wait! Don't do it, you bastard!" But it was too late.

He had reached the first step when a security guard cut in. The two stood locked in a stare-down.

I slinked over, "What's the trouble here?"

Neither broke eye contact. Maybe they couldn't understand me over the K-Pop.

I leaned in.

"Can you hear me?!" Again—nothing. "My friend, here, he's a concerned citizen! We don't mean any trouble," I yelled.

The security guy pointed towards the bridge and, in crystal clear English, said, "Go."

So we went, wandering back up the path, passing a clown couple performing a skit, ice soccer games, and hundreds of fishing couples and families. Where had the Spirit gone?

And then I saw it. Tucked behind the bridge—across from an ice sculpture—dozens of visitors huddled around a pool. We made our way to the front of the crowd, where a fishing hole had been cut in the ice. It was large but shallow. It's water no higher than my knees. The fog had cleared and now the sun beat down in a near blinding radiance. I remember seeing a door to one of the nearby shacks swing open and a man in an orange shirt and black shorts emerge in the doorway. After a moment, he stepped out, followed by a long line of people dressed in the same uniform. They were all barefoot. This was it! The Spirit was upon us.

They walked toward the hole in what seemed like more of a march—the thump of the K-Pop drums in the distance. And from the fishing hole, the announcer roared into his microphone, unleashing a sound



that I could only describe as the battle cry of a wild banshee escaping from a deep trench that stretched hundreds of years back into the past. The orange shirts and the spectators echoed the call. They now stood around waiting for the moment when they'd be given permission to leave their civilized selves behind.

It was then that I looked down into the hole. At the bottom, where I expected to see sand and rock, lay only black rubber. This fishing hole hadn't been cut into the ice at all, but placed on top. It had been planted! And where were the trout? I looked up. Two men in black waders, tipped a plastic garbage bin into the rink and out poured the trout.

We'd been duped! This was all an artificial concoction I hadn't been prepared for. Suddenly, I felt out of place. There would be no reconnection of man and wild. Instead, this would be a game of sport featuring bloodthirsty potato people participating in what amounted to a giant claw-grab game. The Spirit of the Trout had disappeared—it had vanished long ago.

The announcer yelled again. The orange shirts shot into the pool, hands out, racing, shouting, climbing over each other in a ferocious, testosterone-fueled rage. Was this it? Was this the spirit we had come to see?

A yellowed-haired man made the first catch. Photographers and press hurried over to him as he stuck the fish into his mouth. Its tail was still flipping about when he bit down on the head and they flashed the shot. Blood dripped down the gills and the crowd cheered. He held the fish over

his head in triumph. Once again man had conquered beast in a rigged fight.

After five minutes, the announcer alerted the orange shirts that the rampage was over and that they ought to return to their inhibited selves.

We walked along the riverbank to the area where the fish were being cooked. An assembly line had formed. Successful gamers dumped out their bags, sending the half-dead trout flopping into a laundry basket where they waited before being plucked up by the hands of the butcher and brought behind a partition that hid the massacre. It was mechanical from start to finish. The butcher sliced the fish, passed it to a woman who wrapped it in aluminum and shoved it into a rusted steel oven. The oven had individual compartments like a morgue with numbers chalked in white above each door.

The Spirit of the Trout had disappeared—or maybe this had never been about the trout in the first place. In reality, the Ice Festival had become a carnival duck game worth an annual 50 million dollars. Korea had pulled itself from the rubble fifty years earlier by considering the bottom line as the top priority. This sentiment rang true in Hwacheon—the city was simply catering to what the people had become.

Night arrived as we walked back to the bus station. We ambled below the wire scaffolding where trout-shaped lanterns hung. All different colors, the fish swayed slightly in the night, their curved bodies frozen in time. What we had come to celebrate had vanished. ❧