

GROOVE

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AARON COSSROW

Meet the Hatter; Mad Tee-Party with Aaron Cossrow

MUSIC IN THE SUN

Music festival season has arrived

SOMETHING WE WOULD LISTEN TO

Seoul Community Radio's Pirate Ethos

NEKKID WINGS

Nekkid Wings break from American and Korean chicken traditions



INTERNATIONAL BEAUTY EXPO KOREA

Give Your Face The Gift of Placenta

It had been sometime in the early morning, Binx and I had been tipping back soju shots in Hongdae's "Main Bar" while discussing the merits of spring roll sauce, when I saw the text.

"They want us to cover a beauty expo." I had said.

"A beauty expo? Sounds like a cake-walk."

"Think so? All right, why not?"

The details following this exchange were foggy, but apparently I had agreed because that morning, between the hours of 9 and 10 a.m., my phone rang. I answered, but immediately regretted it.

The voice on the other end was distorted, which was just as well since I wasn't one for piddling phone conversation. Through the static I was able to make out the words "International Beauty Expo," "abhorrent disregard for punctuality" (which if the voice was referring to me was an egregious accusation), and "leave now or else." The phone call didn't make immediate sense. What did a beauty expo have to do with me? Had they hoped I'd participate? It didn't add up.

When I got to the subway platform, my advisor was waiting. He was visibly agitated, a stark contrast from the ruddy-cheeked howls of his inebriated laughter in the bar. When I approached, he stopped pacing.

"I recommend we get the f*ck out of this country while we still can," he spat. "That last festival practically ate us alive, and now they want us to go to some make-up party totally unprepared and unfunded. These Collareds have no respect for the working writer."

"Where's your journalistic integrity, man?" I said. "We can't just jump ship in the middle of the goddamn ocean. We're on a mission, an exploration only fit for the strongest of heart." Before he could respond, the train arrived, and the crowd that had gathered swept us in like flies caught in a stampede.

The massive COEX convention hall was the venue chosen for the International Beauty Expo. I had been there on a number of occasions, each time feeling more and more bewildered by its sheer magnitude. There had been dessert shows,

electronics shows, education shows, baby merchandise shows, even money shows; because if a niche audience existed, its only purpose was to be exploited. After all, there was money to be made.

And if for whatever reason you didn't take the bait and step into these spending-traps, the labyrinth that was COEX's underground shopping mall would snag you for sure. It was the largest underground mall in Asia, accented with a movie theatre and aquarium—a consumer's wet dream (and what I imagined hell would look like). But that's what people wanted—a way to "live better," hoping that their next big purchase or "enhancement" would inch them closer to finding their "ideal self." This philosophy had become popular in Seoul. The idea that with a little tuck here or a little sculpting there, one too could reach his or her optimal beauty. Accessorize yourself with the 'correct' surgery, cosmetics, fashion, and possessions, and even you could discover the 'ideal self' and make your fantasy a reality.

We were the only men in the subway car. Everywhere I looked women sat, fiddling with pocket mirrors, brushing on makeup, and curling their eyelashes. This must have been the express train to the event, I reasoned. And then I felt it—the inescapable sense of being watched. It may have been from the dregs of soju still floating

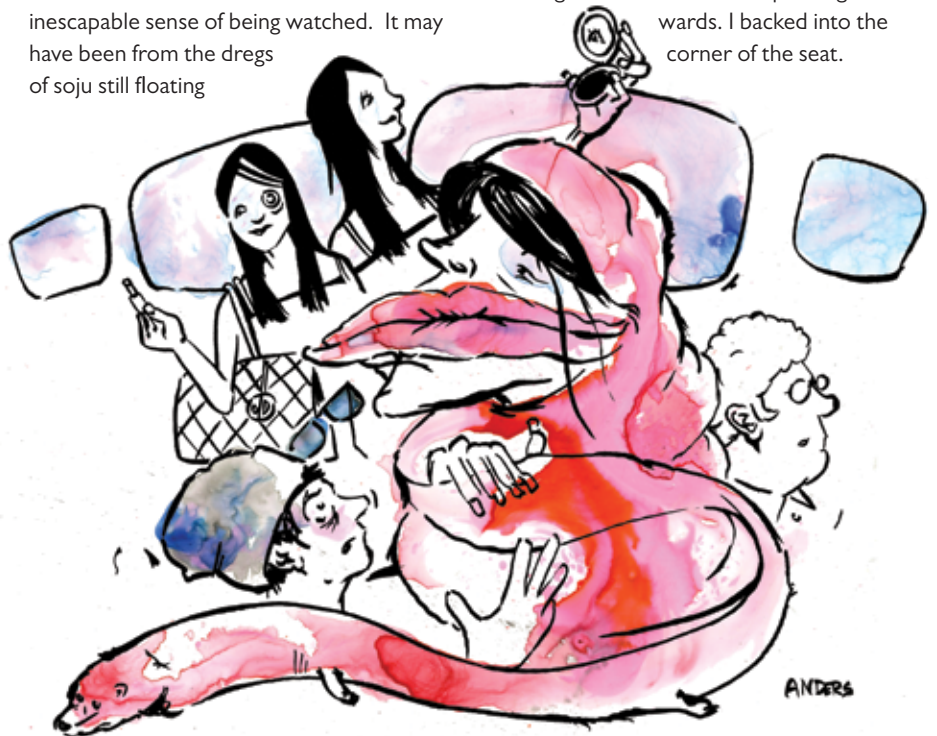
around my bloodstream, but as I glanced down the car it seemed to elongate. With a mechanical click, the eyes I had felt quickly blinked back to their respective hand mirrors.

"Dammit, they've spotted us, man. We're fish out of water," I said to my advisor.

"Don't worry, we're almost there. Just be cool."

I was sweating buckets. I felt my peripheral vision expanding in some kind of hyper-focus. The outlines of everything became thick. It was like we were sitting in the middle some kind of a f_ucking cartoon. A lady seated opposite us stared, and I remember thinking she might have been the poster woman for Botox-gone-wrong. Her lips were as thick as a stack of buttermilk pancakes and protruded out beyond her mink scarf. She had the eyes of a vampire bat. I felt exposed, dirty, penetrated by some sort of ajumma echolocation. Had she seen us before? Did she know where we were going? What we were about?

"Holy hell, it's hot in here, man," I spouted in a jumble of sounds and syllables that may have been words. Binx didn't respond. Suddenly, the bat-lady's lips started drifting apart into two flat, gooey pancakes that edged towards us, expanding outwards. I backed into the corner of the seat.



ANDERS

The mink scarf sprouted a head that popped up from the woman's shoulder. It started shrieking and hissing.

"That scarf's alive, g—ddammit!"

I shouted.

Everyone on the train stopped. The mirror maidens turned in my direction.

"Hissing scarf? You've lost your beans," whispered the advisor. "Sit down and relax. You're making a scene."

Thirty minutes (or a lifetime) later the door opened and I stumbled out. As we walked through the underground mall, a thought occurred.

"I hope they let me into this thing,"

I said.

That morning, I had nearly tripped into my clothes and fallen out of my apartment in the rush. I wore faded jeans and an Old Navy V-neck, two sizes too big. It's not that the outfit was uncommon, but in what I assumed would be a gathering of statuesque perfection, it seemed I had come ill-prepared. In fact, the guards would probably take one look at us and say something like, "Sir, your attire doesn't meet the prestigious standards of this event."

I'd have to be quick on my feet, "Of course it does. We're models. We set the fashion standard. 'What is it we model?' Well, a fresh perspective—common sense—some might call it a way of life. But trust me, every second we're prevented from entering this venue you're putting lives at risk. We take our jobs seriously, man."

They'd look confused, likely exchange a few words in Korean, and let us in out of pity for our primal, foreign drab and strange demeanors.

We were submersed in a culture where personal appearance meant everything. Rumors circled that some women in relationships even went as far as waiting until their boyfriends fell asleep before removing their cosmetically enhanced face. Men were often "left in the dark" both literally and metaphorically, but based on all the purse-holding and couple outfits I had seen around, the men seemed to have embraced this trend.

Past the guards and through the turnstiles we went without disruption. But as we lurched into the enormous cube-shaped exhibition hall, the weight of this event dawned upon me. Salesmen and women leapt from every booth in a tribal rhythm of chaos.

Visitors walked in all directions, up and down rows passing some 264 different vendors. Names like "Jeju Technopark," "Aroma Dead Sea," and "Skin Factory Co." hung on banners at the top of each booth. They had it all: free samples, live beauty events, manicures and pedicures, nail paint-

ing, hair treatment. We ducked through a large crowd of excited women that had spread from a stall where cloth menstrual pads with floral designs were sold.

A line of visitors waited for their chance to participate in a "Spin the Wheel" game. One girl in overall shorts shrieked as the wheel ticked to a stop on a winning space. She received a mask, which the male host seemed equally as excited to give away.

Not more than ten minutes into our initial walk-through, a salesman with thick eyebrows and a brown blazer sprang from behind one of the booths, bombarding us like a wild banshee. He shoved a shiny package the size of a paperback book into my face.

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THE TRUTH IS YOU SHOULD NEVER TRUST A SMILING SALESMAN; THEIR MOTIVES ARE NEVER CLEAN, IN FACT, MOST HAVE THE PURITY OF FOOL'S GOLD OR SEWER WATER

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"Holy hell, man!" I screamed.

"It's a mask made of pig's placenta!" he spat eagerly, waving the package around.

"Have you heard of placenta?"

"Placenta? Why, no." I said. Like anyone who had passed fifth grade sex-education I of course had, but I had a method of dealing with these folk.

The truth is you should never trust a smiling salesman; their motives are never clean, in fact, most have the purity of fool's gold or sewer water. However, it's a mistake to simply shoo these f*ckers away. It's like swatting at a mosquito—you won't rid yourself of the problem, they'll just come back in greater numbers. If you're forced into contact with one of these creatures, the first thing to do is make direct eye contact—make him acknowledge your presence. After all, you're no pushover. Ask him as many questions as possible, as fast as you can. Pretend you're playing some sort of game where you know all the answers, but you ask the questions anyway just to see how he will react. Remember you're the ringleader of this circus. Eventually, he'll

tire, defeated. The smart ones will even realize they've been chasing their tails the whole time, crown you king, and spread your name throughout the sales wasteland.

"You've never heard of placenta before?" he said perplexed.

"Nope. What's it do? How can it help us? How's it improving the world?"

I pressed.

"Well, it's very nutritious for the skin."

"Is that right? Well, we need smooth skin, that's what makes us human—separates us from the rest of the beasts, hell, without that we'd be lost in the shuffle. It's why God put us on this planet. You do believe in Jesus Christ don't you?"

"I'm at church every Sunday." He was lying and everyone in a 10-meter radius knew it. Even through the soju haze, my colleague could smell the bullshit.

"Pig placenta, eh? What's the purpose?" asked my advisor. I could see where this was going and it wasn't good.

Troubled by Binx's question, the salesman stared at me as if he thought I might throw him a life preserver. I had to smooth the waters. But what came out only made matters worse.

"Is this some esoteric ritual from the Joseon Dynasty or are you just f*cking with us? What's the score? How long until the jig is up?"

"It's very good, very good," he said quickly shifting his eyes back to his booth. As his smile faded, I could tell we had reached the turning point.

"You're telling us to put this pig uterus on our faces and you can't tell us what it does? Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"Calm down, you giant sea turtle," I said to Binx. "We don't want to rile up security. They'll feed us to the wolves!"

"Then the wolves it shall be!" Binx said defiantly. "This buffoon has duped for the last time."

Making waves with the locals was ill advised, especially in a place like this. But my colleague had a point. What kind of sick practical joke was this? Putting a sack that nourishes fetal pigs on a human face? There was something we were missing.

"Look we're all hardworking gentlemen? Wouldn't you agree?" I said. "There's no use debating. A little exaggeration is called for from time to time." But the salesman wasn't following.

"Hell, Sales controls the media nowadays," I continued. "That's why we live outside the bubble—play our own bongos all day long—o."

The salesman nodded and sensing defeat wandered back to the shadows where he had come.

"Conniving bastard," Binx spat.

We had no choice but to press on, deeper into this circus.

Everybody in the venue swarmed to find perfection, beat back the encroachments of unavoidable human biology. Deny, deny, deny. But this was nothing new; the modern world lived in a constant state of denial with the belief that technology would cure all.

Denial—that's how rogue politicians, like the infamous Park Geun-hye, scurried around for as long as they did like termites in the walls. You could ignore them, pretend they weren't there, but eventually you'd lose your house and all your belongings because of them while they enjoyed a cushy feast at your expense. If denial didn't suite your fancy, there was always comfort in faith, especially in faith lacking foundation. It helped empower and perpetuate the flotsam and jetsam of society, giving spurious government officials voice, helping churches stay afloat and otherwise bogus companies thrive on promises as real as pixie dust. Be loud, be proud, scream with vengeful tenacity, and no matter how unfounded your message, you can speak truth. But f*ck it, why not? Play the game or watch it play you. It was all for one and one for all.

We bypassed the empty pressroom and headed for the hall of beauty contestants. The first contest of the day had already begun. As many as twenty models, all wearing clay masks, lay stretched out on massage tables like seals basking in the sun. They had on pastel pink bathrobes. Estheticians stood above, gazing down at their respective model, pounding hammers to shape each mask. Judges walked around, clipboards in hand. I became distracted when a female version of cupid, wrapped in a dress of Italian villas, pirouetted into the middle of the room. The whole thing was fascinating to someone, I assumed. Was this their idea of paradise? Stretching out for hours under the floodlights, hoping an ideal self would be revealed? Maybe so, but I wasn't going to wait around to find out.

"I'm bored. Let's come back for the beauty contest."

Back in the main hall, we ambled about, passing booths with breast implant samples, syringes with leaking stem cells, and for the very important persons, masks made from 24-karat gold. If none of that appealed to visitors, there was always the infrared Robocop-looking helmet, which the sales team pledged would unclog pores and eliminate any and all acne. "Just twenty minutes a day!" gloated the rosy-faced man.

We passed by a plain booth advertising sulfur products. The inventor happily engaged us without breaking into a pitch.

"Ah, a newbie!" I thought.

It turned out, while in the depths of his

fashion studies at the New School in New York, he had a nervous breakdown and retreated on a meditative soul-search to what he claimed was a mineral spring in Yellowstone. Here, he had an epiphany. Why not make skincare products out of sulfur?

"It's the first of its kind," he assured me. I had no doubt about this, and obliged when he asked if I wanted a sample.

Out of nowhere came a Collared holding a red container of eye patches said to possess anti-wrinkle powers. He reached in with plastic tweezers.

"Try one," he laughed. "They're made from snake venom."

Before I could swat his hand away, he had popped one onto my face.

"Snake venom, eh?" I said.

Koreans were quite a giving people on the whole. Even if you flatly refused, they'd find a way to sneak the food into your mouth or a gift into your pocket... or, in this case, the snake venom into your blood.

"This is too much for me," slurred Binx. "I'll be down at the bar."

"There's no bar downstairs, you swine. Even if there was, I've put a notice out telling the locals not to serve hairy mammoths dressed in Hawaiian shirts," I said.

"Well, we'll see who's laughing after you find yourself upside-down when that snake venom kicks in. You ready for that? Covering the beauty contest while fighting off poison milked from the world's most dangerous cobra?"

"It's just a marketing tool, you imbecile, and you're propagating it."

"You sure about that?" he said.

"Get out of here, then."

He walked away laughing. A woman with dyed orange hair and ferocious nails gawked in our direction. I remember saying aloud, "Jesus, is that Edward Scissorhands?"

I immediately wanted to apologize, but at that moment a paralyzing clamminess shot through my spine. I tried to move, but it felt like I was caught waist deep in a swamp. I looked back at the Snake Venom



Man whose face had twisted into a sinister snarl only the devil himself could make. I had overstayed my welcome. It was time to leave, but where were the exits? The height of the booths had obscured any indication of them. A blue knockoff Teletubby trudged by, human-sized makeup bottles emerged from the stalls, yelling at me to come inside. This expo had become a free-for-all, and without an exit there was no getting off the ride.

Madness scurried in every direction. Humans began looking like robots. Some waited in lines at various booths, others were getting manicures. A couple in their early thirties stood at a miracle water stand. The Korean man-bot was buried under a mound of shopping bags. I remember his blonde, American wife swiping her debit card, proclaiming, "What a bargain! Only 30,000 won for a ten-pack!"

Had the whole place been drinking miracle water? Or was this all in my head?

When the venom finally wore off, I found myself staring from the outside of the exhibition hall looking in. The Beauty Contest had passed. All the booths had been cleared out and now stood empty. Across from me, hung an advertisement picturing a woman—the Marilyn Monroe type. She rested, posing with her chin on her hands, eyes transfixed on something outside the picture—something far away. It was then I noticed in bold letters the words, "Plastic Surgery Clinic," and a question printed underneath that read, "Have you found your ideal self, yet?"