

GROOVE

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TREACHERY AND MANIA IN THE LAND OF THE JINDOGAE

A STROLL THROUGH SEOUL'S DIGITAL CENTER

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THE JINDO MIRACLE SEA ROAD FESTIVAL: ITAEWON MOVES SOUTH



Treachery and Mania in the Land of the Jindogae

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There was no escaping the treachery I felt at that moment. My advisor and I were headed southbound in a speeding bus piloted by some hunched-back, raging lunatic with a deep-seated hatred for the road and contempt for anybody who got in his path. The bus swerved onto a bridge nearly throwing Binx and me from our seats.

"This bastard's going to kill us!" bellowed my advisor.

"Don't worry, man. I hear the Jindo locals can cure anything—even death." "Bull!"

"No, man—it's probably some ancient island voodoo sh*t. Trust me, there's nothing to worry about," I assured.

But I could feel it—a sharp anxiety pervaded over the entire bus. What had started out as a continued pseudo-

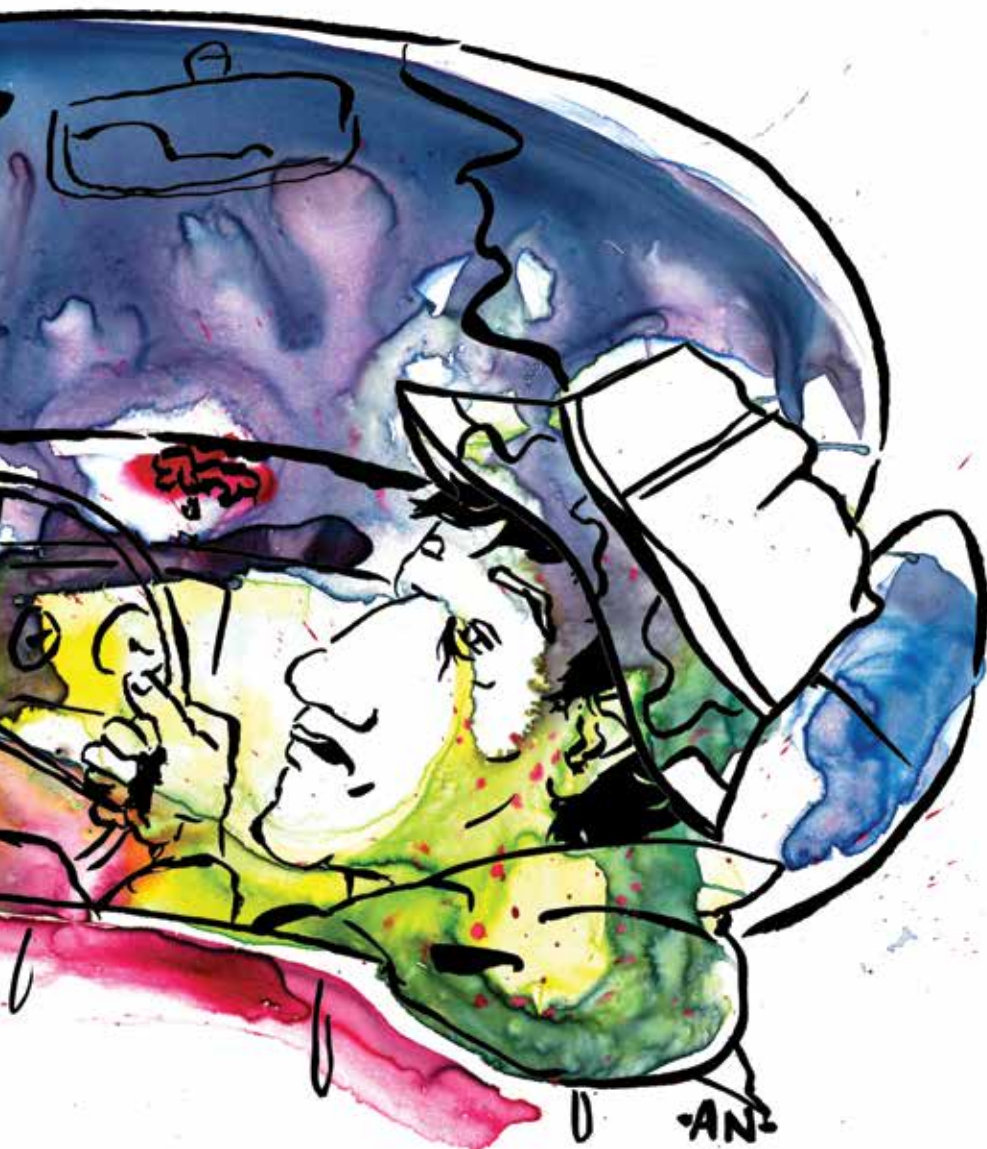
anthropological exploration into the discovery of "true" Korean life had quickly veered into sheer madness. Maybe this trip would be too pure for our Western minds. "Doomed" the headline would read. "Crackpot Journalist And Boorish Advisor Gone Missing;" "Eaten Alive By *Jindogaes*."

The instructions were simple enough. At 11 p.m. a fellow by the name of Joo would meet us at the bus terminal. We'd hitch a ride 20 kilometers to the south shore of the island and pray to ol' Lordsy that we wouldn't end up being chopped into feed for the *Jindogaes*—locally bred Jindo dogs with an unwavering loyalty to their masters and a crippling bite for any trespasser. If not that, then a potentially even worse fate awaited us—forced slavery.

Rumors had been swirling in the weeks prior that told of visitors,

adventure-seekers with the best of intentions, who had gone to Jindo hoping to bask in the island paradise and instead found something far more sinister. Story after story recounted the tragic fates of these unsuspecting tourists who had been forced into years of hard labor, tilling the salt beds, wasting away the remainder of their lives with no plan of escape and no hope for rescue.

"I'm not going out like that, man!" I said as the engine of the bus roared past the dark, island farmland. Minutes later we swerved into the station's parking lot. A lone streetlight stood where the pavement met the sidewalk, its orange light fading across a quiet side street. The bus driver was the first one off the bus, his face red, wrinkled, and tired. It was nothing some soju couldn't fix. >>



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SOMETHING. "WAEGUKIN." HE SMILED.
"WAEGUKIN, INDEED," I REPLIED.

>> He eyed us as I bent down, yanking my bike from the luggage compartment. From the shadows came the rapid-fire cadence of a Korean voice. I straightened back up, coming face-to-face with a man, the gold crowns on his two front teeth flashing with each successive syllable. This must have been Joo, I reasoned. He stopped abruptly as if waiting for us to say something.

"Waegukin." He smiled.

"Waegukin, indeed," I replied.

As any caring grandfather might do, he grabbed my bike and wheeled it 100 or so meters towards his truck. In his Gatling-gun cadence and thick fisherman's accent, he continued speaking...about something. But who knew exactly what.

We tied the bike to the flatbed and piled into the cab.

"We don't speak Korean, but we're good ol' country folk," Binx assured.

Joo looked over, studying Binx.

The car fell silent. Joo's smile widened, his gold teeth shined, and he began laughing. He turned the key in the ignition and the Hyundai sputtered away.

We never did find out what had been so funny—but it didn't matter really. We were part of the entertainment here. In fact, I suspected it was half the reason the government employed clownish, under-credentialed foreigners. We were told that we'd be teaching kids, while in reality we were performers brought to entertain. But an introverted loner, such as myself, who impulsively calculated the risk of opening his mouth to ask something as trivial as "How was your weekend?" likely wasn't the type of amusement they had hoped for. I played the part poorly.

The truck smelled of sand and salt. It let out a guttural croak every time the gears shifted and shook as we ascended the first hill. Just as the wheels reached the top where the road flattened, I saw the horror that lay before us. There, in the middle of the road was a dead black cat. Had this been the fate of the poor f*ckers who had ambled into the fog in Hwacheon? Maybe the fog had been some portal and this was the other side. Quite possibly, I reasoned. >>



>> The road was dark with few street lights on either side, beyond which lay sprawling seas of farmland. The stars were out that night and aside from the dead cats the whole place seemed reasonably peaceful.

By the time we arrived at the minbak (guesthouse) Joo had stopped talking likely from self-exhaustion. The smell of salt hung in the air. In the distance, the sound of waves crashed against the shore. We followed Joo across an alleyway to the guesthouse where only a bluish-tinged light shined. A lady sat on the house steps. I bowed slightly,

saying hello, to which she stood up, let out a grunt, and walked inside.

Joo showed me to my suite. The entrance had three sliding doors where no matter how I slid them together a gap remained. Inside was a dusty entranceway as long and wide as a diving board. Guests were supposed to remove their shoes here. The inner wooden doors creaked open revealing a living room devoid of furniture. There was a yellowish-brown heat mat covering the floor and a television—the portable kind from the 1990s—had been placed on a stool in the corner.

Joo studied the remote, struggling to find the power button. When it finally switched on there was only static. He pointed to a pile of VHS tapes, indicating he'd exerted himself enough.

He continued the tour, showing me the bedroom where small bugs clung to the walls, but I figured any roof over my head was better than none at all. I paid him and he asked if I was hungry. As this had been the second time he'd asked, I obliged and trailed him into the kitchen.

A layer of grime caked to the floor where I sat. Dusty bottles of rice wine were piled in a corner. The pots and pans hung from a shelf and overpoured from the dish drain. He went to a mostly empty cupboard and removed two packs of ramen noodles, grabbed a pot, and briefly glanced inside, likely checking for bugs. It passed the test—the pot was clean, clean enough.

He hunched over the grungy, industrial stove—the kind you might see at a kids summer camp—and stirred methodically, muttering to himself the entire time. When the ramen was boiling, he took the pot and set it in front of me. In between bites, I attempted small talk, even going as far as to Google translate. But after telling me that his eyes were bad, he became frustrated and requested that I eat. I scarfed down the remaining noodles and departed. As fortune had it, Joo's bedroom was directly above mine. So that night, I drifted asleep listening to Joo and his wife discuss the two weird Americans he had met.

I awoke to the sound of Jindogae howls. The wooden door had swung further ajar and headlights glared into the room.

"Quick, man! We're under attack." But Binx had disappeared. A brass drum rang in the distance. I dressed and hurried out.

Four tour buses idled in the parking lot across the street from the minbak.

"Woo, yeah, JinDOO!" a buff guy with a camouflage backpack sprang from the bus.

Pipe down, you maniac. They'll set the dogs on us, I thought.

He cocked his head, puzzled. Had he heard me? We stood in the darkness unspeaking.

"What is it? Hurry up with it man."

I don't have all f*ckin' day."

And then I saw it. Behind us, some fifty meters from the buses, a mob chanted—brandishing lit torches and banging brass drums.

"Now you've done it, man. They've sent the g*ddamn island militia after us. You better get back on that bus and hightail it out of here."

The drums grew louder. I tried to run, but was swept into the pack of torch walkers.

"Watch where you're walking, you small-faced foreigner."

It was Binx in full warrior face paint, torch in hand, raising it up and down in some kind of tribal rhythm. He passed me the torch, waving it from left to right and then up above his head, and down into my hands.

"Take this my son. It'll ward off the spirits."

The leaders wore primary-colored attire with large pom-pom ball hats that shook as they danced about. We followed, zigzagging from side to side as the road curved along the shoreline to an outlook point. An emcee's voice pierced through the air, drawing my eyes to a stone monument of an elderly woman and what I assumed was her pet tiger. Fireworks exploded above us. Gothic, orchestral music blared from the speakers...And then it was over. The organizers gathered the torches and the crowd dispersed, back down the road from which we came.

The sun had risen in a perfect circle—the way it had so often been depicted in old movies about "the orient."

"And who might this sexy lass be?" asked Binx, wandering up to the statues.

"Somebody's grandmama, you pig. We've gotta treat this lady with respect. Isn't that right, Ms.—?"

A placard at the base of the monument read, "The Legend of the Sea-Parting Miracle- The Story of Grandmother Ppong."

"Ms. Ppong."

It was the classic "oh-we-accidentally-left-granny-behind" story. The Son family decides to build a raft and flee from the tiger-infested island where they live. But they make a grave mistake—they forget poor gran-gran... uh-oh. She's forced to endure life among the tigers, so every night she

prays for help from the Dragon King. Sure enough, one night the guy isn't very busy and decides to help Ppong by creating a rainbow bridge from the island to her family's new home. However, what he should have given her were some prosthetic legs or a wheelchair, because during her trek across the rainbow, she collapses from fatigue. Her family, who has been crossing from the other side of the rainbow, finds her, and she dies in their arms.

"Sounds like we found the origin of the K-drama," Binx said aloud.

I couldn't disagree. Koreans did have a knack for melodrama. Their soap

operas had reached global audiences stretching as far as Cuba.

When we finally returned to the central area of the festival, the morning mist had lifted and in its place sat what would define the tone for the rest of the day—foreigners.

They had come, unannounced and uncensored, hungrier than a pack of wild boars. Bros and hipsters, soldiers and teachers, expats from everywhere around had scurried away from the sewers below nightclub bathrooms and into this park. These were the type of people imported from the frat houses of collegian America, sporting tinted Wayfarers, American-flag boat shorts, and tank tops. The type that would find a shirt with the words "My wife is hot" to be either cleverly original or humorously ironic.

They lay sprawled out on picnic tables and benches, holding Solo cups, exuding a "unique individuality" nobody else in the world possessed...except for the person to his right...and the person to her left...It was as if Itaewon—the foreign hub in Seoul—had been stuffed into a shipping crate, flown over the Korean Peninsula, and air-dropped directly into this square. It was "Itaewon Condensed," an unfiltered, f*ckall-of-a-party, and I was about to be caught in the middle of this mania.

"Where the hell are we, man?" my advisor asked.

"Good question. Briny smell, hipsters, valley girls, army bros, frat douchebags—seems like we must have slipped into some wormhole and landed in Venice Beach."

"Douchebag?" huffed a voice from in front of us.

He had a stout physique, which bubbled out from his tight wife-beater. A faded American flag was printed on his shorts. I opened my mouth to respond, but Binx stepped in.

"You. You vile piece of amniotic sac."

"Whatever, bro." He walked away.

"Well, that went smoothly," I said to Binx.

A girl with a valley accent and her friends passed us.

"Tinder's not fun anymore now that Ruby's not here. Ya know? I told her like, 'Ruby, Tinder's not even fun anymore now that you're not here.' It's just not fun anymore." >>

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>> Was she seeking some kind of verbal agreement or just attention? I couldn't tell. She had certainly emphasized her point.

Around this small park the festival had dubbed as the Global Zone, foreign food vendors braced for the truth to rear its ugly head, knowing that come the next day, it would all be over and they would drive off handsomely rewarded for withstanding the firestorm of belligerent lunatics. Behind the vendors was the Global Stage. An area where foreigners sang K-pop drunkenly offbeat, usually only remembering enough lyrics to make slurred attempts at the chorus. A sandpit for traditional wrestling lay in the middle of all this.

Instead of providing a means for cultural exploration, the organizers had catered to the festival directly to the foreigner. A more appropriate name for the Global Zone would have been "Your Home Away From Home." Come relax and party in the comforts of familiarity--feel at home even when abroad. It was natural to seek familiarity, but on a global scale cultures had been bastardized and debased in the name of convenience and amenity. And for that matter, what had happened to "true" Korea? Where was it? Where had it gone?

Binx and I walked to the Jindogae agility course near the entrance. Trainers were already practicing with their dogs, running them up ramps, through hoops and tunnels, and passed a rusty refrigerator.

"Hey doggy, how 'bout a beer?" yelled Binx.

One trainer coaxed his dog over to a series of elevated, metal hoops. Despite being tied to his leash, the dog jumped through flawlessly. For his next trick, the trainer leaned forward so that his torso was parallel to the ground. The dog promptly jumped up and stood balancing on the trainer's back. The onlooking, shirtless army bros sipped their Solo cups and yelled in approval. But the Jindogae had, had enough.

It pranced over to the refrigerator, lifted its leg and claimed the appliance as its own.

I raised my cup, "Give 'em hell, Jindogae,"

The dog looked up, sniffed the air, and ran toward the exit.

"Food whores--that's what they are," Binx spat.

"These are some of the smartest dogs known to man! Even the g*ddamn LAPD considered using these beasts. They're cold blooded savages."

"Savages! Ha! He couldn't find his tail if he sat on it," Binx laughed and

leaned closer to me, the devil in his eyes.

"Drink this."

I looked at the bottle, studying the label.

"Hongju. It's a local spirit, eh?"

"Just drink it."

With that, Binx wandered off to watch the foreigner toga party and wrestling match. >>



MOTHERS AND CHILDREN WALKED ALONGSIDE
SOLDIERS WHO CLUTCHED AT THEIR SPIRITS
HOPING NOT TO LOSE THEM TO THE CURRENT'S
GRIP. ONE BELLIGERENT DRUNK SPLASHED
ABOUT, DRENCHING A NEARBY FAMILY.

>> The hongju was like drinking the devil's blood. It made my skin itch like mad.

"The f*ckers man! They're out to get us!"

By the afternoon, I had sunken too far. Time passed. I found myself outside, slouched at a table with kimchi and soup side dishes. A group of Korean women in yellow vests with the Red Cross emblem prepared food behind me. I was the only foreigner in the tent. My blood was too thick for this heat.

After years of winters in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, you build up a tolerance for the cold. This heat had drained me and the devil's claw crept closer. The hongju had snagged and ripped me into a dark pit of cynical thought. Where were we going on this April afternoon?

We gathered for the sea-parting trek at around 5 o'clock. When the tide finally receded and the level of the water was low enough to walk, the crowd pushed into the sea. Mothers and children walked alongside soldiers who clutched at their spirits hoping not to lose them to the current's grip. One belligerent drunk splashed about, drenching a nearby family. When I finally turned around to view the shore, lighted lanterns floated into the air, drifting above the beach and into the approaching night. The water became grey like dark concrete and the tide rushed back with force.

"It's going to sweep us out to the Ppong rainbow!" I blurted to nobody in particular.

Should I have stayed away from the Jindo festival? Self-destructive tendencies had arisen from the treachery. What was the purpose of this gathering at its core? Did the bros sloshing through the harbor even give a second thought to it all? Had the organizers, like her family, abandoned Grandma Ppong? Maybe it didn't matter.

"Stop taking everything so seriously, you fool," Binx said, now behind me.

Jindo seemed to have sold itself. Come one, come all, calling all buffoons from near and far. As I walked back to Joo's minbak, I passed Grandma Ppong a final time. Empty bottles and food wrappers had been left at her base. Bird sh*t had dripped down her hat and dried. 🍷

This year marks the 40th annual celebration of Grandma Ppong's journey along the rainbow bridge. The Jindo Miracle Sea Road Festival will be held from May 16-19th on Jindo Island. From Seoul, the Express Bus Terminal runs four trips per day directly to the island. If you decide to go, don't miss out on exploring all the island has to offer.