

A Forest

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I'm standing—barely—slumped over the jukebox, back turned to the stage, one arm perched on the glass supporting my body. Shifting between one foot and the other. Legs like jelly, hurting yet hovering. Back. Forth. My body, a pendulum. My eyes fixated on the Jägermeister sign. There's the sound of salt crunching on the brim of a glass, the shuffling of heels on a hardwood floor followed by “Thank you, thank you for your tips.”

Flipping through the 99 CDs feels like an impossible chore. I try to reach deep within myself to pick a song, any song that will move my body enough to exorcise my despair and reel in the monetary love from strangers. I choose a go-to: the Cure, from *Seventeen Seconds*. It's one of my favorite albums, different from the others in its understated, melancholic tones.

10:00 p.m. Some regulars sit at the end of the bar. They tell jokes. I laugh. Usually, I have the script of most evenings down to a science, mustering connections out of thin air like clockwork. But now, when I need that magic the most, is not one of those times. I desperately want to vanish.

I am in such a daze that everything is on autopilot. Sometimes dancing is like that. When it's good, it's great. It feels familiar, yet new. But tonight, I am tired of the world and the persona I've constructed to mentally survive.

“How was Korea?” I hear a faint voice say behind my back.

Dread creeps in. I should have a generic response prepared for this, but I don't.

“Happy birthday to you,” they sing. My second day in Seoul. It’s my birthday. I’m surrounded by seventeen other adoptees whom I met the day before. We’re in a restaurant that serves barbecue but not the kind with the grills on the table. They’ve ordered me some dessert from the menu. Although strangers, we get right down to business: “How old were you when you were adopted? Were you in an orphanage or fostered? Did you come with hopes of finding your birth parents?” The smell of galbi fills the air. Fast friendships are forged over food and displacement.

Normally, I am great at seamlessly switching between my internal monologue and my client-facing persona, but at this moment I feel weak. I don’t want to be at work in this condition but fear that if I don’t put a schedule in, I’ll be punished with fewer shifts next week. And after three weeks in Korea, I desperately need the money. I spent around six thousand dollars on one of the most eye-opening and disappointing trips of my entire life. The happiness and sadness of some days was nearly impossible to contain. Being back in the States is painful.

“Painful” is an understatement.

I turn around, long black hair flowing, as I paint a smirk on my face. Walking, wobbling toward the stage as I pass by a regular customer. I’m friends with his girlfriend; she must have told him why I was there. “It was great,” I say as if the person speaking from inside me were someone else. “There’s 24/7 shopping, and the city feels so safe to walk around.”

A look of disbelief crosses his face. But what exactly does he expect? For me to lay myself bare right there in the club, right before I walk on stage to dance my abandonment away? I don't trust anyone enough to hold my despair. It is too fresh, still bleeding, not refined.

Our hotel in Seoul is central to everything. We even have a tiny washing machine in our room. After unpacking, I go off on my own to explore. The smell of street vendors making fresh candies and fried foods on sticks fills the air. I feel proud to be from here. The pavement is different from Los Angeles. I feel smooth stones beneath my feet, and I want to walk forever.

Jet lag is uncanny but in this case symbolic. The show must go on, despite my crumbling sense of self and limbs weak enough to float away. My body aches from my eyes to my ankles. My black patent stripper heels feel like a custom pair of cement shoes, far from the hollowed-out plastic they are made of. On any other night my shoes are my support; they make me feel strong and unshakable, sexy, limitless. This is not one of those nights.

I'm on stage in a daze, doing slow-motion hair flips, spinning, offering an intense gaze followed by a coy look, then a quick turn. *I hear her voice/ calling my name/ The sound is deep/ in the dark.* I dance like a ghost, hardly registering the floor under my feet. I manage to fool the audience into thinking I am desirable, confident, insatiable. In reality, my soul aches, and I am disoriented by my own thoughts.

How could I tell them how deeply lonely it felt to be among a sea of people who looked just like me?

I never met my mother but sometimes I feel her in my bones, in my blood. We are the same, despite the 19 years between us in age. In her translated letters, written to me before I went to Korea, she hinted at being wild, at having made choices that shamed her family. I never set out to live my life to redeem her buried sexual freedom, but somehow it chose me.

Suddenly I stop/ but I know it's too late.

Who am I, anyway? I almost grasped an answer before it slipped through my fingers. I almost faced who I was, but she slipped through my fingers.

My set ends, and I crawl around the stage sweeping my money from one side to the other, stopping and pausing to thank patrons, attempting to humanize myself in the process. I collect my tips from the customers, with their prying eyes and mouths. I don't think anyone can tell I am slowly dying inside as they stare at me, their tongues hanging out of their mouths like cartoon animals. How could I tell them that my mother had an opportunity to meet me but instead chose to abandon me for a second time?

In the cab back to my hotel, I sob uncontrollably. "She couldn't do it. It was too emotional for her," relayed the social worker as she steered me, implacably, out of the agency's offices. This statement plays in my head over and over. In the seat next to me lie a bouquet of flowers and a photo album I made of the years of my life she missed. The time elapsed from

receiving this news from the social worker to stepping into the cab must have been mere minutes, and yet my whole life flashed before my eyes. Do I even exist?

At the jukebox, I'm setting up my second set. My boss comes by and places her hand on my back. "Did you meet her?" she inquires.

Why is she being so nice to me? I don't trust her. "It didn't happen," I respond while staring into the light of the jukebox. "She couldn't do it." My skin crawls. Why this conversation? Why now? I cannot handle being in my physical and emotional body at once. The air is stagnant, and the music is so loud. The sound of distorted laughter and clapping feels thick as I swallow in discomfort.

How could I tell her it felt like when I lost my virginity? It's the second time I've felt this different—enough that when I look in the mirror, I think that others must notice as well. But it's not the same, it's a different kind of exposure. Very real, in the flesh—the kind that feels exploitative. The kind that can be bought. Here I am for your viewing pleasure, possessed by pleasure and pain.

In the dressing room, I count my money. It was a good set. I've missed the sound of sweeping up dollars, missed the way they felt in my hands. I've missed unfolding them and neatly facing them the same way. The security guy used to comment on this when I changed them at the bar: "You have respect for your money." I didn't know what he meant by that. It's satisfying to see them neatly folded, and easier to know if I've met my "quota" for the evening.

Back at the hotel, I am met with open arms by the 17 other adoptees waiting for my happy reunion. I have nothing. I can hardly face them. I bow out of group lunch and dinner that day and do what feels the most healing, exploring the city alone. For hours I walk, until my feet blister. Being in Seoul is surreal. I see my face in others and yet I cannot communicate with words. When it's brought up by shop owners, I mumble, "I'm adopted." They throw their arms around me and cry.

My mother hid in an unwed mothers' home with me. She didn't tell my birth father I existed. I try to feel him in my bones, skin, and spirit since he's part of what made me too. I'd like to understand his side of the story. My mother felt she was doing us a favor, so I could "have a better life." So he could "have a better life." She put herself in a state of loneliness I cannot even imagine. I wonder sometimes if she "has a better life".

Outside, between sets, I light a cigarette. The action of inhaling calms me down. The boss doesn't like when we take smoke breaks, but I don't care what the punishment is at this point. I need the release, though it means I'm forced to make small talk with customers who are likewise out smoking. My face already hurts from fake-smiling, but at least the cigarette keeps me occupied.

Back inside, in the lap dance booth. I could use the extra cash, but I'd rather be anywhere but here. My body sways, and he thinks I'm being sexy for him. I'm barely standing, leaning on

his shoulders for support, but I make it appear I'm angled for closeness. Manufacturing intimacy is a defense mechanism for me; it's become second nature.

Steve is a regular. He smells like cigarettes, but so do I. I made the mistake of adding him on my personal Facebook page, and now every time I see him, he makes some comment that suggests he "knows me." I can tell he's high right now because he can hardly talk, but predictably, he spits something out. "I read your blog. You're so *dark*." The words sputter and slide sloppily from his mouth.

I feel kicked while already down.

I've danced through breakups, through the deaths of family and friends, through tears shrouded by my hair, and now through this. It's as if the movement is a sort of conjuring, a merging of my body and my mother's as if I am dancing her repression, her shame, away. I dance when I don't know what else to do, a somatic response to everything that I have no words for. No language is needed, no explanation. I can be in my body, and in that moment I feel safe. I am autonomous, haunted, consumed, reckless and abandoned in this space, this underground, where feelings are sin and feeling is foreign. But it's also here where people pay to witness my pain, night after night.

I'm running towards nothing/ Again and again and again and again.