

RON SCHAFRICK

DON'T YOU KNOW ME YET?

IT WAS A SEASON, BARRY KNEW, of big and forthcoming changes. The snow had finally melted, the daytime highs were on the rise, and leaves were starting to bud on all the trees. Tentatively, one by one, people ventured outdoors again, some even dared to wear shorts, exposing legs that were ghostly pale from months of being cocooned in long pants and central heating. Even the ice cream trucks began reappearing, slowly cruising up and down the quiet residential streets, chiming their familiar childhood melodies.

Barry's own life was going through some changes when his boyfriend of three years (a man he assumed he'd one day settle down with) dumped him just as his long-time career as a professional student, slowly collecting one useless degree after another, was coming to its conclusion. Barry hadn't thought too far into the future, and the idea of being both alone and possibly unemployed scared the daylight out of him, forcing him to scramble for work. But his frantic search yielded little hope until one day, while looking at the job board on campus, he noticed a poster: TRAVEL THE WORLD, it read in big bold letters. TEACH ENGLISH OVERSEAS. The photo beneath was of an international mix of young and good-looking men and women, all with exceptionally white teeth, all smiling and laughing together, more like a group of age-old friends than any group of students and teachers. POSITIONS AVAILABLE IN KOREA, the poster advertised. NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY.

Barry had hardly ever travelled (a few cross-border shopping trips into the US and a weeklong stay on a beach in Mexico with Dave, his ex, were the extent of his journeys) and had often wondered what it must be like to venture to such faraway places. But now that he was on the brink of graduating and about to face the looming enormity of his student loan debt, the idea of getting paid to go abroad to teach a language he'd spent his life speaking sounded like an offer too good to pass up; and so, six weeks later, contract in hand, Barry was in Seoul, a big crowded city in a small divided

country on the other side of the planet. He'd half-expected some kind of paralyzing culture shock that would send him fleeing back home; instead he beheld everything with wide-eyed amazement and wonder, which instantly enamored him in the eyes of his students. He discovered that he loved teaching (at least initially), and he quickly made friends (both Korean and foreign), seizing his new life with a sense of adventure, which surprised him for he wasn't ordinarily an adventurous person. He took subways and buses aimlessly, and when it came to food, he was willing to try anything: grilled chicken feet and pigs' toes, steamed silkworms, even things that continued to wriggle and squirm after they were freshly killed and chopped into little pieces. Who was this person, he sometimes thought, who'd lain dormant all his life? This squatter in his own body? "You almost Korean," people would often say to him, astonished to see him wolf down food doused in red pepper paste, regardless of the sweat beading on his forehead and dripping down his nose. It pleased him to hear that; it was as if he'd passed a test and was officially approved of, something he'd never felt before.

From the day he arrived, Barry took a surprising interest in the language (he'd never done so when it came to French), and within a week he had its most basic and useful words down pat: *Hello. How much? Delicious! Thank you. Goodbye!* At night he relived the simple two lines of dialogue he'd had with shopkeepers and restaurant proprietors, thrilled to have been both understood and to understand. Over time, his vocabulary expanded. He took a few courses, learned simple sentence structure, the past and future tenses, the formal and informal voice. Eventually, he even had the need to say "*Saranghae*"—I love you—and mean it.

His first year, he would later reflect, was his best.

Five years passed. Then six, then seven. Barry's debts had long been paid off, and the roots he'd established in Korea were long and deep. He'd moved into a bigger apartment (with a new boyfriend, a Korean man two years his junior), got hired on at a tiny, little-known university, and developed a small network of mostly Korean friends and acquaintances. Apart from his colleagues, Barry seldom socialized with other *waygookin*, and outside of school he conducted his life almost entirely in Korean, as if going about striving to make a point: that whatever gaps and holes existed between cultures, he was living proof that it was possible to bridge them. He'd "gone native," he sometimes liked to think, and was proud of it. And when he encountered other Caucasians on the street, they appeared odd to

him now: bulbous noses, gangly hairy limbs, impossibly wide-hipped and heavy-bodied. Was he also like that? Or was it just the ones who ended up coming here? Slowly, without him completely realizing it, as one country opened up and revealed its secrets to him, the one he'd come from quietly slipped into the background. No news from *over there* ever made the papers, and it was as if the vast, snowy country he grew up in had started to fade, like a memory. He couldn't imagine ever going back. He'd come with only two suitcases; now he owned appliances, antique furniture, framed works of art. He even had two cats. How could he ever go back now? And what would he do if he did? And the winters? He couldn't imagine returning to those.

But instead of things getting easier with the passing years, life seemed to get increasingly frustrating. "You are almost Korean," people continued to remind him, only now they said it to him in Korean. It was always "almost" that they said. *Almost*, but not quite. In the past, it made him happy to hear that; now he felt like he was perpetually in second place, like he was forever on the outside of something, barred from entry, that no matter how hard he tried or how well he spoke the language, he would always be a *waygookin*—an outsider—a feeling he often had while growing up.

And then there was the recurring thought that what he was doing wasn't exactly a real job, that he wasn't a *real* teacher with proper training and credentials (he could never get a teaching job back home), but some imposter, a fraud, continuously faking his way through class as he did through life, living a kind of pretend existence in a pretend place, and that he was also pretending if he thought things could go on like this forever; that one day all of this would catch up to him and he'd have to grow up and go back to the real world and get a real job, just as most other foreigners he'd known had done.

Then there was the steady merry-go-round of questions, again and again, always the same ones: How old was he? Was he married? Did he have a girlfriend? Why not? Did he know how to use chopsticks? Could he stomach the food? Wasn't it too spicy? There was the persistent assumption that he was American, the blatant stares and whispers of people on the subway, the invariable *Hullo! Hullo!* of passing schoolchildren—things he'd once shrugged off now grew increasingly tedious and irritating. Like hairline cracks appearing in a favourite mug, a rupture seemed imminent.

"Don't you know me *yet?*" he often felt like pleading, and sometimes did as he washed the dishes and stared out the window at the endless expanse of identical apartment highrises that coldly stared right back at him.

He grew tired, too, of the produce trucks with their megaphones, those blue Kia Bongos that crisscrossed the neighbourhood streets and alleyways, the loud, grating Buddhist chant of their sales pitches, deeply sonorous and monotone, stretching out the final syllable of each sentence like a dying gasp.

“Tofuuuu ...”

At first, he treated it as a listening test: out of the garbled noise, there was the pleasure of identifying words—“apples,” “squid”—then later on entire sentences. Back then he considered the Bongo trucks practical, even exotic. “Listen to that,” he’d say to his mother whenever she happened to call as one could be heard driving by. He’d hold up the phone in the direction of the window. “Isn’t that neat? They’re selling radishes.” Now their constant drone and yammer got on his nerves.

And sometimes what they were saying was completely unintelligible and haunting, like a shamanistic chant or an Aborigine didgeridoo.

“What’s he saying?” he’d ask Kwang Cheol, in Korean, when they were still living together, before they broke up and Kwang Cheol decided to Americanize his name to KC (and later to Casey).

“*Moo-la,*” he’d answer, shrugging. Dunno. Which surprised Barry, since Kwang Cheol *was* the native speaker. But maybe that was the point of this kind of marketing, Barry considered. Because you didn’t know, you had to look out the window to find out for yourself. It wasn’t until much later that he wondered if Kwang Cheol just didn’t want to say, willfully holding back words, as if being deliberately spiteful.

Then one morning—a Saturday, 6 a.m.—the salt peddler came by.

“So-geom! So-geom!”

The sound came without warning, like a radio alarm going off in the middle of the night.

“Shing-shing-han so-geom! Muji muji sagae pamnida!”

It was a slow and steady chant, each syllable clearly enunciated and shockingly loud. *Salt! Salt! Fresh salt! Very, very cheap!*

Barry was in bed, but he wasn’t asleep. He was an early riser by nature, and now he lay with his eyes wide open, staring up at the wallpapered ceiling. The light fixture above him rattled faintly from the noise.

At times it was possible to tolerate the produce trucks—more or less. Together with the din of traffic or the tat-tat-tat echoing from a nearby construction site, Barry could sometimes pretend they weren’t even out there, like buzzing cicadas on an airless summer afternoon. And once, not

long ago, when Barry was chatting online with a Korean guy who'd refused to send him his face-pic, but only pictures of his chest and abs, Barry was so absorbed in their conversation that he hadn't even heard the approaching fruit peddler outside, not until he heard "*Ba-nah-nah!*" and he dashed downstairs to buy some.

But never before had a Bongo come by this early in the morning, and never this loud. Barry got up and stumbled over to the window. His cats, too, joined him at the ledge, as if also curious about the hullabaloo downstairs. Outside, a Bongo was slowly nearing the building, its headlights two bright beady eyes in the early morning dawn. On the flatbed he could make out enormous bags of salt, like piles of firm-looking pillows.

Barry pulled on a pair of jeans over his boxers and plodded down the stairs where he found the truck parked in front of the building and the peddler leaning up against the grille, smoking a cigarette.

"*Yah!*" Barry shouted over the roar of the megaphone (its sales pitch a tape played on a loop). He deliberately addressed the man in the informal. "*No-mu shikurewah!*" It's so loud.

Barry was not surprised that no one else had come out angrily into the street that morning. He had learned that people here tended to turn their backs on life's annoyances, sooner pretending these things didn't exist than risk losing face. Even if someone was talking loudly on his hand-phone in a crowded movie theatre, he discovered, no one ever turned around to glare. (*Maybe important call*, his students had once tried explaining.) Or when a woman cut into line at the bank, no one ever raised a voice. (*Maybe just quick question.*) They held it in. They *endured*, a verb, he noticed, much used in the language.

"*Myushi inji ara?*" Barry shouted. Do you know what time it is? But just as the words tumbled out, he wondered if he wouldn't be understood as literally asking for the time. The salt peddler lowered his cigarette and stared blankly at Barry.

"Fresh salt!" the megaphone continued to howl. "Very, very cheap!"

Barry had never thought of salt as fresh. Did it ever go stale? He didn't know what else to say. Turn that thing off? Go away? He thought he'd said all that was necessary, yet he felt his message lacked something, his anger unresolved.

And then it came out, all on its own it seemed. It was a word frequently used in the movies, a word that people tended to shout at one another or mumble in a breathy, gritted teeth sort of way. Usually the subtitles read

“Bastard” or “Son-of-a-bitch,” yet both expressions fell short somehow: neither captured the filthiness of its pitch, its glint of malice. Barry had never used this word before, at least not seriously. Sometimes he’d tried it out on Kwang Cheol, but with him he always said it ironically, playfully, and Kwang Cheol would laugh, in a nervous, sheepish sort of way.

Now Barry hurled the word at the man, as if it were a stone.

The salt peddler didn’t say anything. Instead, he stubbed his cigarette out on the ground, climbed back into his vehicle and drove off, decibelling his way down the street.

Barry’s day was ruined. He knew what he’d done would be perceived as typical foreign behavior, bolstering whatever notions many had of Westerners as loud, arrogant and rude. He also feared that he might have lost the respect of his neighbours: the shopkeeper who lived above his tiny store across the street, the drycleaner and his family who lived in the back of their shop next door, the hairdresser downstairs on the first floor. But what worried Barry most was if his landlord and landlady had heard, and they likely had since they lived in the apartment directly below his. He didn’t even know their names; he only knew them as Halmoni and Halabuji, grandmother and grandfather. What if Halmoni had been making kimchi and needed salt, but the fracas had prevented her from going downstairs?

But he couldn’t have been the only one who was annoyed, he thought, and wondered if anyone else had lain awake disturbed by the racket. More likely, though, anyone watching probably would have found the whole thing hysterical. Imagine: a foreigner shouting at the salt seller in alien-sounding Korean. It would be a rousing bit of gossip in the hair salon, and he pictured an older woman, perhaps even Halmoni, bursting through the doors:

“You’ll never guess what happened this morning!”

Barry tried not to think about it. He put it out of his mind and went on with his life. *Pretend life*. Still, he tried looking for any signs of change in his neighbours.

“Hullo, hullo,” said the shopkeeper when Barry dropped in to buy a package of *ramyeon* instant noodles. The old man, perched on a stool behind the counter, beamed when he saw Barry, eager for the opportunity to practice his English. He did an awkward wave-bow combination as he always did, unaware, it seemed, of the morning’s events. “Not too spicy?”

The drycleaner next door also seemed no different. The short, stocky man was at a large, padded table in the storefront window when Barry came in, ironing as he always was from morning to night. A sit-com playing on a television just in front of him gripped the man's attention, and without glancing away he pocketed the money held out to him and blindly passed Barry his plastic-draped suit. Just as he always did.

In the alleyway in front of her salon, the hairdresser was hanging towels on a drying rack that doubled as a parking barrier, lost in a world of her own thoughts and concerns.

"*Annyong haseyo*," Barry said in greeting, bowing his head.

"*Unhhh*," she replied, as usual. "*Unhhh ...*"

The following day Barry was online chatting with the guy who'd sent him the chest and abs pics. How old was he and what did he do? Barry wanted to know. Twenty-three, came the reply, a university student. Where did he live? South of the Han River. What was his major? Economics. Barry would have liked to ask him what movies he'd seen lately, about his taste in music, if he liked to cook—the sort of questions that typically came up in his conversation class—but past experience had taught him that people were quickly turned off by that kind of chat. It was something else that they were looking for here, and it required using language that didn't beat around the bush, and which didn't come naturally to Barry.

—*Can I see what you look like?* Barry click-clacked into the computer keyboard, hoping to sound sexy. —*Your face, I mean.*

They chatted in English (the young man refused to switch to Korean) and after a little coaxing, a head materialized on his screen. Not surprisingly, what Barry saw was somewhat disappointing: pimply skin, glasses, plain features. His face was also too close to the lens, emphasizing all the wrong features and making him look chubby, although Barry couldn't be sure. The photo was also underexposed and slightly blurred, making Barry wonder if the chest and abs pics, which were well lit and sharply focused, belonged to the same person. The chest, in particular, was of someone who clearly worked out, but when he studied the young man's face, Barry did not get the impression that Kcluboi was the type. The whole thing screamed of fraud. He opened up the three snapshots in Photoshop and examined them closely, scrutinizing them for colour and texture, trying to determine if they matched anatomically. He resized them and stacked them up, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and tried to imagine the rest.

A text window appeared on the screen:

—*u there?*

Outside, Barry could hear the echoey slap-slap-slap of someone climbing the exterior staircase.

“*Sunsang-nim!*”

It was Halmoni. “Teacher” was what she called him, as his own name was unwieldy to pronounce.

—*Nice pic*, Barry typed, then stepped into the living room where he could see Halmoni framed in the window, a hand cuffed to the glass, peering into the apartment. She was a short, stout woman with silvery-grey hair permed in tight little curls, a woman Barry had never seen *not* smiling.

“*Sunsang-nim.*” She was holding a plastic container, its red contents visible within. “*Kimchi julka?*” With her free hand she made a rapid circular motion toward her mouth, as though shoveling food in as quickly as possible.

Barry told her he’d love some and felt greatly relieved. Everything, it would appear, was business as usual.

On Wednesday morning, just when Barry had forgotten about the incident, the salt peddler returned. This time it was a little past six. For a moment Barry didn’t know what the thrumming sound was (he was in the shower, getting ready to go to work), and then he recognized the salt peddler’s chant:

“*So-geom! So-geom! Shing-shing-han so-geom!*”

When he opened the bathroom door he could hear it plainly, each word, each syllable. If this were a listening test, he thought, even a level-one language student would have no trouble catching every consonant and vowel.

Barry hurried over to the window, but the truck was nowhere to be seen, and the incessant chant hung over the neighbourhood like a malevolent fog. Barry tried to get ready for his day, but the constant droning made him nervous and edgy. He turned on the radio to try to distract himself, but all he could hear was that the man outside had cheap salt.

It went on for nearly an hour.

He was just about to leave the house when he caught sight of the truck trundling down the alleyway, its sales pitch growing louder as it approached the building. Barry considered his options: he could just go to work and forget about the racket. Or he could set things straight.

What happened next Barry would later try to wipe from his memory. What he should have done, he later reflected, was to have politely asked the

man to lower the volume. That probably would have worked; it just never crossed his mind. Instead, he was all rage and emotion. He was like a lunatic, no longer in control of his own words and actions. Instead of coming to a peaceful resolution, he provoked the start of a long, drawn-out war. Oddly, the salt peddler never said a thing the whole time. He rested his arm out the window and waited for Barry to finish his rant, wearing the same look as someone stuck in traffic. He endured it.

When Barry finished, the salt peddler sirened past, and Barry went to work. He felt miserable and ashamed and his day was ruined—again. In class he was distracted and lacked energy and enthusiasm, which only made his students act up and not pay attention—*pretend teacher*—adding to his foul mood. He ended his last class early by ten minutes.

“Did you hear that guy this morning?” Barry asked Shelley at lunch, a teacher from New Zealand who lived just up the street from him.

“Who?”

“The salt guy.” He covered his nose and mouth with his hands. “So-gum. So-gum,” he said, sounding as though he were talking in a tin can.

She had no idea what he was going on about. “Sorry, but I can sleep through an air raid and not hear anything,” she said. “That’s just the way I am.”

He should have spent the rest of the afternoon marking quizzes. Instead, he logged onto the chat site where he often ended up killing entire evenings and weekends. Kwang Cheol, his ex, was also online. He knew it was Kwang Cheol because, unlike Barry, he had posted his face-pic alongside his handle: Casey. Barry wondered if he’d done that intentionally, guaranteeing that Barry would see him, trumpeting his availability, letting it be known that he was looking around, having fun. But a few seconds after Barry logged on, Kwang Cheol logged off, making him wonder if Kwang Cheol knew who he was, if online gossip had revealed his identity.

Kcluboi was also online, a name he’d begun to read as *Ka-blew-y*. Barry asked him about the pictures, if all three were of him, and he said that they were.

—*Prove it*, Barry punched into the keyboard, and Kcluboi replied that he had full body pics—a clothed one *and* a nude one—but again he was coy about sending them. Barry selected a photo of himself from his hard drive and dragged it into the chat window, an old snapshot in which he looked unaccountably slim, his nose only slightly altered in Photoshop. He pressed Enter and waited for the reply.

Outside, the fruit and vegetable peddlers were buzzing around. *They* weren't obnoxious, Barry thought. In fact, he liked the sound of them, he told himself now. Plus they came around at more reasonable hours. Why couldn't the salt peddler be more like them? He could hear the old man who dragged away discarded cardboard and paper in a two-wheeled cart, plodding along with a pair of medieval-looking shears that from time to time he clanked open and shut, open and shut to announce his presence. *Clank, clank! Clank, clank!*

"*Yeul-say! Yeul-say!*" now announced the key cutter, a man who scooted around on a three-wheel motorcycle, the back of which was loaded down with a whole array of stubby uncut keys, plus a tiny motor to do the cutting.

—*u looks astralien*

Barry blinked. What did an "Astralien"—an Austra-alien!—look like?

—*I'm not.*

—*USA?*

—*Guess again.*

—*new zeeland?*

Now came the pickup truck whose driver went around offering to buy up used appliances and furniture, much of what he rattled off was in English: *Com-pew-tuh! Poo-rin-tuh! Cah-pet-tuh! Aih-con!*

—*u looks kind*

A black Hyundai minivan with tinted windows and four enormous megaphones then thundered its way down the street. The deafening sound pounding out of that thing forced Barry to get up from his desk and look outside. But when he realized what was being announced would affect him and his neighbours, his flash flood of anger dissipated, making him feel bereft of something that was his due right. Because of nearby construction activity, the robotic voice boomed, the water in the neighbourhood would be turned off. But what Barry had trouble understanding was the exact date, time, and number of hours of the planned shut-off: all the numbers together mixed him up. He tried listening through the announcement again, but it still didn't make sense to him. And by the third time it rolled around, the minivan was already far enough away that its message grew muddled and echoey.

—*u there?*

Barry replied that he was going crazy. All the Bongos! All the noise! He couldn't stand it.

—*oh ... nobody likes*

—*So why doesn't anyone ever do anything?*

When no response came Barry asked Kbluboi straight out what it was he wanted.

—*i'm looking for a good guy*

As the broadcast from the minivan began to dissipate, Barry could hear the distant tinkling of a bell and a woman calling out something indiscernible in a singsong.

—*So am I.*

When they'd arranged a time and place to meet, Barry went downstairs to the hair salon to find out more about the shut-off, poking his head around the frosted glass door. The room was full of *ajumas*, women deep into middle age, their hair in curlers, all of them sitting under white plastic capes and red heat lamps. They all turned to him, startled, as if a man had accidentally wandered into the ladies'. To no one in particular, Barry asked if they'd heard the announcement from the minivan that had just passed. They all shook their heads.

"When was that?" asked one.

"Just now."

"What did it say?" asked another.

"Something about the water being shut off."

The women looked at each other and shook their heads, some started chuckling, others riffled through glossy magazines. *Silly foreigner*, he imagined them saying afterwards as he trotted back upstairs. *Hearing things*. He rapped on Halmoni's door. Oddly, she too hadn't heard anything, she said, adding that at her age her hearing was shot. She asked Halabuji as she slipped back inside. Neither did he, he chortled. He was sitting on the living room floor, watching TV. *Oh, come on*, his laugh seemed to say. *You're pulling my leg*.

"*Sunsang-nim*," Halmoni said, floating back to the door, smiling broadly. She was cupping a plastic container in her hands and pressed it toward Barry, making a spoon-feeding gesture near her mouth. "*Kimchi julka?*"

He waited in front of the Starbucks at the end of his street, just outside the subway entrance. Two steady streams of people filed up and down the steps of the station, like a busy colony of ants, all imbued with a sense of purpose and direction. A man standing on a box next to the entrance was clapping his hands, loudly calling out to the passing crowd, trying to draw attention to the ersatz Gucci and YSL bags on his table. "Very cheap! Very

cheap!” he shouted, doggedly optimistic, even though everyone shuffled right past. Barry felt sorry for the man. Sometimes you just have to face reality, he thought, when things aren’t working out. And then Barry anxiously contemplated his own life. He looked at his watch.

Barry scanned the crowd, trying to out-spot his online friend—*pretend friend*—before he himself could be spotted. *Him! Him!* he thought whenever a handsome face strode by. *Let it be him.*

“Hul-lo,” he heard someone say behind him. He’d been waiting nearly thirty minutes. “Hul-lo! Hul-lo!” Two middle-school boys in uniform were approaching him. They wore blue suits and red ties, like little businessmen. “Bye-bye,” they said, giggling as they walked past. “Bye-bye.”

On Saturday morning—at nine this time—the ruckus started up again. Barry had been waiting for him. Like last time, it dragged on for an hour before the Bongo neared the building. Barry was standing in the kitchen window, doing the dishes and keeping an eye out for the salt peddler. From here he could see the little shop across the street and the old man inside, shuffling in and out of view as he restocked items on the shelves, and the drycleaner in the window next door, ironing the endless pile of wrinkled clothes that was forever behind him.

The hot water, Barry noticed, had turned tepid and now nothing but cold was streaming out. As he lathered and rinsed the bowls and chopsticks, Barry caught flashes of the Bongo cutting down nearby cross streets before finally cruising down his own, slowly approaching the building like an army of one.

Who does he think he is? Barry thought. And why does no one stand up to him? Barry’s hands shook and the bowls and plates clanked dangerously as he added each dripping one to the dish rack. Don’t you know me yet? he thought.

When the Bongo finally neared the building—the water barely dribbling out of the tap now—Barry dried his hands and went downstairs. He marched up to the truck and stood in front of it, blocking its progress, like the lone Tiananmen Square protester in 1989. Barry pulled out his hand-phone from his pocket and thumbed 1-1-2, the number for the police. Barry described the situation to the operator, gave his address, then listed off the truck’s license plate number. The salt peddler’s eyes widened. “It’s very loud, isn’t it?” Barry shouted, and the operator concurred. Where was he? she asked, and again Barry began reeling off his address.

"No, no," she said. "Are you outside?"

"No," he lied. "I'm in the kitchen."

"Oh," she said, sounding alarmed. "Someone will be there shortly."

He snapped the phone shut and stepped aside. He would have waited until the police came but feared that if he stayed there any longer the situation would turn ugly, and the faces of everyone in the neighbourhood really would fill the surrounding windows, eager to watch. He would then have to defend himself in a language that was not his, and he could see himself stuttering and looking foolish. Like a clown.

It dawned on him then that he was a coward.

The Bongo slowly foghorned its way past, and the two men glared at each other. Barry stamped back upstairs. A short while later his phone chimed. It was the police. No such vehicle matching the description he gave could be found in the area, he was informed. Nothing at all.

That night Barry had dinner with Kwang Cheol at a pork barbeque restaurant in the neighbourhood. It was one of those dinners in which the two of them try to *catch up*, a vain attempt to maintain some sort of post-breakup friendship. But neither had much to talk about, and long stretches of silence typically punctuated their get-togethers.

Luckily for Kwang Cheol, tonight there was a TV that hung in the corner of the restaurant directly above Barry's head that he was able to watch and laugh along with as Barry stabbed at leftover scraps of *bulgogi* while scrambling to think of topics of discussion—what he did nearly every morning minutes before his level-5 Free-Talking class. *Pretend teacher*.

"Kwang Cheol," Barry said, snapping him back to reality.

"Casey," he replied, narrowing his eyes.

Barry couldn't bring himself to call Kwang Cheol "Casey" and went on as if he hadn't heard. "I met someone the other day," he said, in Korean. He didn't know why he was making this up, this lie, this pretend life.

"Oh?"

"But ..." He shrugged, not knowing how to go on. "But, well, even though he had a really nice body, he ..."

The lights in the restaurant dimmed suddenly and a cake impaled with a sparkler like a lit fuse was brought to another table. A birthday tune pumped out of the speakers in the ceiling.

"But he wasn't really my type," Barry shouted above the music as everyone in the restaurant clapped in time to the song.

There was some muffled cheering, a noisemaker popped loudly, and a burst of confetti showered down on the birthday table. The sparkler was then extinguished and the lights and music went back to normal, as if the past minute had never happened.

“Why do you think—?” Barry hollered, changing the subject. He lowered his voice. “Why do you think he’s so loud?”

“Who?”

Earlier in the evening Barry had told Kwang Cheol about the salt peddler, but left out all the unpleasant bits.

“Oh, him.”

“Even the walls shake, it’s so loud.”

Before they broke up, both Barry and Kwang Cheol were guilty of habits that neither of them seemed able to break. Because Barry wanted so much to be fluent in the language, to fit into this society, if there was something he couldn’t express in Korean, he simply wouldn’t say it. He refused to switch to English, even though Kwang Cheol spoke English fairly well. Barry would use other words to express himself, wildly flapping his arms around if he had to, to make himself understood. He’d steer clear of whatever he couldn’t express, sidestepping the issue as though it were some gaping pothole in the street. And Kwang Cheol, too, Barry had slowly begun to realize, only spoke to him in a kind of dumbed-down, level-one version of Korean, which explained why he often had trouble understanding strangers but never Kwang Cheol—or KC, or Casey, or whoever he was. There was, Barry now knew, a lot that neither of them had ever said to the other.

“Because,” his ex said to him now. He turned to look at Barry squarely and, in English, said something that was stunningly obvious. “Because most people don’t really listen.”

The salt peddler didn’t come by the following week. And when another week passed without commotion, Barry thought: Problem solved. And when a third week went by, he was overjoyed and thought that was that. End of story. It was like a time of new beginnings, fresh starts, new resolutions.

—*u there?*

A window had popped open on his computer screen late one afternoon.

Barry had his hands poised above the keyboard, about to ask him what happened that night, but then decided against it. Instead, he glided his mouse across the window, clicked on the X in the corner, then shut the computer down altogether: a small but liberating step. *Ka-blew-y!*

It wasn't until the fifth or sixth week that the salt peddler returned. Again on a Saturday, and again just after six a.m. Barry looked out the kitchen window and watched the Bongo slowly approach. He sighed.

Barry didn't know why he went down to the bottom of the stairs that morning. He wasn't about to make a fool of himself by screaming again, nor was he going to call the police for the second time. He had no plan except maybe to glare at the man. No matter what he did, he knew now, it was a battle he'd never win.

Finally the truck drove up to the building, megaphone bellowing. When the salt peddler saw Barry, he stopped the truck and shifted into park. Barry thought he was going to step out of the vehicle, pull out a gun and shoot him in the head. I certainly deserve as much, he thought. Instead, the man turned down the volume, leaned across the seat and opened the passenger door. He gestured for Barry to come forward. "*Eri-wa*," he said softly. Come here.

Barry slowly neared the truck.

"Get in," the salt peddler said, gesturing again, and Barry cautiously climbed inside.

"How loud can I go?" the man asked, and he readjusted the volume knob to roughly the halfway point.

It was very strange to be sitting inside the blue Bongo. What was stranger still was that until now Barry had never heard the man speak. The peddler's voice, he discovered, was not the same droning voice as on the recording. Whose was it? The man in the driver's seat sounded human, his voice gentle. This seemed to throw a new light on things. Barry turned to look at him, as if seeing the man for the first time, and noticed his dark, leathery wrinkled skin, a gap between yellowed teeth, and large, rough-looking hands, dusty with salt.

He's just a man, Barry thought, just a peddler of salt doing a job he probably doesn't care for one ounce. And it occurred to him that he might actually be a nice man, not the monster he'd envisioned. He wasn't reviled by anyone in the neighbourhood. If anything, most people were probably indifferent to him, if they even knew he existed. And for a moment Barry pictured the two of them sitting on the heated floor of the salt peddler's home, at a low wooden table while his wife brought each of them a steaming pot of *kimchi chigae*, bowls of rice and dishes of *panchan*. "This man used to give me so much trouble," he imagined him saying to his wife, able to laugh about it now, warmly clapping Barry on the back. No, not "man." That wouldn't be

the right word. What he would have said was *ching-gu*. Friend. “This *friend* used to give me so much trouble,” would be a more accurate translation, awkward-sounding though it was in English. “Oh, really,” he heard his wife say, pretending not to know, and he saw the two of them—the peddler and himself—raise their glasses of soju in a toast. Clink!

“How loud? This much?”

Barry had only ever dreamt of complete silence. But that, he now knew, was out of the question. Barry turned down the knob a little more, though not too much, afraid it might be rude to do so. “This much,” he said, wondering if he was pushing his luck, although where the volume had been before seemed fairly tolerable too. It was hard to say since he was inside the Bongo and not upstairs lying in bed.

The salt peddler grabbed a dull wooden pencil from the dash and made a little tick on the tape deck, next to the white dot on the knob. If there were subtitles, the words he spoke next would read: “We’re OK now?” He used the informal in speaking to Barry, the way an older person might do to someone younger, or the way two friends might speak to each other. The soft resonance of his voice did not make it impolite.

Barry nodded and got out of the vehicle. He started back up the stairs.

“*Kamsa-hamnida*,” Barry said, turning back, speaking in the formal. Thank you. He bowed his head, slightly.

The salt peddler shifted the truck back into gear and resumed his slow advance down the street, the megaphone continuing to announce that he had fresh salt for sale.

Barry watched the truck disappear. As it pulled around the corner, slowly getting farther away, it was difficult to tell if the volume was much lower than before. In fact, it was impossible to say whether it had changed much at all, if any. The only thing that had changed was that it was now a little easier to endure.