

## I Imagine A Conversation

While browsing through videos on YouTube as one of my usual pastimes, I stumbled on a series of videos that captivated me. These videos were a vlog created by a Korean Youtuber named Sena, who embarked on a journey to various countries around the world, one of which was Russia. Sena decided to use the Trans-Siberian Railway in order to travel through the country, and on this train, she encountered a number of different people, experiences, and situations. One particular encounter on this railway, however, completely transformed my perception of what it means to be “Korean.” One day on the train, Sena came across a group of men, who, like her, spoke Korean. However, their accents were different. When they spoke Korean, it sounded, to me, almost like a song. The way the syllables oscillated up and down like a ship travelling through the rolling ocean waves was like listening to an oddly familiar tune. Sena and the men talked about their families and introduced themselves to one another and their conversations flowered, but I sensed an unspoken tension and an underlying caution. Yes, Sena was immersed in the conversation, but anyone could tell she was nervous. On that fateful day on a cramped passenger car headed to the city of Vladivostok, Sena, a young, South Korean woman, met citizens of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, who came to Russia on a working contract that allowed them to leave the hermit kingdom. In search for what the world would consider to be a pitiful wage, these men had no other choice but to consider their journey away from home and family a gift when remembering the conditions they left behind in their home country.

After I watched that video, I imagined myself on that very passenger car of the Trans-Siberian Railway headed to the city of Vladivostok in Russia. There, I find myself in that peculiar situation, just like the one Sena found herself in. In the confined passenger cars of the speeding train piercing through the nipping cold Russian winds, I come across a group of laborers. They look battered, tired, their hands are scarred and rough, like leather. Despite this, their faces look like that of my own, my parents, my community, my elders, and my people.

Would I be afraid? What would I say? What would I tell them? Could I even face them? Could I look them in the eyes and share a conversation with them? I think about how strange it is that in a world where our meeting has been forbidden since our grandparents' childhoods, I could happen to stumble upon these tired men on the railways of such a foreign, cold country. I think about how strange it is that we could sit face-to-face to share a conversation in the same tongue in a world where our conversations are kept so strictly apart by an imaginary line guarded by grave soldiers with dangerous weapons. I think about how strange it is that a history of division, constant tension, and fear could be undone in a single moment, or how quickly that imaginary line could just dissipate in one conversation.

When I think back to Sena and the laborers on that train— their tired hands, their hospitality, their vulnerability, their curiosity toward each other, their conversations— I am heartbroken. I can't help but notice how *Korean* they are. I could never forget how concerned and caring the men were toward Sena, who, in their eyes, was just a young woman travelling alone in a foreign country, and how much they reminded me of the

Korean elders in my own community. The way the men's banter reminded me of the way my dad spoke to his friends on the phone, the way they kept pushing their food at Sena, insisting that she eat more, or the way they were concerned for the scarce job opportunities of young Koreans who just graduated from college, or even the way they playfully scolded her for not yet being married—I could never forget how Korean they felt to me.

Yet, in my years living and growing up in America, I've had a rough time figuring out what it even meant to be "Korean." Indeed, I've always been confused as to who, or what, I am supposed to be as a first-generation immigrant. For the longest time, I couldn't fully understand what made me Korean (though I was sure that I was), but I was also sure that I wasn't purely American. In the midst of my convoluted idea of what it meant to be me, I hadn't even considered those in the city of Pyongyang, just nearly 200 kilometers north from the city where I was born, Seoul.

Looking back, I never really considered the place north of that imaginary line as "Korea." It had always been foreign, apart, and distant to me and my identity as a Korean American. In fact, whenever I would tell someone, most of the time non-Asian, that I was born in Korea, I was irritated and quite frankly, offended when they would ask "North or South?" for clarification, whether it be as a crude joke or just out of plain ignorance. It occurred to me only recently that the reason why I was so uncomfortable with this question was because I didn't consider North Korea or the North Korean people to be "Korean." No matter how unsure I was about my identity as a Korean American, I was

sure of one thing: to be North Korean was to be foreign, disgraceful, not “Korean.” I believe now that I could not have been more wrong.

Truly, Korea is not North or South. Korea is its people: the history, the language, the pain, the division, the healing, and the reunification. Though it is hard to see the tyranny, the brutality, the suffering, the propaganda, and the poverty as one and the same with what we might be used to as our idea of “Korea,” there is a simple truth that lies within the people of both sides, north and south, that is simply undeniable: we are all Koreans and deep in our hearts, we all feel and recognize it.

I won't lie; I can live my daily life not constantly being haunted by the idea that my homeland still stands divided and apart, as most of the world does. But the more I think and ponder about the state of the two Koreas, there's a pinging sense of sadness and heartbreak that occasionally echoes within the chambers of my mind and keeps me thinking. The armies of the world can make their preparations, the treasurers can add up the costs, the governments can engage in their negotiations, but there is a hollowness and uncertainty within every single Korean in the world that will continue to haunt us as long as we know that the imaginary line exists. It's a reality that I and thousands of others like me have just accepted and lived with. But if I search deeper and deeper into my thoughts, I find that I am restless. I can't help but to imagine the world with a united Korea.

I can't help but to wonder what it would be like. I can't help but to believe that while it may be the Korean peninsula that will be united, the atmosphere throughout the globe will be different. The world will be breathing in a new air. Perhaps I am idealizing what is an extremely complex international affair that will bring about extreme

challenges and costs or maybe I'm undermining the difficulty and the risks of the task at hand. Still, I just can't help but imagine that sigh of relief that will echo through every corner of the world as the people of the two Koreas meet one another to have a conversation in a unified Korea. I can't help but imagine that hollowness within every Korean being filled with a sense of hope that we didn't know we had.

I often dream of their stories. I dream of the pain, the frustration, the anger, the helplessness, the tears, the turmoil, and the stories they must keep deep within their hearts, kept hidden and obscured deep within the walls of the hermit kingdom. I dream of the people that our ancestors left behind and the conversations that they could have shared after the war waged some seventy years ago that should have ended in the past. It's a simple and primitive thing to wish for, but I cannot help but to imagine the beautiful conversations that will take place between the people of one, united Korea.