

Hongdae's Hidden Art Gallery

“Has Hongdae always been this vibrant?” I wonder aloud, gazing at the sparkling shopping district around me.

Nicole laughs. “You haven’t visited Korea in five years, right? This country evolves faster than AI in a sci-fi novel.”

Two-story buildings line the wide walkway, strung up with neon signs advertising everything from nail salons to designer clothing. Students from a local university travel from bar to bar, while high schoolers move in uniformed packs. Christmas lights wrapped around tree trunks cast a soft glow onto the asphalt streets; it’s the runoff of winter in Seoul, Korea, and I’m in the center of its warm heart.

Nicole approaches a food-stand to make a purchase. “*Ddu gae salsu-issnayo?*” I just barely understand that she’s asking to buy two of the stand’s wares. Soon, there’s a hot Korean corn dog in my hand — and I am once again jealous of Nicole’s fluency.

We met through an online writing program. Back then, it was so easy to make conversation: we would perform peer edits, or gush over Haruki Murakami novels. But here, in the pulsing nightlife of her motherland—which is also my land, but not really, because I feel like a foreigner—I’m struggling to speak. I’m starting to regret asking to meet up.

I’m Korean-American. But the *American* part of me stands out like ink bleeding over pencil marks.

“Are you okay?” Nicole asks.

“I’m fine,” I gasp, while in reality I want to close my eyes and plug my ears. “I’m just... feeling a bit dizzy.”

I expect her to laugh, or maybe give me a quizzical look. But instead, Nicole nods in agreement.

“I know a place we can go to get away,” she says.

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After weaving through the Hongdae district, we arrive at a residential street with high cobblestone walls on either side, trees peeking their leafy heads over the tops. Void of flashy colored lights, the area is dimly lit. My eyes are drawn to a solitary lamppost farther up ahead, but Nicole gestures to the nearby cobblestone wall.

“Look,” she says, prompting me to swing my head around. I search for whatever it is I’m looking for, visually wading through the dark.

And then I see it.

It’s *art*. Magical, marvelous art — paint smeared against stone, every inch of color a blood transfusion. I stare at solitary portraits of dancing tigers and murals depicting skies full of stars. Nicole gently leads me farther up the street, where more art is etched into the cobblestone.

“The art students at the nearby Hongik University did all this,” she tells me.

As we make our way forward, Nicole comments on certain artworks. “This portrait was inspired by Kim Hyun Jung, a female artist known for her illustrations of women in *hanbok. This abstract piece over here represents the spirit of the Korean people. See how the colors match that of the Korean flag?”

We walk along the cobblestone street, admiring the art while also maintaining a steady stream of conversation. We talk about everything from kpop, to our hatred of standardized testing; it turns out Nicole and I have much more in common besides writing.

Eventually, Nicole stops in front of a wide mural drawn in vivid colors. “This one’s my favorite.”

Together, we admire the piece. The lines of the mural are sharp and defined, depicting a crowd of Korean citizens gathered around a long banner displaying a message I can’t immediately translate. A girl stands beneath the banner, her solemn face and raised fist a compelling contrast to the surrounding commotion. I recognize her as seventeen year old Ryu Gwansun: one of the youngest, most famous political activists in Korean history.

“This mural is an homage to the series of protests and demonstrations that took place on March 1st, 1919: otherwise known as the March 1st Movement,” Nicole says. “It was one of the earliest displays of Korean resistance against Japanese rule. About 7,500 civilians were killed — including Ryu Gwansun and her parents.”

She reads the banner aloud: “We herewith proclaim the independence of Korea and the liberty of the Korean people. This we proclaim to all the nations of the world in witness of human equality. This we proclaim to our descendants so that they may enjoy their inherent right to nationhood.”

“It’s like the Declaration of Independence,” I say.

“You’re spot on. It’s known as the Korean Declaration of Independence.”

“It’s strange,” I say. “Up until now, I felt like a stranger in my own country. But this homage to activism? This country’s history of bravery?” I gaze at Ryu Gwansun’s face. “I’m so proud to be Korean — albeit an Americanized one.”

“You’re just as Korean as I am,” Nicole says. “So what if you live in the US? We can draw a million connections between our countries — for example, our respective declarations of independence.”

We both laugh. “But seriously,” she continues, looking me in the eye. “No matter where we live, or what language we speak, or how we look... It’s who we *are* that matters. Your fierce spirit? Your immense creativity? Those qualities of yours transcend barriers.”

“You know what? You’re totally right,” I say, smiling at her.

Nicole smiles back. “Exactly. We became friends not because of our Korean heritage, but because we’re so much more than where we were born.”

This time, when I look at her, I see myself.