

## K-LOVE

Seoul is bathed in neon. Sparks and revelry greet those who wish to enjoy it. Ginseng shops are commonplace, each displaying their wares as gloriously as possible. They head underground, where they encounter rows of neatly lined shops, sterile, every single one awash with cute designs. The shops flank them on both sides of the pavement. Several hundred pairs of eyes cast their gaze at Yadi as he passes them. The strapping young man from the Nusantara is here to attend the World Poet's Congress.

"We will visit Wolseong Palace tomorrow. Where is it?"

Yadi asks Hyun-soo as he admires her thick eyebrows.

"Oh, in Gyeongju, about two hundred and eighty kilometres from here," she answered with her barely audible voice. Yadi is taken by her gentleness. He feels blessed to have been able to roam the gorgeous streets of South Korea's capital city. He feels even more fortunate to be spending time with Hyun-soo, who he finds delicate and elegant. Their conversations are made even more intimate because Hyun-soo speaks fluent Bahasa. She studied Malay language and literature for six years, and now lectures at Seoul National University. She teaches Bahasa to South Koreans.

"You have a beautiful country. I have fallen in love with South Korea," he expresses his feelings as he holds Hyun-soo's tiny fingers in his hands.

"You have an even more beautiful country," she replies.

Yadi feels honoured to be welcomed by a representative from the World Poet's Congress at Seoul's international airport. Every guest is paired with a Korean lady in traditional clothes. Hyun-soo was tasked to be Yadi's guide. It feels as if God arranged this. God granted Yadi's wish to meet an astounding Korean girl who can speak Bahasa.

They browse the shops. Many are eyeing them, stealing glances at this foreign man being so cosy with a local girl. Tired of walking, Yadi requests Hyun-soo to take him to a less crowded place. He wants to be closer to her. She takes his hand, and they move towards the main road.

"I'll take you to a coffee house," she explains. They order their drinks on reaching their destination. Hyun-soo sits close to Yadi. The scent of her hair and her gentle breathing is driving him wild. He believes he is infatuated with her.

"Your country is well developed. They appreciate artists here. They value poets in the same way they value ministers," Yadi says.

"Your evidence?" prods Hyun-soo. Their eyes lock. To Yadi, she seems to possess Korean and Japanese features. Her cheeks are rosy, her lips soft, and her pupils glossy black. His heart palpitates.

"Well, we get the 'red carpet' treatment," he says.

"And?" she asks flirtingly.

"We are put up in the most expensive hotel in Seoul," answers Yadi.

"And?" she presses on.

"The event that was organised, the food that were offered, they are all exquisite," Yadi answers as he holds Hyun-soo's gaze. She is fiddling her blue silky blouse with her petite fingers.

"Aren't poets also important intellectuals to the nation?" Hyun-soo answers in the gentlest of tones.

"So you think poets are intellectuals?" Yadi teases her.

"Yah! Intellectuals in the wider sense of the word. Especially because they interpret the world and life," she answers confidently.

Yadi holds Hyun-soo in a steady gaze. He is convinced that she is the most beautiful person that he has ever laid eyes on.

"I feel like I don't want to leave Seoul even though I have only spent five days here," he utters melancholically.

"Why?" she enquires.

"Everything is lovely here. I don't know how to leave Seoul. If I do, then I'm afraid my Nusantara tears will wet your city's grounds," he says sadly.

"Can we meet again?" Yadi asks. He holds Hyun-soo's hands. Her eyes are glassy.

"I don't feel like going home. South Korea is charming. It's clean and green, cool and calm. I want to stay here longer," Yadi expresses himself.

"Oh! Let's talk about something else. We have three more days to enjoy South Korea together," says Hyun-soo, trying to repress her sadness.

"Asian poetry is very romantic. Many are escapist and mushy," says Hyun-soo in an obvious attempt at switching the topic.

"How about American poetry?" Yadi asks.

"They're more philosophical and full of intellectual questions," she replies.

"But they're rigid and bad at aesthetics," counters Yadi.

"They look down on our values and cultures. I haven't come across any academic study that covers Asia in its entirety," he continues.

"Their thoughts are not that complex. I believe that a veteran poet from my country can best their deepest thinkers," says Yadi, laying bare his true feelings about Western cultures.

"Let's take a walk outside," Hyun-soo suggests. Yadi pays the bill in American dollars.

They take an impromptu tour of the city of Seoul. Feeling lethargic, Yadi decides that it is time to go back to Lotte Hotel where the rest of the Congress participants are staying. Hyun-soo heads home. Yadi has no idea where she stays. They meet early the following day, joining the other participants for an organised tour of old temples and remnants of the famous Silla Castle. Their outing in Gyeongju lasts about two and a half hours. Throughout the trip, Hyun-soo busies herself explaining to Yadi all that she knows about her country. The area, far from Seoul, is hilly and gorgeous. Greenery beautifies the roadside. Roses can be seen aplenty throughout. Sitting next to Hyun-soo, Yadi is taken by the serenity and romantic ambience of the place. They stroll around the site of Wolseong Palace, and visited the museum and temples of Gyeongju.

When night falls, the crowd heads back to Seoul. Yadi could not sleep. Hyun-soo keeps appearing in his mind each time he closes his eyes. He replays their intimate exchanges during the day.

He begins to plot the ways that he could be with her, all the while imagining her beside him. The cold fog outside makes the lights in his room seem dimmer, enhancing the romantic ambience about the place. He stares at the empty pillow beside

him. He pictures Hyun-soo's lithe body lying there, clothed in a purple nightdress. She is sleeping soundly. Oh! What a joy if I could take you back to Temasek. You would look so sweet in kebaya and songket. You would look lovely with a blue selendang. Oh Hyun-soo, you would be stunning!

They meet again the next day. It is Yadi's last day in Seoul. Tomorrow, the participants will be heading back to their countries.

They make their way to a scenic hill whose grounds are littered with red roses. At its summit, Yadi and Hyun-soo takes a moment to enjoy nature's beauty. She is beautiful in her traditional green and blue Korean dress. Yadi cannot take his eyes off her.

"Don't stare at me like that," she pleads.

"Why not?" asks Yadi.

"You stare with such intensity. It feels like a knife is piercing my heart," she replies in her quiet voice.

"I cannot help but look at you as much as I can," says Yadi, who acquiesces to her request by shifting his gaze to a stalk of roses. Melancholy is creeping into his heart as the gravity of his final day sinks in. Hyun-soo peers at the flock of trees at the base of the hill. They dread the inevitable sadness.

"I'll miss you. I want to look at you to my heart's content. I want to sear the image of your face unto the crevices of my heart. I don't want to feel the stinging pain of missing you," confesses Yadi.

"I will miss you too but we have to part. This parting will be painful and lengthy. Tomorrow, we will see each other. Then we will be separated by oceans and mountains over thousands of kilometres. But we will meet again. I am sure this is not our final meeting."

Hyun-soo utters these words tenderly. The cool mountain air feels refreshing. Blooming roses are everywhere. The day is sunny. The clear skies are sparingly decorated with white clouds. Where there are no clouds, the skies are captivatingly blue. Yadi and Hyun-soo do not speak for a while, each dwelling in their melancholy.

"You believe in love?" she suddenly asks him.

"I don't know. Before coming here, I've promised myself not to be too romantic or sentimental. I thought that the idea of romance was fantastical. It's dangerous to my being. I'm constantly on the move. I'm actively thinking about the conditions of my community and how to improve them. But, breathing the cool air here, seeing you, listening to the sweet rhythm of your breaths, I feel as if I've been enveloped by affection. I'm kidnapped by sentimentality, by the idea that everything's beautiful and captivating. Is this love?" asks Yadi in all honesty.

"Now I'm afraid to leave Korea. I'm saddened and troubled by the thought of tomorrow. What's the meaning of all this?" Yadi laments.

"It is a pity that we would be separated over a great distance," says Hyun-soo sadly.

"But nothing can stop our love," Yadi quickly adds.

"How will we be together?" she asks.

Yadi looks into her eyes, whose pupils are works of art even as they dart about lined with a tinge of redness.

"I invite you to come to my country. This is a possibility," Yadi suggests.

She looks down. She is thinking about her beloved sixty-year-old mother. Her father's seventy-year-old face is tugging at her heartstrings. She tries to imagine life in a foreign land.

"Do you accept?" Yadi presses Hyun-soo for an answer.

"Yadi, it is better if we part first. Then we can really feel the pain of separation, the anticipation of love. Let us go through the trial of being apart, separated by oceans and mountains. We will write letter after letter. We will yearn and ponder. We will use our minds as well as our emotions. Let us first suffer the pangs of parting and the anticipation of affection," she replies.

Yadi feels this is truly the final time he will be in South Korea. It is impossible for him to return every year. It will cost him thousands. This trip was itself sponsored by a company back home. To finance such a trip out of his own pocket is unthinkable. A teacher like him does not earn more than eight hundred dollars a month. On top of that, he is supporting his parents and disabled brother, footing the bill for housing rental, water and electricity. These costs strain him. But Hyun-soo is unaware of these. He has no heart to tell her his problems.

"Can you visit me next year?" Yadi asks.

"It's possible if I have official business or research," she replies.

"You must promise me," says Yadi.

"Promise what?" she asks.

"That you'll visit me next year. So that we can rekindle our love," he explains sadly.

"I will try," she says.

"I want you to promise me. Make it a resolution," Yadi pushes on.

"If I do not come, even though I have tried, will you visit me in Korea instead?" she asks.

"I promise. If you can't, I'll come here," says Yadi. The words came even as his mind was still mulling over his financial difficulties.

They stop talking. A breeze blows. Several stalks of roses sway. Korean roses are big and beautiful. Yadi peers into the horizon. Hyun-soo looks to the edges of the forest that surrounds the hill.

The next day, they meet at the airport filled with sorrow. Yadi gazes at Hyun-soo, trying his best not to look away. He fears that this will be the last time that he would set his eyes on her elegant face. Hyun-soo keeps looking down to hide her teary red eyes. About five minutes before Yadi has to enter the departure gate, she speaks.

"Take this necklace as a symbol that I am always with you," she says before hugging him. Yadi's shirt is wet with her tears. Grief is stabbing at his heart.

"You take my songket as a symbol of my love," says Yadi as he passes her a piece of intricately designed blue cloth. He reluctantly tears himself away from her hug. It is time to go.

Once he is seated in the airplane, Yadi immediately feels the anguish of a terrible loss. He becomes listless. Images of Hyun-soo are dancing in his mind's eye. Yadi looks out of the window at South Korea, which is getting smaller and smaller by the minute.

## THE INTERVIEW

**I**n truth, Salim loathes interviews. He dislikes the prying. He abhors others questioning him about his abilities. As an introvert and loner, he cannot help feeling anxious about tomorrow's interview.

"What will they ask me? How will they test me?" he ponders.

To Salim, this is a crucial moment. It can make or break his future. His hopes and ambitions hinge upon it. It determines if he secures a scholarship to attend university or drops out of the education system altogether. It determines if he enters the ivory tower or becomes damned to mediocrity. Potentially, he can get the sum of a thousand dollars each year, which will ease his cash-strapped existence. The scholarship is his lifeline.

"It's nothing lah. The interviewers won't ask you tough questions. At most, you might need to speak about politics in ASEAN or the Vietnam War. Surely, that's not a problem for you?" said his friend Hashim in an attempt to assuage his anxiety.

Salim imagines how life would be like if he secures the scholarship. This will alleviate the financial burden on Ayah. As a clerk, Ayah does not earn much. Armed only with a steely will, Ayah wants him to pursue a university education. Ayah is always saying, "Even though I'm poor, not highly educated, I don't want you to end up like me. I don't want you to work jobs like mine. I want you to work at a much better and more respectable place than where I'm at. I want you to graduate from