The reluctant teacher

Antoine Giraud

The screams reverberated off the windowless classroom walls as I slumped in my chair with my head in my hands. The fuzzy melody of a hackneyed nursery rhyme could barely be heard above the din as 10 six-year old monsters started tearing the room apart. Chairs were knocked over and pencils flew to the floor. A poster was ripped off the wall. Bits of paper fluttered through the air like lacklustre confetti—a fight broke out between two warring boys and the sound of crying joined the cacophonous chorus of mayhem. I felt a splatter of something wet land on my arm. Just another day at work for a kindergarten teacher.

Before I came to Guemchon, South Korea to teach English, I asked myself whether teaching little kids could be worse than digging ditches or scrubbing some rich asshole's boat for nine dollars an hour just to pay the rent. After getting thrown into the classroom of bored little tyrants a few days after my plane touched down in Seoul, I wasn't so sure of the answer anymore. It seemed like a great deal—a paid air ticket and free accommodations in exchange for just one measly year of teaching a bunch of kids at a school called "Wonderland". How bad could it be?

The teacher whose position I was taking over was a professional bull-rider from Tennessee called Sean. Before he left, Sean took me out for a drink and a pep talk at a bar in town called "The Hadrak Café". He told me how he had broken every bone in his body riding bulls before joining the army and fighting in Iraq. He showed me the battle scars

on his legs that he had gotten from flying shrapnel. He then leaned over to speak in furtive tones, his eyes wild and desperate, his cowboy hat touching my ear.

"Don't let them get to you," he said. "I've been spat at, had my hair pulled, and been called the dirtiest names you can think of. But just remember—the lesson is only 45 minutes long. Just hold on until the end and it'll all be over." He then leaned back and chugged down the rest of his beer.

After a few days of observing other teachers conducting their classes, I wondered what Sean was gibbering on about. These little kids were so cute and well-behaved and I was being treated like a rock star. Curious children would come up to me and stroke the hairs on my arms and my face. The principle of the school took me out for lavish dinners and the other teachers were all smiles. I was given a cash advance, an apartment and a cell phone. After barely being able to afford groceries in Canada before I left, I felt liberated by the shiny new wads of won (Korean currency) in my pocket.

And then the honeymoon was over. I was given my very own class of fresh students to teach. Ten kindergarten kids—a group named "The kitten class". They couldn't speak a word of English. On their first day, the Korean teachers gave them English names and taught them how to say "Can I go to the bathroom?"

On their second day I showed up to the classroom alone with a board marker in my hand and a clean shirt on my back. "Hello everybody," I said with a nervous smile, "my name is Antoine teacher." Ten blank, uncomprehending faces stared back at me. Ten minutes later, somebody stole the board marker while my back was turned. Fifteen minutes later, my shirt was covered in black ink. Forty-five minutes later I crawled out of the classroom begging for mercy.

It got progressively worse from then on. The teaching materials I was given were ludicrous—they consisted of a few tattered flashcards and a tape cassette of unmelodious songs that even the kids found incredibly grating. After a while they ignored anything I wrote on the board, or they would run up to the front and wipe it off, laughing at their blackened fingers. I shouted. I screamed. I yelled, “Stop that right now!” But even though they could understand an angry tone, they couldn’t understand the words.

There was one little boy who was particularly troublesome—his English name was Jacob. His favourite trick was to crawl on the floor under the table and refuse to come out. On one such occasion I stuck my head under the table and spoke to him in a friendly tone.

“You’re such a little bastard,” I said sweetly, “I bet you’re going to grow up to be a drug dealer in a triad gang, aren’t you? You’re going to be a filthy criminal, aren’t you, you spoiled little shit?”

Jacob nodded uncomprehendingly with a silly smile on his face, thinking it was all a big game.

Meanwhile, the other kids grew restless and started jumping around and shouting, some crawling under the table to join Jacob. A Korean teacher then yanked open the door and yelled at them in Korean. She pulled Jacob out from under the table and smacked him on the back of his head before placing him back in his chair. The other kids were suddenly stone-faced and sombre, sitting stiffly in their seats. Then a scrawny monkey-like boy called Arnold slowly put up his hand, “Antoine teacher, can I go bathroom?” he said.

After seeing how well the children responded to Korean, I went home that night and started studying some choice phrases to use, such as *haji-ma*! (don't do that!) and *cho yong wee he* (keep quiet—or literally, "keep your mouth shut").

The next day, I strode into the classroom, confident I had this discipline thing well in hand. I got out some flashcards and asked the students to repeat after me. I held up the first card. "Ball," I said.

"Ball," the students chimed in.

I held up the next card. "Doll," I said.

"Doll!" the students shouted back. Jacob's head lolled back as he looked at the ceiling.

"Pen." Jacob jumped out of his chair.

"Pen!"

"Bike." Jacob crawled under the table. The students lost interest in the flashcards and started pointing at him and conferring in Korean.

"*Haji-ma*!" I shouted. There was a moment of silence before the class erupted into howls of laughter. Jacob rolled around on the floor, clutching his stomach.

"*Cho yong wee he!*" I screamed, red in the face. More peals of laughter and students crowded round me begging me to say it again. Spurred on by the mass revelry, Jacob crawled out from under the table and climbed up onto the book shelf. He jumped off with a yell. The others followed suit, knocking over their chairs in their haste to clamber up the shelves. In fury, I picked up one of the chairs and threw it across the room. It bounced off the wall and hit the floor with a resounding clang. I was gripped with an anger I never thought possible. I had lost control. I had gone too far. The children

stared at me in stunned wide-eyed shock. A Korean teacher burst through the door and asked what was going on—I pointed at Jacob.

I was tired of fighting with the kids. They didn't care about learning English and I didn't care about teaching them. I let them run amuck—in fact, I joined in. If somebody wanted to draw a picture, I gave them crayons. If somebody wanted to jump off the shelf, I caught them so they could land safely. If they wanted to play a game and clap their hands, I clapped along, even if I didn't understand what the game was. I grew very popular among the students. They would high-five me in the halls. But those heady days of pure fun couldn't last forever.

"We're getting complaints from the parents," my supervisor, Debbie, said. "They say their kids are doing whatever they want at school. How are you disciplining them? When somebody does something wrong, what do you do?"

"I don't know. I just tell them to stop," I mumble.

Debbie pursed her lips. "You can't control the kids," she said. "They're running wild. They're not learning anything."

"It's not my fault!" I was indignant. "It's not my fault they don't want to learn anything—they're just kids. They just want to have fun."

Debbie's face turned purple, her anger barely contained. "It *is* your fault. It's *your* responsibility. These parents paid a lot of money so that their kids could learn English." Debbie folded her arms and stared at me silently for a long moment while I pouted resolutely.

"Alrighty then," she said, "I'm going to observe all your classes next week—and that's the whole kit and caboodle."

I looked at Debbie askance, slightly amused by the odd expression. She learned most of her English from *The Truman Show*, her favourite movie.

At first the kids were scared of Debbie, but then they started nattering away in Korean and playing around, and I started screaming as usual, but to no avail. Debbie's eyes bulged and she started scribbling in her notebook. At the end of each lesson, she would hand me a long laundry list of things I did wrong.

The week of intense observation and criticisms wore me down. I took to drinking *soju* (Korean vodka) every night and fantasizing about fleeing to Vietnam. But, despite my hatred of Debbie's constant interference—and her insistence that I write weekly reports on what was going on in class—things started getting better. I started implementing the changes she'd suggested and little by little, the kids started to calm down. The kids didn't stop arguing and fighting, but they would argue and fight in English, which was a big improvement, according to Debbie.

It took me almost the whole year to get *Kitten* under control. It took just as long to start having real conversations with them. Nobody ever told me I was doing a good job and I never once received an encouraging word, but I learned a valuable lesson. I learned that even the nastiest junior warmonger can be trained to become a respectable member of kindergarten society and that even the most reluctant teacher can be trained to teach.