

# This is Jeong

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It was a Saturday morning near the end of August, and the Korean summer was in full swing.

I woke up to the sound of my roommate's alarm clock. Eyes half-opened, I took a hold of my cellphone under my pillow. It was almost ten in the morning. I sighed realizing that I was late, as usual. My tendency for tardiness was certainly the only thing that had not completely changed over the past few weeks, since I had moved from my little French hometown to the exciting city of Seoul, South Korea. I had an interview at eleven o'clock to teach private French lessons to three high school students and did not want to miss this golden opportunity to earn a few thousand won. I dashed out of my blankets to get ready as fast as I could, running to use the bathroom before my roommate. I did not have time to do my make up, thus decided to do it on the way to my appointment. Yet, I grabbed a cup of iced Americano at the coffee shop on the first floor of my new university dormitory before heading out. My cell phone indicated twenty past ten.

The second I stepped outside I was instantly overwhelmed by the heat and sticky tepid air. After a few days, I had come to the conclusion that the warning "summer in Korea is hot and humid," I had heard before coming, was just a euphemism. I was used to dry summers with cool breezes creating comfortable warmth. Here, the rain could be pouring down for days on end. However the temperature kept on fiercely high. Because of the heavy atmosphere I commuted with iced beverages all the time. But today was a rather surprisingly sunny day. My coffee was refreshingly sweet, which cheered me up. I hurried out of the campus. I had been in Seoul for two weeks already, but reaching the front street flooded with people was always a shock. Couples on dates, groups of high school girls holding hands, old women cooking traditional snacks, middle-aged men selling cheap accessories, young pretty girls promoting cosmetics, tourists taking pictures of everything: a great variety of individuals were strolling around, enjoying the break from the daily rain.

I stood in awe, vaguely watching this mass of people rushing back and forth of the shopping district. I felt pleasantly lost. My empty stomach grumbled upon catching the mysterious smell of the spicy rice cakes the grandmas were cooking. The street vendors were shouting out to the passers-by, probably trying to convince them into buying something, speaking louder than the up-beat songs from inside the shops. As someone bumped into me I came

back to my senses and headed towards the subway station. Sweat was already dripping down my forehead. I took a sip of coffee but stopped drinking as soon as I saw the subway gate. It was completely cramped, a sea of people was struggling its way in, or out, I could not tell. I glanced at my phone, it was already half past ten: I only had thirty minutes left. I contemplated venturing my way into the subway station, but promptly gave up. As I knew nothing about the bus system, I was relieved to notice some taxis parked at the other side of the street. Taxis were really cheap in Seoul, but I found it hard to consider them as an affordable means of transportation. Crossing the road, I waved at the first vehicle on the line. "Apgujeong," I tried to articulate in my non-existent Korean - that was the name of the neighborhood I had my meeting at - half across the city. A sympathetic middle-aged man with grey hair and round glasses nodded back with a smile. "Get in," he said, in English with a heavy accent. Surprised, I hopped in, too happy to escape the packed subway. The taxi driver carefully watched me as I sat down, and smiled again.

"Apgujeong, right?" he repeated, turning around and putting his elbow on the front seat. I nodded back and we quickly departed. The air conditioner was on, and after drinking the coffee leftover in one go, I felt alive again. I took out my makeup kit out of my bag and wiped the sweat off my face. Nibbling on the remaining ice cubes, I pondered whether putting foundation or eyeliner in this kind of weather was actually a clever thing to do. I looked out: the road was full of cars, public buses and delivery scooters and the traffic was really slow. The taxi driver was humming to the radio songs, keeping an eye on me with curious peeks in the rear-view mirror. I opted for lipstick and mascara and started arranging my barely washed face.

"Student?"

I looked up and acquiesced: "Yes. I'm a student." The driver seemed pleased with my answer: "How old are you?" he went on.

"Er... 20 years-old."

"Where you studying at?"

I was reluctant to answer, wondering why he was being so indiscreet: "...the women's university in the center..." I replied, thinking that he probably did not mean any harm, and was just trying to pass time, since the traffic was jammed.

"Oh! Good university!" he complimented me.

I remembered the Korean obsession over university rankings and agreed, laughing stiffly. "Ah...I guess..."

I gave a finishing touch to my makeup and put my kit back into my bag. It was already ten forty-five and I would never make it in time for my engagements. Disappointed, I started looking for my cellphone in my bag, but got interrupted by the taxi driver once again.

"Student beautiful! Beautiful!" he joked winking at me.

Blushing awkwardly, I thanked him and started to feel that the situation was getting a bit weird. "Where are you coming from? America?" he continued.

"...No, I'm French. I come from France," I said politely.

"Wow! I love France!" he exclaimed with a beaming smile.

Uncomfortable, I rummaged through my bag again.

The driver looked like he was searching for words for a few seconds and clumsily explained, "Actually... son! I have a son. He studies French at university in Seoul!"

"Oh, is that so? ... Hope he likes it," I said with a feigned interest.

"Wait, I'll call him, so you two talk together... in French!" he suddenly suggested, taking out his phone.

Taken aback for a second, I then quickly leaned towards him: "Eh? Sorry, what?"

"Let's call my son!" he said again.

"I don't think that will be necessary."

"Come on! Just say hello."

“No really...”

“Wait I’ll call him!”

Not listening to any of my words, he just called his son, mumbled in Korean and gave me the phone. I was really surprised of how things were turning out, but did not have any reasons not to speak to his son, so I just picked the phone he was offering.

“...”

No one was talking.

“Bonjour?” I finally said.

“Oh... bonjour...,” a faint hesitant voice replied.

“Comment allez-vous?”

He answered slowly, “... Très...bien...”

I was not sure what I was supposed to talk about: “Vous étudiez le français?” I asked.

“Oui... très intéressant...”

“...D’accord...”

“Hm... désolé pas de temps maintenant...et mon père... désolé...” It seemed like that guy was also being uncomfortable about this situation and embarrassed at his father being so pushy.

“Oh, bien-sûr! Pas de problème!”, I reassured him, realizing he was probably a good guy that only had an over-enthusiastic daddy.

“Mon père, s’il vous plait?” he amiably requested.

“D’accord.”

“Au revoir.” It sounded like he was laughing.

I handed back the phone to his father, who could not take his eyes off me.

“Short talking,” he noticed disappointedly.

“Well, we don't know each other,” I shrugged.

“My son is nice guy, right?”

“He seems to be. And his French is fairly good,” I approved. The father smiled proudly.

After a while driving restlessly through the busy streets of Seoul and chatting about the Seoulite life, the driver stopped at my destination. I was only fifteen minutes late, not that bad for a French girl. Before letting me go, the driver told me to wait for a minute and scribbled something on a piece of paper. “Son phone number!” he explained.

“That’s not necessary, really,” I sighed.

“Please! You can meet and speak French!” he insisted.

I just took the paper, parted ways with the taxi driver and ran to my appointment.

That night, I told the story to my roommate, and stopped thinking about the taxi driver and his son.

I had completely forgotten about them, until one night when I was cleaning my room I found the phone number again. I had pretty much settled down in Seoul but most of my friends were foreigners and I still found it hard to ever meet or talk with locals. My roommate was out partying, as usual, and I did not feel like doing my homework, so I sent a text to the boy. It was just to say hi, it was not a big deal. I was not really expecting an answer, but still I felt disappointed when, two hours later, I went to sleep without one. I gave up on receiving an answer the following day and threw the paper away.

It is easy to imagine my surprise when one week later, the boy sent me a text, as if that was the most natural thing in the world. “Hi! Of course I remember you. Dad asked if we had met already. We should get together sometimes.” He did not seem the least sorry about not replying earlier, which annoyed me a bit.

“Peut-être,” I told him right away.

“Come over to Chuncheon while it’s still autumn,” he answered, but the next day.

“Chuncheon? Why are you speaking English by the way?”

“English is easier. I live in Chuncheon.”

“Uh, okay... where is Chuncheon?”

“Not far from Seoul. Come next Friday. Call me when you get there.”

This boy was definitely going at his own pace. But I was absolutely curious about what Korea was like outside Seoul. I did not think too long before accepting the offer, half-excited half-worried.

The suffocating summer had ended and a warm fall was now reigning over Korea. The leaves were turning to bright colors, and Seoul was busy as always, filled with people trying to enjoy the last days of warmth. As a matter of fact, going to meet the boy was my first trip in Korea and I was genuinely looking forward to it. The train from Seoul to Chuncheon only took a bit over an hour. I had not received any news from the boy since I had said I would come, but he was supposed to pick me up around 2pm. He had not impressed me as a very talkative person. Yet, since he had gone through the trouble of inviting me to Chuncheon, I persuaded myself that he probably was a nice person, that perhaps Koreans were all like him.

I arrived in Chuncheon around 2.30pm that Friday. No one was waiting for me at the train station. I quickly realized it, since the Chuncheon train station was small, quiet and somewhat empty. There were only a few old people, casting curious glances at me before disappearing. I called the boy, but no one answered. He was probably on his way. As a French girl is always late, I could not really get upset at those kinds of things. I sent him a text saying I was at the convenience store inside the station, and went to buy a drink. After waiting for half an hour alone, without any news from the boy, I started to feel really uneasy. What if he had forgotten about me? What if it was a joke? What if he never came? But at that very moment, my phone beeped. It was a masked number.

“Hello?” I asked hesitatingly.

“Oh hi ... I’m the friend of your friend... Please come outside the station,” said a young male voice before hanging up.

I left the station disconcertedly and literally gasped out of surprised when I saw where I was. I knew that Chuncheon was famous for its spicy chicken, and as the set of an old Korean TV show that was popular with middle-aged Japanese women. What I did not know was that it would be so different from Seoul. There were no high buildings in sight, no noisy people, no smell of the snacks old women usually sold, no public buses, nor any shop to be seen.

The place seemed empty, except for a few taxis waiting in front of the station. All around there were only waste grounds. Could it be the countryside already? But then I noticed some buildings in the distance that looked like a city. I glanced around again but there were no signs of the boy, nor a youngster that could be his friend. I tried not to panic. Suddenly, a fancy black car with tinted windows stopped in front of the station and a young man got out from the back seat and ran towards me.

“Hi! You French friend?”

“Yes... And you are?”

“My name is Dong Gyun. Friend. Let’s go!”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the car. We sat in the back while two other young men were seated in front.

“Hi! I’m the boss here,” explained the guy on the driver’s seat.

“Don’t tell her that,” objected the other one, who was wearing a black cap. He spoke a pretty good English but with a heavy accent. “My name is Mingook, but call me brother. How old are you? I must be older. Just call me oppa. You know? O-ppa.”

“Then, call me brother too,” protested the driver “Oppa, good!”

I stared at them blankly, trying to understand what was going on. The boy who had introduced himself to me said something in Korean. They all laughed and the car left the train station.

“Wait, where are we going? And who is the guy I was supposed to meet?”



They all looked at each other and made signs with their heads, exchanged some words in Korean, but no one answered. I asked the question again. The one in the front seat pointed at the younger boy seating next to me. The young boy sighed, and turned towards me.

“You not the French friend?”

“Yes, I am French but...”

“No problem.”

“What do you mean? Are you the taxi driver’s son? Do you speak French?”

“French! Oh no, English difficult already.”

“Then who is the boy I was supposed to meet? Is it one of you?”

“Not here. We go meet him,” revealed the driver.

“Where is he?”

They all stayed quiet.

“We are going to meet him soon,” the other in front finally repeated.

I leaned back on my seat and looked out. We had left the succession of waste grounds and entered the town. The atmosphere reminded me of the station: few people, few buildings, and few cars - nothing that compared with Seoul. The three unknown boys in the car where engaged in a heated conversation in Korean. Because of the glances in my direction I could sense they were talking about me. Uncomfortable, I reached for my phone in my bag and sent a text to the boy that was supposed to pick me up, asking where the heck he was. A phone rang next to me. The younger boy took out a cell phone and looked up.

“You send text?”

“Wait. If you’re not the boy I’m supposed to meet, why do you have his phone?”

He stared silently at me for a few seconds.

“He... give it,” justified the driver.

I turned to face the younger boy. "Listen... er what's your name?"

"Dong Gyun."

"Dong Gyun, why is... this person I am supposed to meet not here? Why didn't he come to pick me up?" I had suddenly realized I knew nothing about the taxi driver's son, not even his name.

"We go to meet him!" the driver said again, looking upset.

"Eh, don't scare her," protested the other in front. "Don't worry you'll meet him soon. We are almost there," he smiled at me and went on talking in Korean with the others. He seemed to scold them. He offered me another smile that I could not bring myself to find reassuring.

I looked out again, trying to guess where the car was heading but there were mostly waste grounds and rare buildings around. The car stopped after what seemed like an eternity. The driver looked back. "Hungry?"

"Not really, no. Where is my friend?"

"Eh, you eat," the younger one said.

"Let's go eat first," the one with the cap concluded.

"Is he here? The friend I'm supposed to meet?"

"No, we see him after," the driver said, going out the car.

"Where is he now?" I questioned again, following him outside.

Once more, my question was left unanswered as all three of them entered the only building in the area. It was a spicy chicken restaurant. What was I supposed to do? Was I to leave? I looked around but I had no idea where the train station was.

Dong Gyun came up to me. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know. I'm not hungry."

He did not listen, gripped my hand and dragged me inside the restaurant. Like the town it was small, quiet and empty except for the three boys I had just met, and an old woman taking their orders. Still, it smelled so good I decided to just eat with them and take my leave. After all, they wouldn't do anything suspicious inside a restaurant.

"We come here all the time," the cap guy told me, as I sat down next to Dong Gyun.

"Yeah, owner like family," Dong Gyun explained, while serving water to the other two.

"Do you have money?" the driver asked looking at me intensely.

"Er... not much."

"Don't worry, you can always pay back later," said the cap guy, and they all laughed.

This was getting weird. I took a deep breath and stood up.

"Sorry, I have to go." I started walking towards the door, but Dong Gyun took hold of my bag and pulled me inside.

"Where you going?"

"I need to go. The boy I'm supposed to meet is not even here, so..."

"We see him soon, no worry."

"No. Let me go."

The driver looked at me with a condescending smile. "How do you go to station?"

"I'll just take a cab" I replied, snatching my bag away from Dong Gyun's hands.

They all repressed some smirks.

"A cab? No cab around! You need own car here," the driver explained.

"Then I'll just walk back."

This time they all guffawed, smacking their hands on the table or on their legs, as if that was the funniest thing they had ever heard.

The cap guy put down his glass of water. "Just sit down." This sounded like an order more than a suggestion. Dong Gyun took the bag from my hands and pressed on my shoulders to make me sit down. I was not the least hungry anymore.

"Did you eat Chuncheon chicken before?" the cap guy asked.

"Really good!" Dong Gyun assured.

"Here: best chicken in Chuncheon," the driver confirmed.

They went back to talking in Korean and soon after their orders came out. The old woman put some ember in the hole in the middle of the table and put a grill on it. I was surprised and the cap guy noticed it.

"You probably don't have that kind of food in France, right?"

"Real Korean food!" smiled Dong Gyun, who then proceeded to roast the chicken.

I was upset and determined to show them I would not let myself be tossed around like a toy. I stayed silent, ignored their remarks and refused to eat the rice and the meat they gave me.

"Hurry! Get cold!" Dong Gyun urged at some point.

I looked away, as if I was disgusted, but it actually smelt good.

"I said you can pay us back later," told me the cap boy.

"Look...," I started.

"I'm Mingook, but I also said you can just call me brother, oppa!"

"Okay, 'brother', I'm not hungry and I want to go back to the station."

"You should still meet our friend before going back to Seoul."

"At this point, I think I will not meet him even if I stay here."

"Of course you will, why else would we have come to the station?"

"Well, then tell me where he is, then."

He stayed silent for a moment, chewing on his food, drank a glass of water and looked up with his creepy smile.

“Just eat.”

I avoided his gaze.

“Come on!” he said, holding a piece of meat with chopsticks in front of my mouth.

“Eat now, cause later...,” intervened Dong Gyun.

He stopped as Mingook glared at him. They exchanged some words in Korean.

“Later what?” I asked, worriedly.

“Later... you won’t be able to try this, of course. It’s a Chuncheon specialty,” said Mingook, moving the food in front of my mouth as if I was a child. Dong Gyun was looking down at his plate. I did not want to make this cap brother angry with me, and quietly started eating with them. I was so tense I could not even taste the food. Should it have been inedible, I would still have eaten it. When they had finished eating it was already almost five.

“How much is it?” I asked politely.

“Don’t worry. Oppa will pay for you,” the cap guy answered, with yet another smirk.

“I’d rather pay myself.”

“Don’t worry. You can always pay back later,” he said with a wink.

I sighed and went out first with Dong Gyun who was pulling at my sleeve.

“Do you know where the boy I was to meet is?” I asked tentatively since he seemed to be the nicest of the three.

“Can’t tell you.”

“What do you mean? Where are we going after this?”

“Can’t tell you... Brother be angry.”

“Brother? You mean, Mingook? The oppa with the cap? Why would he?”

“Tell you, plan...” he sliced his throat with a finger, meaning he would be dead if he told me.

“Plan? Which plan?”

“If you know plan... Fail. And me...” he did the hand gesture again, with a worried face.

He stopped short as the two older boys came out. I had no idea what this plan was about, but I knew I had to get out of here as soon as possible.

“Well, thanks for the meal but I need to go back now.”

“Go where?” the driver laughed as he pushed me inside the car.

“Just sit,” the cap brother added, getting in the car as well, and locking the doors. I needed to hurry out of here.

“Are we going to meet that friend now?”

“Oppa has a little business to take care of,” the cap brother explained, turning around to smile at me. “We’ll go after.”

I was too scared to ask what it was about. I sat back and tried to collect my thoughts. I was probably thinking too hard about all of this. For sure there was a logical explanation.

After a short drive the car entered an underground parking lot that was pretty empty, except for a group of young boys wearing black suits, waiting next to a black vehicle.

They moved forward and one of the young boys opened the driver’s door while another opened Mingook’s door. “Oppa will just take care of something quickly,” told me the cap brother when he stepped out and the whole group outside deeply bowed and greeted him all at once. He chuckled a bit and shook some hands while they kept bowing very low. I understood at that moment that he was the real boss here. It was getting obvious that I had gotten involved with a gang and they weren’t even trying to hide it anymore. Outside, the conversation was clearly going on about me as they were all trying to glance inside the car, but were bothered by the tainted windows. The cap brother was speaking to them in Korean and I wondered if he was explaining about the infamous plan. After a few minutes, one of the young men in black brought back a white box from inside their car. Handling it very carefully, he gave it to the cap brother. The oppa peeked inside and smiled, patting the

young boys on the back, as if to congratulate them. He gave the box to Dong Gyun who put it inside the trunk.

“What’s that?” I asked.

He looked at me with the same worried face he had shown earlier, glanced at the group of boys. “Can’t tell you,” he whispered.

Mingook turned around. “French friend! Come on out!” he called.

I tried to pretend I had not heard but Dong Gyun came to drag me out. The group of boys in black seemed really happy to meet me. They mumbled some greeting in English and shook my hand.

The cap brother put a hand on my shoulder. “You’ll need to go with those friends here,” he explained.

“What? Why? Where are you going?”

“Don’t worry you’ll meet oppa again later,” he laughed pinching my cheek.

Within three seconds I realized this was my last chance to escape. Giving up on my bag in the car, I turned around all at once and started to run as fast as I could out of the parking lot. It took them a few instants before calling out to me, dumbfounded.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

I heard noises, some screaming in Korean and people coming after me. Dong Gyun and one of the boys in black were chasing me. I reached out first, and rushed down the street without knowing where I was going. They were still following me.

“Help! Help me!” I shouted, but the street was desperately empty and there was no building around. I stopped, panting. Dong Gyun caught up to me, looking concerned.

“Why? Problem? Hurt?” he said holding my arm.

I shook off his hand and started to cry. The cars stopped next to us, and the driver and Mingook hurriedly came out.

“What’s wrong? You okay?”

“I said you’ll meet with us again later, it’s okay to go with them.”

“I don’t want to go.”

They all stared at me. The cap brother got closer and said softly: “I thought you wanted to meet our friend?” He smirked. “It’s okay... come with me. It’s just a slight change of plan.”

Dong Gyun patted me on the back and got me inside the car. The boys in black were confused, but Mingook talked to them in Korean and they all went back to their cars.

Hopeless, I wondered where it had gone wrong. I shouldn’t have got inside that car to start with, for sure; nor should I have answered a phone call from a masked number. Or could it possibly have been an even earlier mistake? Had it gone wrong the moment I had contacted the taxi driver’s son? Maybe the first mistake had been getting on that taxi in Seoul. I suddenly remembered the insistent gaze of the taxi driver that time. And his smiles! Now that I was thinking about it, he had the same aura as the cap boy - so creepy. How come it had not alerted me? I had been too naive to think that everyone in Korea was nice, and now something terrible was about to happen to me. I could just sense it.

I stayed silent and no one talked for a while. I did not even bother to ask where we were going since I knew no one would have answered anyway. After a short drive, we arrived at a place with five-or-six storey buildings all around. The boys in black were here too, and they rushed inside one of the buildings. Dong Gyun carefully took the white box from the trunk and dashed after them.

“Let’s go meet our friend!” the cap brother exclaimed with an ominous smile. He put his arm around my shoulders and we slowly followed suit. The building reeked of sweat and dust. I stopped walking but the arm on my shoulders forced me to go on. We arrived in front of a door with the picture of a racket on it.

“Okay, let’s go,” Mingook said.

He opened the door and I closed my eyes.

“Welcome to Chuncheon!”



I slowly opened my eyes to discover a banner with such words. There were more than a dozen young people: the boys in black I had met, together with other young boys and girls, all dressed very nicely. Dong Gyun was holding a whipped cream cake on top of the white box from the trunk, and got closer to make me blow the candles. Utterly confused, I stared at them blankly. Dong Gyun whispered, "Welcome party. Surprise! The plan!"

A boy I still had not met came upfront. "Bienvenue à Chuncheon!"

I looked up. "Le fils du chauffeur de taxi?"

"Oui...," he said shyly, offering to shake my hand.

I stood agape, unable to do anything. The cap brother put his hand on my shoulder. "Your friend was too shy to get in touch with you alone," he explained, "so we helped him to organize a little something for you. But since we ran late, we had to save some time by going to eat and such. But you saw a bit of Chuncheon thanks to that, right! It could have been more of a surprise if you had gone to see the lake with those boys while we finished preparing here, but well..."

"Wait ... Oppa," I started, "where are we? And who are you guys? I don't get it," I stammered.

"Here? It's Chuncheon university of course. And welcome to the tennis club!"

"Me...Captain this semester," the driver explained.

"Me: Youngest member!" Dong Gyun said.

"And I'm the oldest member. I'm graduating soon I hope," the cap boy laughed.

I deeply sighed, but in relief this time. Dong Gyun held up the cake to me again. "After that, party and drinking. No eating again!"

I blew off the candles, and the whole tennis club warmly congratulated in English, Korean or French.

Mingook pinched my cheek and chuckled. "Welcome to Chuncheon, friend!"

*Jeong (정) : affection, warm-heartedness, attachment, feeling, emotion, human nature, sentiment, sympathy, compassion.*

The notion of *jeong* is central in Korean culture. It is what makes the community, the “us”: the affection and warm-heartedness that we share together. It can take on infinite forms, from starting a conversation with a stranger, paying a dinner to a friend, being respectful to someone older to fully accepting a new person in a group. There is no complete definition of *jeong* because there is no limitation of how to share this affection. It is hard to explain what *jeong* is, especially when many cultures seems to have forgotten about the warmth of the community. The best thing is to experiment it personally and to understand that “this”, it is *jeong*.