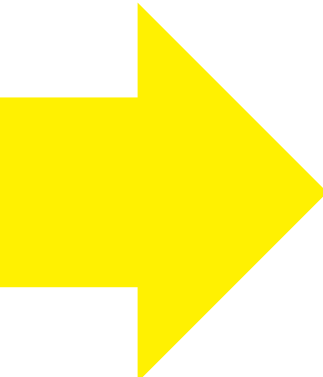


A close-up portrait of a man with dark, wavy hair and light-colored eyes. He is wearing a blue button-down shirt over a white t-shirt. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

*** MY
KOREAN
NIGHTMARE**

Cullen Thomas made one small mistake. (It weighed one kilo.) And he spent the next three and a half years shuffling between South Korean prisons, living his own maddening version of 'Midnight Express.' **Here's how he made it out alive**



THE PAIN IN MY SIDE hasn't been diagnosed, but I'm sure it's Korea. A little Korean tumor between the pancreas and liver, or maybe a Korean tear in the muscles around the ribs, a Korean hernia, a persistent Korean funk. Ultrasounds and a CT scan have shown nothing. But even though it disappears for weeks at a time, the pain always returns, a dull throbbing that saps my energy.

Aside from this phantom pain in my side, all the physical reminders of the years I spent in prison in South Korea have faded away. The parasites in >>>

★ Cullen Thomas, pictured today, *opposite*, moved to Korea when he was 23. He lived with a friend before moving into the Moonwha Yogwan, or Cultural Inn. Like many expats, he made money teaching and traveled when he could.

my intestines were killed off with medicine. Most of the bizarre accent I returned with is gone. But I am not the same. I've still got the stamps in my passport, my Korean visa, maps hanging on the wall in my room in Brooklyn. I go to them to remember.

I went to South Korea in the summer of 1993 to teach English. My friends and I had been mostly drifting aimlessly, spending our days looking for women, and taking Jon's pit bull on walks to Manhattan's Washington Square Park, where we'd smoke. All of us had artistic ambitions, but none of us the required discipline to achieve them. I was unformed and untested. I dreamed of traveling, getting out of what I knew. I chose South Korea, but really it could have been anywhere. If I'd had leads on teaching jobs in Sri Lanka, I might have tried myself there. I didn't know a thing about Korea, North or South. But I heard that a friend from college, Tim, was teaching English in South Korea, and the news galvanized me. He and I talked. I bought a one-way ticket to Seoul for \$700 from a discount-travel agency in Greenwich Village. I called home from a pay phone to tell my parents.

I wandered through enormous apartment complexes in Seoul—mazes of concrete blocks, one identical building after another, distinguished only by large colored numbers painted high up on their sides. Seoul had a lot of makeshift businesses, back alleys, hidden stores, tiny unmarked family restaurants, singing rooms, and bars jumbled together in clusters in nondescript spots. Squat, jolly older women with short curly hair stood behind counters or crouching by their wares: the *ajummas*.^{*} They'd smile at you and cackle when you didn't understand, give you an extra portion of salted intestines, saying, "Service." I started going to the saunas on Tim's recommendation.



I TAUGHT ENGLISH at a school above a Wendy's, on the second floor of a faux-brick building. Before I started, one of the school's young administrators put me through a brief interview in an empty classroom. I gave her my résumé and a copy of my college diploma. She asked if I had a work visa. When I told her I didn't, she said, "Well, you cannot legally work in Korea...but it should be okay. Our company has an agreement with the government." I have no idea if this was true, and it didn't

Author's note: Rather than use the official system for romanizing Hangul, Korea's alphabet, I have chosen to romanize Korean words, phrases, and proper names in my own way, as this results, I believe, in a more accurate representation of the actual sound and flavor of the language. All of the events depicted here are true. However, in order to protect both the innocent and the guilty, some of the names have been changed. Any similarity between the fictitious names and the names of real individuals is entirely coincidental.

really matter. The money was good—nearly \$30 an hour, tax-free.

I lived in Tim's apartment for several months before moving into the Moonwha Yogwan, or Cultural Inn. Most Koreans thought of the *yogwans* as love motels, cheap places for vagrants, but for us foreigners the Moonwha offered a genuine, traditional Korean experience—or at least our idea of it. I met two smart and outgoing American girls from Idaho there. They were in their midtwenties and like the rest of us had come to Seoul to teach. They told me that a friend of theirs was in the Philippines and that he was soon to mail them a surprise package. They kept the story vague, but the day they picked up the package at the post office, they invited me back to their room to watch them open it. Inside an unremarkable square brown box, sent by someone calling himself Tocqueville, was a mess of white Styrofoam squiggles and two large tins of cocoa. The two girls, giddy with excitement, stuck their hands into the cocoa in each can and pulled from under the powder thick slabs of dark hashish.

Tocqueville returned from the Philippines. He was a charismatic 30-year-old American, and he gradually began to tell me about his trip, about the wide-open nature of the Philippines, about the cheap and plentiful hashish he'd gotten in a small village up in the mountains of Luzon. He leaned in and whispered the name to me: *Sagada*. It stuck in my head. There, Tocqueville said, for about 300 United States dollars you could get a kilo of great stuff that in South Korea was worth more than \$10,000. He and the two girls were selling it off to other foreigners.

I was impressed by what I saw as Tocqueville's cunning and daring. He seemed to embody all of our foreign, restless energies in Seoul, to have stretched out and seized some of the potential all around us, there for the taking at the edge of Asia.

* Thomas (center), in happier times, with his brother and sisters before he left for Korea.



I could do this thing, too, I thought. So I went to the Philippines with my girlfriend, Rocket, bought two kilos of hash, and shipped them back to Korea.



BACK IN SEOUL, I'd made no move toward the post office. My friend Zack had picked up the first package I'd sent, which contained one of the two kilos. It had gone off without a hitch. Zack had been selling the hash. We were splitting the money. I was taking my time, smoking during the day, going out at night. But Rocket was anxious. And two weeks after returning, we finally went to pick it up.

It was dark and cool inside the post office. The sun was blunted and softened by the windows, and it diffused around me as I walked through the double doors. To my right was the main room, with a high ceiling and a row of neat counters and lines of Koreans waiting. Young Korean postal workers were dressed in neat blue blouses and skirts, the men in uniform pants and shirts. They carried on their business with the expected Korean public courtesy. "*Neh, neh. Ta-oom boon im ni da. Annyong ha shim ni ka...*" Yes, yes, next person, please. How are you? It was 3:15 P.M., a Friday. This, and then the weekend, I thought. Good things ahead.

I walked over to the farthest counter. A Korean man with thinning hair in a collared shirt and a mess of pens in his pocket was behind it. On the counter was a clipboard with a list of all the packages held there: name of recipient, name of sender, relevant dates, place of origin, and a postal code consisting of numbers and letters. I picked up the clipboard and looked for JAY GALLAGHER and THE PHILIPPINES. I read the entry across the line. Everything looked fine, except unlike the rest of the entry, the office code for my box was written in red. I checked to see if there were other postal codes written in red, and there were, but only two or three besides mine in the pages of listings.

(MEMOIR)

Rocket couldn't believe I was taking so long. She was standing by the front steps with the sun on her, reading the copy of *Moby-Dick* she'd brought along. She grew bored and went over to several vendors' tables on the sidewalk. She tried to talk to an old man selling back scratchers, smooth wooden sticks with small carved hands.

"Hi, how are you? Can I have this one, please?" I asked the clerk, holding up the list with my index finger placed just below the name JAY GALLAGHER. He squinted, and when his eyes reached my finger, he said, "Oh," jerked his head up a bit, and took a half-step back. I tried to study him, but there was no time for any more doubt or conjecture or intuition. Only the plan mattered.

"One moment, please," he said, and disappeared into the storage room behind him. He came back with the box, but he was gripping it roughly and awkwardly with one hand. Then I saw that the box looked damaged, as if the top had been sat on.

"Can I see your ID?" he asked.

"I'm not Jay Gallagher," I said, taking out my wallet. "I'm picking this up for him."

"Can you sign, then? Because you are not person on box. And put address and telephone, please."

I wrote: "This is not my package. I am picking it up as a favor to Jay Gallagher."

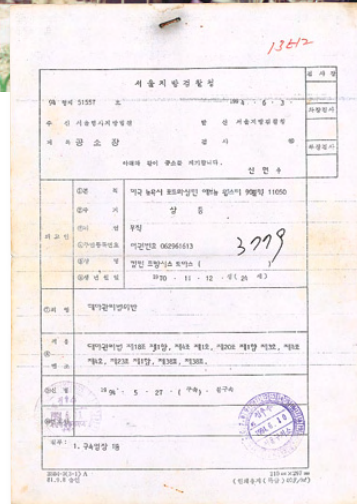
I put my wallet in my pocket, picked up the box, and turned and walked away toward the doors. I felt a pair of hands clamp down on my shoulders. All the strength in my body seemed to leave me. Something sank in my bowels. *Korean police!*

"What's wrong? What's the problem?" I asked. They forced me down the steps and outside the building.

Pray they don't see her, pray she doesn't give away a sign. Don't look at her.

Rocket isn't sure whether she ever saw me come out. Maybe the bodies of the police had hidden me from her sight, but I don't see how she could have missed me. A young Canadian girl who knew us from the Moon-wha came up to Rocket as she was waiting on the front steps and told her that police had just grabbed me inside. Rocket turned and walked quickly away, fled west down Chongno, then north to the U.S. embassy. She had to hand over her passport to get inside and was terrified as she did so. She told a consul that her boyfriend had just been arrested and she didn't know why. She fled the country the next day and spent six months shielded by lawyers. Not knowing what else to do, she went to live with family friends, took care of their children, tried to make sense of it all. This was not paranoia. They *did* come looking for her.

I was interrogated. A short, fat man who still had the grease of lunch on his face and the smell of liquor on his breath slid what looked like a curling iron out of his suit jacket, leaned toward me with a smile, and casually pressed it against my upper right



thigh. A painful blast of electric current shot through me, shot me right out of my chair into the middle of the room.

Several days after I was arrested, in May 1994, I was summoned from the detention house and brought to the Seoul prosecutors' office building. Shin, the prosecutor, was waiting for me in his office on the twelfth floor. A consul from the American Citizens Services department was there as well. Because of the distance, my family had little knowledge of what was going on and were desperately doing their best to find out where the case stood. I was able to communicate with them only through letters. They were in touch with the consul and scrambling to find a good Korean criminal lawyer, one who could speak English and explain the charges, the possible sentence, whether or not parole was an option.

In the first month after my arrest, I saw two lawyers. But the best advice came from someone I met in the detention center, someone about my age, someone who called himself Billy the Kid. "Selling and trafficking is at least five—what I got," he said. "You can get less than that. Tell him you smoke always; give them numbers, Koreans like numbers. Tell the prosecutor you smoked like twenty grams a day. Tell him you're addicted."

In July, I was handcuffed and tied with yellow rope and driven with a busload of the Korean accused to the courts. I've never seen men cry the way they did—tears for their own deaths, I suppose. I was escorted into the courtroom by a bailiff in a black suit. Three judges in black robes gazed down from a long table that was raised above us. The prosecutor quickly recounted the details and asked me only three or four questions. I responded by saying "Yes" or "That is correct." There was no way around the mandatory minimum for the smuggling charge. I confessed to owning the package, the made-up twenty grams a day. I said the kilo of black Philippine hashish was for personal use. "The sentence cannot be reduced or suspended," the speaking judge announced. "There is nothing this court can do for you." I thought that was an interesting choice of

★ Thomas, shown above in Seoul's Pagoda Park, was arrested in May 1994; below, the indictment report issued by the prosecutor. He was sentenced to three and a half years.

words: It sounded as though they really wanted to help, as though it were their hands that were tied. Though the sentence came as no surprise, its weight sat right on top of me just the same—a three-and-a-half-year term, swallowing my life in one gulp.

I WAS SENT TO UIJONGBU, a prison north of Seoul and roughly fifteen miles from the DMZ, the specter of North Korea looming over us. In the detention center I'd mostly been called "American," but in Uijongbu I became an even less specific thing: "the foreigner." I grew accustomed to being laughed at, to being made fun of and insulted. Sometimes my limited Korean told me I was right, but often I was tense and defensive without reason. Simple requests and greetings could still be difficult. The respectful form for speaking to superiors and elders still eluded me, so I unwittingly offended, unintentionally showed disrespect when I was only trying to say hello. There were many ways to say, for example, "Have a nice meal." All of them mean basically the exact same thing, but each carries a different connotation of respect, a clear statement on the speaker's relationship, superiority or inferiority, to the other. So if, with kind intentions, you said "Have a nice

(MEMOIR)

meal” to someone older and didn’t include the right verb form, he might turn around and tell you to go eat shit.

The U.S. embassy sent consular officers to see me in Uijongbu. They were supposed to visit once a quarter or at least three times a year after one’s conviction, to see that we weren’t being tortured, that we were receiving enough food, medical attention if we needed it. The embassy’s standard disclaimer was that we had the right to be treated just as Korean prisoners were but no better. Later the embassy gave me a pamphlet entitled *Legal Problems Encountered by American Citizens in the Republic of Korea*. It stated that we “should not expect to be spared beatings if Korean prisoners would be beaten for the same behavior.” We will not intervene, the embassy stressed. We cannot get you out.

My cell was roughly four and a half feet wide—narrow enough that I could almost shimmy up with my back against one side and my feet pressed against the other—and nine feet long, coverable by four short paces. It was only about a foot taller than me, so with my feet flat on the ground I could extend my arms only halfway and have both palms flat against the ceiling. Lying down, I covered the entire wood floor, with my head hanging right at the edge of the wood, beyond which was a porcelain trough set in cement. A pipe with a tap at the end rose up through the cement in one corner. Like everyone, I washed clothes there, right beside the trough—the sleeves and legs of things would often flop into it. Only cold water came from the pipe and only during brief stretches of the morning and night. Often we had to wait for water, with urine or heaping kimchi dumps stagnating in the trough.

Two buckets sat next to the trough, so to bathe or relieve myself I had to move one bucket out of there. The second bucket was a privilege, given to us one summer because Korea’s monsoons were late and there was a drought. The water rarely came from our pipes then. When it did, we had to seize the moment and get as much water as possible into those two buckets before the taps were closed again. Problem was, the water smelled metallic and looked dirty. A viscous, rusty film formed at the bottom of the buckets.

My skin went bad. Boils spread. The only soap available dried the skin badly. Every summer I got rashes in my groin. Diarrhea was common; intermittently over the final year of my term, I suffered weeklong bouts of parasitic pains. My hair was falling out.

The Korean inmates always swore by the cold water, saying that it was good for your circulation and nerves. That may be true, but every fall and winter, colds and flu traveled through our entire population, and all of us dealt with the beginning stages of frostbite on our ears, noses, and toes. Still, I think I preferred the cold overall. In the



★ When he landed at JFK Airport, Thomas was held up at customs. The agents didn’t know what to make of the nearly four-year lag in his passport.

heat you felt like you couldn’t breathe, that you’d soon run out of air. You had to get real still and sweat out the hours—sitting on the floor, the sweat from your back staining the wall; letting your brain baste as perfectly beautiful, sunny days cruelly passed you by just outside your window.



THE WEEKS RUMBLE by. It seems each time I look up, it’s night again, and I’m sitting on my mattress on the floor, back against the wall, reading or writing letters. Viewed as a whole, this journey is years, but I can see that it’s really just a collection of moments: uncountable moments here, some joyful, others an awesome struggle, the same as everywhere. Today I drank blood soup, ate squid, juggled for a while, taught English for forty-five minutes to one of the officials in the classification room, glanced at the one bright star above the wall visible from my cell in the morning, stood staring up at Surak Mountain, thought of Morocco and the Philippines, was told to shave a dozen times. It seemed like I had all the time in the world, but sometimes I saw through that illusion. Time wasn’t as abundant as it seemed. I had to be disciplined. I thought of performing experiments on myself, fasting, depriving myself of sleep. I went weeks sometimes without bathing. I was going to count every breath for entire days.

We sometimes spent three or four days in a row locked in our cells with not a second outside them, stewing, everything slowed to a crawl. Thinking was a kind of hallucination. We lived in our own heads—nice places to visit, but not to live. Sleep was always around, tempting you: *Escape in me—come on, escape in me.*

I snapped. It was a haircut that set me off. “Medium! I told him medium!” I screamed. Lurch, our floor *tamdang*, stood next to a massive Korean prisoner who’d just cut off all my hair. The big man was *gang-pey*, a member of a powerful group on the outside. Along with the guards, these gang members held sway in Taejon, the prison to which I was transferred after Uijongbu and where I spent the last two and a half years of my sentence. The gang members got the choicest work assignments and brooked no opposition. Somewhere in me, I knew I was lucky not to have already been beaten

senseless. But I was humiliated and powerless, broken and not accepting it.

I’d gotten up and walked back to my cell. I looked at myself in the small mirror pasted to the stone. My head was a hatchet job, and when I saw myself, I wanted

to cry. My skin was oily and marked with boils; I had red-pepper diarrhea, was thin, in shock, on a hair trigger. I slid back into my blue prison shoes and walked back down the hall.

“Medium length, damn it—I know he heard me!” I kept yelling as best I could in Korean. The gang barbers did nothing. They just stared back at me, no doubt thinking, Who the hell does this arrogant foreign *keh seki*, son of a bitch, think he is?

Lurch followed me back down the hall. “Fuck you!” I spat the words. “Get the hell out of my face.” He circled around me and stood in front of my cell with the door open, waiting to shut me in. The sound of the thick doors always pounded home our impotence; the bang meant you didn’t matter, you were no more than a broom.

Pacing uneasily in the cell, I could hear my heart hammering away in my chest—alive, pulsing with blood, how marvelous, but how sad and rabid! I was struggling against something unbeatable. Somehow life had cheated me. I was a failure, a loss, a disappearance.

If I was to keep my sanity, I knew I had to get out of the isolation of the cell and start working, so I took a job in Peehyuk, the prison’s shoe factory, and became a convict cobbler.

Hours passed at the factory. Days. Months. I didn’t give a damn about the eighty cents a day, about working away in this factory buried in a South Korean prison. We got high on glue, inadvertently. It got to the head and sent you for a loop—not a welcome kind, really, though at first it was a novelty, Peehyuk’s little chemical secret. My ears were filling with the irregular beats of dozens of hammer blows, rising and falling, the metallic cacophony filling our factory.



MY FAMILY BROUGHT up the idea of visiting. My reaction surprised me. Despite missing them all and needing to keep the link to them, to my former self, alive, I would have been ashamed to have them see me in that place, in my prison uniform. I was ashamed of what I’d already cost them.

When I was first arrested, the U.S. embassy in Seoul told my family that the minimum penalty for my crime was seven years. Mom nearly fainted. Then there was the nervous breakdown she had in a King Kullen grocery store while wheeling a cartful of food. She was picking out cans of corn and refried beans when the weight of her son’s

folly sat right down on her head, and she wept and seethed. No matter how often I wrote to say I was all right, they were left to their own visions of prison: rapes, murders, and torture. To this day, my brother thinks I'm lying about never having been involved in any prison sex; he likes to joke about how I must have been a treat for the Korean sodomites—his fraternal love at work.

The only real sex I heard of was of a consensual nature. Some older gang men, even several factory captains, were apparently having money put into the accounts of young inmates they wanted. But this was rare.

I lost track of time remembering what women were, how they once felt, badly missing their thighs and hair, their hips, the smell of the skin behind their ears. Though one day we did get a reminder.

There was a sudden commotion in the factory one afternoon as our captain announced a special event. This was rare, and several of the Korean gangsters, smiling, told me that I'd be a fool to miss it. Marching down the long hallways in single file, we joined several hundred other inmates in the auditorium. Fast electronic music started up, and, magically, a girl strutted onto the stage all by herself. She stripped down to little red panties and a bra and wildly screwed the air and the floor of the huge stage around her. We were stunned into silence and awe. The only thing that could have been more exciting than that would have been a prison-wide amnesty. I thought she captured some essence of Korea itself when, at the end of her all-too-short routine (fifteen minutes), she scurried on her red high heels to the back of the stage and, rather than bend over—which she'd already done a dozen times in a dozen different ways—to pick up the dress she'd shed, instead primly bent at the knees to get it and quickly dashed out of sight.



I FASTED EVERY year on May 27, the day I was arrested, putting my kimchi, barley rice, and *ramyuns* aside. The lesson of the day was always "Don't ever again be so stupid." Where holidays and birthdays used to send me tumbling into depression, in time they passed like any other day. They no longer had any power over me, that I could see through the construct and see it as just another day in which I'd wake with the horns, eating my meals at the same time, looking for the moon in the Taejon sky at night.

During my last year in Taejon, I found out that my parents had divorced—that had been expected. It wasn't my fault, and nobody blamed me. They'd grown far apart before I ever left for Korea. Stuff went wrong; I knew that. You had to let things die, make changes, adapt. They'd been through deaths, infidelities, separations. Four kids to deal with. I respected their bat-

les. Pops had sold the house we'd grown up in, though I felt unmoved when I found out. So much had passed since I'd left. So much had fallen away like dead skin.

I watched another American, an older man with a heart problem who had been cashing phony traveler's checks, come in and shout about Korea's "barbaric prisons." He was going to report it to the United Nations. I saw a reflection of my earlier self in him. And all the fighting over laundry space and hot water, food and blankets, uniforms and seats at the factory tables, all the greed and need, the tide of misery and suffering, the power games, the humiliations doled out mercilessly—I wanted no part in any of it. I stepped away from that shit then and there and have remained at a distance ever since. I was done torturing myself. It was all right that I'd failed so spectacularly. I was fallible and still decent. I was mortal, even, and that was acceptable.



THEY GAVE ME the same clothes I had on when I was arrested: green khakis, button-down shirt, black shoes. I was thinner than before—I had parasites but didn't know it yet, and they would prove excruciatingly painful. Two officials in slacks and jackets took me to the immigration office in Taejon City. They led me through the final doors and past several gates. When we reached Kimpo Airport, we had little time to spare, and the two officers held my arms and walked me quickly to my boarding area. I remember thinking that I wanted to give them a polite good-bye, but they weren't

my hair and how weird my accent—I truly sounded like an Asian street kid, my English words clipped, foreign, grunted—Mom hugged me again, then held me in front of her and slapped me. "Don't ever do that again!" she yelled. She was relieved to have me back, whole and sane, but I had caused her a great deal of anguish, all those days and years of worry. As much as I had been through, I knew Mom had suffered also, as only a mother could.

I saw Rocket that night. She looked just as she did that day at the post office in Seoul. It was a sweet reunion—a reminder of a bond formed in the adventurous idiocy of youth, under palm trees and on ferry boats, in tropical waters and on the chaotic streets of Seoul. We stayed with each other for several weeks. We'd written letters often, but we both knew that Korea hadn't just kept us apart; it had sent our paths in different directions.

I'm back in New York now, years removed, and I function fairly normally. You wouldn't guess a thing by looking at me. The pus-filled boils on my chin went away, as did the large painful ones in my crotch hair. No sign now of the frostbite. The broken fingers healed. The color returned to my skin. When I talk to Koreans in the groceries and bodegas here in New York City, I remember. Korean comes out of my mouth. "You are so good," they often say, beaming, while I think to myself, You have no idea what you mean to me.

I think of Korea whenever something tests me and I feel my anger bubble up and my side ache, or when I'm in uncom-

We sometimes spent three or four days in a row
locked in our cells with not a second outside,
stewing, everything slowed to a crawl. Sleep was
always tempting you.

interested. I had a lot of appreciation left in me for Korea. She had taken me to the edge and let me look over, but she never let me go.

Our landing at J.F.K. Airport was rough. I got held up in customs. The agent seemed puzzled. Maybe it was that, despite having only a three-month tourist visa for South Korea, there was a strange three-and-a-half-year gap between my last entry and departure stamps. And I had just the one little black bag. He called over another agent, and together they looked over my passport and me.

My family was waiting for me among the crowd. After they'd shouted and grabbed me as if to make sure I was really there and we'd all hugged and talked wildly and they'd remarked on how thin I was and how short

fortable, claustrophobic situations, like on the subway at rush hour with sweaty bodies pressed against me. I like to go eat Korean food on Thirty-second Street in Manhattan, squid stew and barbecue beef and especially *bibimbop*, something of a peasant's meal—rice, vegetables, and beef thrown together in a big bowl. I still pace from one side of a room to another, almost unconsciously. It soothes me. Sometimes I squat in my tub under cold-water showers to get the feeling back, to remember how I was strong when I had to be. ❧

CULLEN THOMAS is a writer living in Brooklyn. Reprinted by arrangement with Viking, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., from *Brother One Cell* by Cullen Thomas. Copyright © Cullen Thomas, 2007