

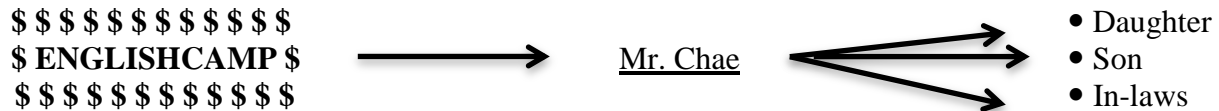
Never-ever-land
(Excerpt)
Mary Pike

1. GOOD TO MEET YOU AGAIN, SAYS MR. SEONG.

He loosens his knotted tie and pushes back his baseball cap. I only wish for harmony, but I am not responsible for the money Mr. Chae stole from you.

He dry washes his manicured hands of the problem. *Swish, swish.*

Two Korean office administrators and four North American teaching staff study a chart on the whiteboard behind their boss. Dollar signs encircle the bold red ‘EnglishCamp.’ From EnglishCamp, an arrow shoots to an underlined Mr. Chae. From Mr. Chae three arrows point to a bulleted list: daughter, son, in-laws. There’s no mistaking how the money had flowed.



The school’s bus driver lays a final cup of green tea on the oval coffee table around which the staff sits. He doesn’t speak English and now glances at Yoo-han, the school manager. Mr. Seong’s announcement has caught Yoo-han off-guard. His round face looks both troubled and bewildered. He rubs his thumb back and forth over the tip of his right index finger. The finger is a tad shorter than normal and the nail curves over the tip, protecting the softness beneath.

He looks up. *Doni eobseo*, he mutters. There's no money.

The driver's shoulders sag; he last saw a salary six months ago. As he shuffles from the room his shoes slip-sigh against the carpet.

Kendra, being the newest teacher, holds her tongue.

Leslie doesn't. Excuse me sir, she says, with the full authority of her forty years. She pushes back a shock of electric blue hair that falls long over one eye. I don't care who stole from who. I just want a guarantee that at the end of the month we'll receive our full salary. Not half a salary. She gives a dimpled smile, hoping to take the sting from her words.

Half a salary? As one, the other teachers sit straighter. Mr. Seong swells like a blowfish. He grabs the arms of his oversize chair and lurches forward. What do you mean by that?

It's happened in other companies.

Other companies? I am not other companies. How can you say this? He stares at Leslie, and then shifts his gaze to the others. He places both hands over his heart. In a softer voice he says, This school is my dream. I will live or die by what happens to it. And to all of you. Mr. Seong offers his empty palms in a plea. Plans are coming, and with plans, more money. We will have a children's summer camp during school holidays. There will be more students. More teachers hired.

Gavin jumps up, skinny arms flailing in an oversized tee-shirt with the oversized lettering *I Don't Speak English*. Ah, ha! He punctures the air with his forefinger. Will the teachers have the correct work visas? Or any visas at all?

Mr. Seong's eyelid twitches. Of course. It is the law.

During winter camp, Immigration swooped in. Gavin airplanes his arms and skims Leslie's hair. They hauled seventeen teachers right out of class! We only got nine back. The

others didn't have the right visas. Gavin put his hands on his hips as if to say, now what do you think of that?

Mr. Chae's responsibility.

Immigration? Kendra's belly constricts. Her indrawn breath sounds loud in her ears.

Maybe it's Chae's fault. Maybe not. But somebody sure let the ball drop. Gavin falls back into his seat. He reaches to the side of his chair. Cellophane crackles. As he brings a handful of cereal to his mouth, crumbs drift from between his fingers. He reaches again for the large Frosted Flakes box that he now tucks between his thighs. While stuffing a few flakes into his mouth he catches Kendra's eye and gives a slow wink.

Breeze shifts. Like all of his movements, little effort is expended. Breeze glides when walking, drawls when speaking. In slow motion he raises his thumb and forefinger next to his thigh and folds in the remaining fingers. He points his gun toward his boss. *Bang*. Which company will be recruiting the new teachers?

The name?

Yes.

Why?

Because recruiters lie. When we hired teachers for last year's summer camp we lost some just after they arrived in this place.

This place?

This countryside.

Deep furrows appear on Mr. Seong's forehead. They remind Kendra of plowed rice fields.

Breeze flaps a hand at her. Show him the ad that lured you here, Kendra.

Flushing, Kendra extracts from the pages of her notebook the Internet advertisement she spent weeks agonizing over. She spreads it flat before passing it to Mr. Seong.

We are looking for native-teachers who are a very sincere and responsible man and woman. If you are that very man or woman, why don't You come and join with confidence?
Company name: EnglishCamp
(HEADQUARTER – SEOUL)
We are partners with a large company that has lived in Seoul 20 years.
We need foreign teachers who are responsible for teaching with ENTHUSIASM and PROFESSIONALISM.
Furnished single apartment. It is an exciting and busy area of the city. (Good and luxury place)

Mr. Seong looks from the advertisement to the teachers. His eyelid twitches as if in a race.

This is an ad for Seoul, explains Breeze. Not Baekam. We're an hour from Seoul. Exciting and busy area of the city? We're lucky if a couple hundred people live in town. And furnished single apartment? Come on! Kendra still lives in a dorm room. He holds up his right hand with thumb and forefinger an inch apart. He squints through the gap. One tiny, tiny room.

Mr. Seong takes a deep breath. Mr. Chae is no longer my partner. I am speaking to new investors who will help. There are careful negotiations. Much has to be arranged. He looks around the room. The Korean staff nod agreement; the foreigners look skeptical.

Please, give me one more chance. I promise solutions in two weeks. Or three. Everything will go according to plan.

Mr. Seong shuts his briefcase in dismissal. When the door closes behind the last of his staff he pulls a monogrammed handkerchief from his suit pocket and pats his face dry.

The group wanders in silence to their communal office. It's so quiet they hear the photocopier humming in tune with the fluorescent lighting. Tall windows allow angled sunshine to highlight six rows of desks. The four to a row, mostly unused desks, are aligned on the window side of the room like an ordered classroom. Leslie's and Yoo-han's desks are side-by-side like teachers' desks at the top of the room. The office serves students and teachers as a common walk-through to eight classrooms and a student lounge beyond.

At one desk Howard sits, staring at his computer screen. With a suddenness that causes hearts to skip he grips the sides of his keyboard. He attacks the keys with a two-fingered staccato clicking of his fingernails.

Leslie and Gavin exchange glances as they continue past a round conference table and through the office. Kendra slips into the chair next to Howard. Why didn't you go to the meeting?

He doesn't look away from the screen. What meeting?

With Seong.

Didn't know there was one.

Gavin or Leslie didn't mention it?

Nope. We only share an apartment. No communication.

Seong is hoping for a new investor. Says he'll have one in a couple of weeks.

Howard leans back. I think it's pretty obvious, Kendra. This company is going to fold. Didn't I warn you when you first came?

Yes, but . . . Howard being the cynical sort, Kendra hadn't given it much thought. The novelty of Korea and the steep curve of learning how to teach occupied most of her time. Kendra

considered Howard's advice and help settling in as fatherly and she was grateful for the time he took with her. The other teachers pay her little attention. They have their own lives.

Howard closes his eyes and inhales a long, slow breath. Exhales. I don't need this. He stretches his eyes wide. Tiny red veins look ready to pop. Who was at the meeting?

Yoo-han and BS, Breeze, Gavin, Leslie and myself.

Cameron?

Kendra shrugs.

He's going to be fired, says Howard, shutting down his computer. Kendra pictures the pony-tailed Cameron pedaling like crazy on a cast-off bicycle to the nearest glass of cheap *soju*, his muscles bulging under puzzle pieces tattooed from shoulders to wrists, his fluorescent red sneakers flashing like beacons.

Let's hear what the others think, says Howard.

They track Breeze's slow, southern voice to the lounge. He leans against a vending machine and surveys the group from his height of six-foot-four. Well, he says, Who's planning to stay after our next payday? Who wants to work for another month wondering if it's for free? Yoo-han? BS? You guys haven't been paid in two months.

I do not think you should ask us that question, says BS. His lip trembles. He needs to succeed with this first job.

Leslie speaks up. Well, if any teacher decides to leave please let us know so that we can get somebody to replace you.

Who're you going to get for no pay? asks Breeze.

Kendra slings her knapsack over her shoulder and grabs a new company brochure. Her footsteps echo through the building's empty stairwell as she descends three flights of stairs and into the fading daylight. As she leaves the Samsung Complex for the fifteen minute walk to her dormitory she studies the centrefold picture. Her crinkly autumn-red hair and freckled whiteness stands out next to the black haired Koreans. The smiling students give testament in English and Korean to their monthly residential or weekend intensives at EnglishCamp. Business people, professionals, recent graduates, those between jobs—all are promised expert teaching with native speakers. As Kendra stuffs the brochure into her pocket the smooth sound of a vehicle gearing down causes her to step onto the gravel shoulder. When the BMW passes she catches a glimpse of a male driver. A female sits in the back with Mr. Seong. Surely God he doesn't have a driver with the company losing money? In less than a minute the car fades from view and Kendra is alone.

Behind her is the Samsung Complex, a corporate training facility from which EnglishCamp rents classroom and office space. The EnglishCamp staff and students mix with the Samsung employees in the company cafeteria, otherwise both groups go their separate ways. A kilometre straight ahead is a grouping of dormitories and apartments, accommodations for Samsung employees and EnglishCamp staff and their students.

On either side of Kendra scattered farm buildings and rice paddies border the road. The sharp odor of manure hangs heavy in the spring air. A migraine builds. One month. Just one month in Korea and now this. She hears a rustling in the dry grass on her right and stops. As she searches for familiar squirrels or rabbits a wave of small brown sparrows takes flight toward the safety of rice paddies. When she starts to walk additional waves respond to her approach. The birds fly low in the familiar grass, staying close to their source of food.

The prospect of a quick escape had lured her overseas. Her mother had been horrified with her decision. Kendra now pictures her nestled into her crocheted afghan and gazing at her Samsung big-screen companion. CNN's newscasters debated the likelihood of North Korea actually possessing nuclear weapons. Her mother had shuddered. 'Why do you have to go to one of those queer countries, love? I'm sure everything will work out here.' Her tone was soothing. Cajoling. As familiar to Kendra as the thin, jagged scar extending the lifeline on her left palm.

And Kevin, that louse of an ex-boyfriend. He'd pressed his way through the Friday night crowd at The Sundance Bar a week before she'd left home. 'It's like this,' he shouted over the noise, drunkenly pointing his half-filled Labatt's at Kendra. It hovered as near her mouth as a Karaoke singer's microphone. 'Would you put to sea in a ten foot aluminum boat knowing there's a storm coming?'

She'd given no thought to potential troubles between North and South Korea. Warring with Kevin occupied her mind.

Kendra kicks a stone into the grass bordering the road and flushes another flock of sparrows. This tempest at EnglishCamp could be catastrophic. She grinds her teeth so hard her jaw hurts.