

CUTTING THE CORD

After days of scavenger hunting, I was finally settled. As my young guide, Miss Yu, climbed into a taxi, I knew I'd miss her, but I felt like I had when my mother first left me at kindergarten - ready to cut the cord.

Miss Yu rolled down the window, one delicate eyebrow arched in concern – or skepticism, "You sure you be okay?"

"I'm sure!" I said. Especially since we had found the kindly grocer, Mrs. Kim, who spoke English. Mrs. Kim had offered to help me in any way she could during my six months in Seoul.

"Telephone if something come up," said Miss Yu.

"I promise," I said, but felt confident I wouldn't need to call.

A few days later, something came up.

Starting with Mrs. Kim's, I had searched the myriad of groceries and general stores in my neighborhood without finding a single tampon.

"What is word, 'tampon?'" Mrs. Kim had said. I'd checked my *Berlitz Korean for Travelers* but 'tampon' wasn't in it. I didn't know her well enough to want to explain. "Maybe next grocery," she'd said.

The groceries did stock Kotex, but I'd already adjusted to so many things in this new culture, when it came to my body I had to draw the line. Where there were Kotex there had to be tampons. Somewhere. After all, Seoul was hosting the 1988 Olympics. The Olympics committee, I reasoned, wouldn't choose a city that lacked tampons.

In humble desperation I called Miss Yu. She would know the Korean word for 'tampon.'

"Okay:" she said. "What is 'tampon?'"

"Um:" I stumbled, caught off guard, never at ease with the subject. "You'd know it if you saw it..."

"I come tomorrow:" she said.

"A cup of tea before we start, Miss Yu?"

"Maybe next time please. Show me what you call 'tampon.'"

Dear Miss Yu, all business as always, so mature for a college freshman. It was a comfort having her at my kitchen table again. Her sleek bob shone like a shampoo ad, her white Adidas dazzled, her Levis held a sharp crease.

I handed her a tampon, still in its wrapper.

"Okay," she squinted at it, "What is tampon?"

"Go ahead and unwrap it. Then you'll see."

She read the wrapper aloud, practicing her English, "Open this end. Grasp cord and pull from wrapper."

"I could only fit one box in my luggage," I said as she tore it open, "and you know how it is when you run out."

She nodded agreeably, dangling it by the cord like a dead lab rat, "What is tampon?"

Ignoring my sinking feeling, I forged ahead with a hot-cheeked, fumbling explanation. She looked blank. Silently I cursed our language barrier; I didn't know her well enough to want to mime it.

"I know!" I reached for my sketchbook, "I'll draw a diagram."

She watched intently as I drew. I had to admit it was a pretty good sketch. I labeled the body parts. For good measure I added a directional arrow. Finished, I leaned proudly back in my chair.

Miss Yu was looking more poker-faced than usual.

With a hot stab of embarrassment I wondered if I'd just taught her the facts or tampons, but was afraid to ask. I hoped she wasn't as shocked as I'd been when my big sister informed *me* were it was supposed to go. But I'd been thirteen at the time; surely a college woman like Miss Yu would already know. Had I broken some cultural taboo?! I was about to apologize when Miss Yu said in her

usual businesslike way, "Okay. We go to *yak*."

I grinned with relief; I hadn't offended her, and what's more she knew where to find them. "What is a *yak*?"

Miss Yu consulted her Korean-to-English dictionary, and read phonetically, "Fah mah see."

"Of course! A pharmacy!" I'd have thought of it myself if I'd seen one. Pondering the cultural difference of pharmacies having an exclusive on tampons, I hoped I wouldn't need a prescription; I doubted my *Berlitz* had phrases for a pelvic exam.

To my surprise, right next to Mrs. Kim's grocery was the *yak*. I hadn't recognized it because of the prominent display of Camel cigarettes in the window.

The *yak* had plain white walls, an empty white counter spanning-its width and smelled of disinfectant- a no-nonsense atmosphere very different than my gift shop/pharmacy back home that featured teddy bears, and pushed imported chocolates, my personal addiction, especially at that time of the month. In the back of the *yak*, shelves stocked with brown glass bottles and plain white boxes rose to the ceiling. A frowning man in crisp lab coat and horn-rimmed glasses waited behind the counter.

I hung back, for the first time glad I had not yet learned Korean. But Miss Yu talked to him as if perfectly at ease. Apparently the subject was less awkward for Koreans. But he wasn't producing tampons. They kept talking. Maybe she was regaling him with tales of my diagram. But they weren't laughing. They hadn't even glanced at me. For all I knew they were discussing the weather.

Gosh, maybe they were. Maybe she *was* embarrassed and hadn't yet found the nerve to ask him. Poor Miss Yu.

She turned to me and said briskly, "Okay. Maybe *next.yak*"

"Okay," Miss Yu said again, "Maybe *next yak*."

Exiting the seventh *yak* (after as many mysterious conversations), head aching, heels blistered, tongue dry as toast, I squinted down the long road ahead of us. Above all the grocery awnings, amid the jumble of signs that were gibberish to me, I recognized the green cross symbol for *yak* after *yak* after *yak* until they were lost in the smog.

So many *yaks*, so little stamina compared to Miss Yu. Her Adidas marched ahead of me at unslackening speed. How many miles would I walk for a tampon?

Then it hit me - was Miss Yu's dogged determination more about saving face than optimism? I remembered hearing that for Koreans, answering a request with a direct 'no' causes loss of face. Was she unable to give up without losing face? Would she lose face if I asked if she was saving face? Did "maybe next *yak*" mean "please say uncle"? Had I unwittingly plugged us into some sort of Sisyphean cross-cultural hell?

My life in Seoul flashed before my eyes: last week's fruitless quests for a soft pillow, long-handled broom, cheese - wait a minute - the grocer, Mrs. Kim. She'd said she used to work at the American Embassy. There had to be tampon dispensers in the women's restrooms there. Mrs. Kim might not know the word, but she'd recognize the thing itself. Maybe she could order tampons!

I ran to catch up with Miss Yu. Lying to help her save face, I assured her I could live without tampons after all.

"But maybe next *yak*," she insisted, masking her relief at saving face, or at the hunt being over, or both. I helped her hail a cab and again said goodbye and many heartfelt thank you's.

Unlike the other groceries, Mrs. Kim's reminded me of a 7-11, because except for Skippy peanut butter, there were few items of nutritional value. She was behind the counter, pricing cans of Coke. Her wrinkled cheeks dimpled when she saw me come in.

"Hi Mrs. Kim." I slipped the tampon from its wrapper and placed it on the counter.

"This is the tampon I asked about. Can you order them?"

She tapped the cord thoughtfully, clucking her tongue, then beamed with sudden inspiration. "Okay!"

"Wonderful!" I flushed with elation and guilt - what I'd put Miss Yu through when all I'd had to do was—

"No order," Mrs. Kim said with a smile.

I collapsed against the counter in defeat, brought down by a hail of realizations: Koreans *could* just say 'no'; 'okay' did not always mean 'okay'; American brands everywhere in Seoul didn't mean Seoul had everything; I might have been wrong about the Olympics committee.

From now on, no more assumptions.

"I have *here!*" she exclaimed, and rummaged under the counter.

"Oh!" I reinflated with joy. They were behind the counter! With the condoms and Playboys? You had to be over twenty-one? And interesting cultural difference.

So Miss Yu *hadn't* known?

"Here we are for *you!*" Mrs. Kim produced it like a rabbit out of a hat and slapped it happily on the counter.

It was a Korean brand, its cord more of a loose tassel made up of different color threads, including hot pink and chartreuse. But it wasn't a cultural difference. It was a travel sewing kit.

I stifled a laugh of surprise, not wanting her to lose face; she looked so pleased to have helped me.

"Okay!" I grinned, not meaning 'okay.'

I also bought some imported Hershey's chocolate.

And a box of Kotex.