

# SEOUL SEARCHING

By Donnia Harrington

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The only 'soul' searching here is for public self image in a neon synthetic midnight mondo-singularity where no relationship is deeper than nail gloss and personal space (privacy) is viewed as some kind of social aberration. We like the adroit depiction of aimlessness and fetishistic narcissism that run through this beautifully realized 'confession/memoir' of present day South Korean club culture. The author's matter of fact prose style is the perfect fit for the subject. Quote:* Jenna mastered the craft of dancing alone. Her boyfriend would try to bring her close, but she would always find a way to drift away from him, dancing freely to the beat without any restriction. *And:* A midafternoon nap before she began her nightlife prep: another shower, music blasting from her laptop. A makeup tutorial on the screen, the smokey eye and bold lip that she wore so well. And the outfit—the most important part—her favorite pairs of black from shorts to a leather skirt, the platform heels that she found in Hongdae, and a flashy top.

## Seoul Searching

Clubbing in Gangnam. I never thought I'd see myself there; out with the kids dressed in all black, wearing mouth masks as a fashion statement and not because they were ill. Trips to Hongdae usually ended with me impulse buying in an attempt to mimic the confidence that so many naturally possessed. I was already accustomed to the curious eyes focused on my braided hair and blood red lipstick; I only stared back to take mental note of their personal style.

What was it like to look like a badass? I spent most of my nights at Angel-in-us coffee with Amy, trying to write, but mostly procrastinating and browsing gossip sites. Before Angel-in-us, we would hop from café to café looking for that coveted 24-hour location. Our search took us off campus at odd hours of the night, walking the crowded streets of Seoul where teens and young adults casually roamed as if it were mid-afternoon.

I admired their commitment to nightlife. Even Angel-in-us was packed. Most of the customers were students pulling all-nighters, but there were some like Amy and I, introverts in need of fresh air from cramped and humid dorm rooms. Amy's roommate was Tatiana, but we amiably agreed that I would've been a better fit.

I attributed the bond to our compatible star signs—Virgo and Scorpio—but in reality, our creativity and silent passion for self-expression drew us close. We entered Angel-in-us with laptop-heavy backpacks in tow, found a corner and stayed there for hours. I thought I would spend the rest of my nights like that, but I began to tire of the same routine.

Whenever I walked past a group of girls after midnight, I wondered where they were going. Their makeup was fresh, their voices loud. Their night was just starting. I watched them in awe and envy—would I get that chance? It came to me in the form of a question. When Tatiana asked if I wanted to go out with her and her friends, Jenna and Limbo, I said yes without hesitation.

Tatiana was a seasoned party girl. While I was checking into bed after a night of web browsing, her nights followed the same path as those girls I always saw. Sometimes she doesn't get home until early morning, Amy would tell me. My envy changed to curiosity. My entire adult life had been spent in comfortable silence, a secluded shelter. The one party I went to during freshman year ended with me leaving early, deciding to end my night with Netflix. It was difficult to branch out since I was always an introvert. And yet, my usual restrained and thoughtful response was replaced with the urgency to be spontaneous. The moment I agreed, I knew I couldn't back out. I was suddenly terrified.

Wear something sexy, Tatiana told me. I now owned all black, which was sexy to me. My former wardrobe that consisted of florals was quickly discarded the moment I discovered the intimidating power of black in Hongdae.

On the eve of our outing, I was at the regular spot with Amy. She had already declined Tatiana's invite. Are you sure you don't want to come? I'm drowning in homework, she responded. Homework. Something I wasn't trying to think of this weekend. I wanted to be carefree and weightless like those girls. They weren't worrying about homework.

That night was crisp, perfect bomber jacket weather. It was almost as if Mother Nature herself decided to work in my favor, so my crop top and tight shorts didn't have to be covered by my parka. My anxiety was lurking close behind as I walked with Tatiana to the train station. She was effortless with her look; coolness came naturally for her.

Her afro mimicked my jumping nerves as we walked, her hair with a life of its own as the breeze kissed our faces. As if on cue, I soon felt myself surrounded by the same groups that I encountered on my walks to Angel-in-us. An instant relaxation took over. I was here. I was with them. I blended into the scene. I finally knew where they were going.

The passengers of Line 2 on Seoul Metro were filled with young adults with similar ideas for the night. No kids on this train, it was almost eleven and the oldest person wore a suit and carried a leather briefcase. I wondered if he was going home, or if his night was just beginning like the rest of us.

I remembered reading an article about drinking culture in Korea; businessmen would go out on workdays to drink with their bosses and colleagues, even if they didn't want to. The pressure to fit in, to look good in the eyes of their superiors even as they drank themselves silly.

In contrast, friends sat next to each other in pairs, scrolling through their phones and whispering in ears.

Ten stops south of my university was Gangnam Station, our destination. I had never met these friends of Tatiana's; she hardly knew them outside of their mutual interest of clubbing. They stood waiting, Jenna alongside Limbo with two others they invited, their figures illuminated by the bright lights of an Artbox stationary store in front of the station exit.

This part of Seoul was new territory for me, open stores and neon signs brightened the dark skies into visibility like every other part of the city, but the vibe of Gangnam was undeniably different. I was reminded of Hongdae and the people I would see there, dressed impeccably from head to toe, every piece of clothing and jewelry intentional for the statement.

Just like the businessmen trying to impress their bosses, nightlife culture for Seoul partygoers consisted of drinking before any event. We huddled together at a small table of a local barbecue place; the refrigerator was right behind us so we could easily reach for alcohol. I held my nose at the whiff of raw meat being prepared in front of me, and politely declined when asked if I want any. I'm a vegetarian—and don't worry, I already ate. The table erupted in laughter.

Although I did fill my appetite before—cheese quesadillas at Dos Tacos in Star City Mall—my tolerance had always been light and I quickly felt that familiar buzz, a carefree daze that was easy for me to achieve. My usual quietness was replaced with the need to be social; Jenna and Limbo were perfect for the sudden exploration, natural extroverts like Tatiana.

One of their friends was sitting closer than usual to Jenna, closer than one could be crammed in a corner. That's her boyfriend, Tatiana told me. She likes white guys. Despite his

obvious attention on her, Jenna was more interested in catching up with Tatiana. A few drinks later and a final look around the crowded table of empty, green-glassed Soju bottles had me prepared for the next stage.

Limbo led the way as we rushed by a variety of bustling streets and alleys, taking routes that tourists wouldn't be aware of in their preoccupied state. Tatiana and I held onto each other throughout, arms linked and minds racing. I'll be next to you the entire time, she reassured me and I only nodded, that previous anxiety long gone, a confidence fully taking over.

The club was unappealing on the outside, a hole in the wall in the form of black doors against black brick. But the muffled music told a different story, an invitation to enter if you dare. Inside was indigo blue with flashing white lights that reminded me of being in an igloo. Mirrors lined the walls, reflecting the backs of people who leaned against them.

My head mimicked the throbbing thumps of EDM as we reached deeper in, past bag checks and lockers, past bouncers in muted colors who blended in with the partygoers that they kept a watchful eye over. The lower level was where the action was at; I peeked over the metal balcony and saw a mass of bodies. Dancing bodies, jumping bodies, one unanimous form. Tatiana grabbed my hand and we delved into the belly of the beast, her friends—my new friends—close behind.

Things happened fast after that; hand holding turned into bodies pressed against each other between giggles. The DJ—I somehow remembered his introduction the next day—was popular in his native Scandinavia and was currently on a country hopping tour. I had no idea who he was at the time, and it didn't matter. He played music where I could close my eyes and feel vibrations ringing through my body and that was what I needed, the combination of alcohol and

excitement sending me to euphoria. I'd never considered myself a good dancer, in fact, I hated to dance. But the feeling of weightlessness left me confident to do anything.

I love your vibe! A light touch on my shoulder snapped me out of the moment and I turned to face Jenna, who moved closer to me and away from her boyfriend. Yeah, I don't usually... My voice died out with the beginning of a new song and before I knew it, I was back on an indescribable high. When I felt a pair of hands on my hips, I think it's someone from my group but one glance at Tatiana's mischievous expression told me that this was a complete stranger. I let him grind against me, I would never see him again. Wasn't that the fun in it all?

My drunken confidence left me feeling unnaturally capable, even teasing the thought of getting laid in the moment, but my tinge of rationality dismissed the idea. Even when he started to whisper not-so-sweet nothings in my ear, I didn't pay attention to it. The mystery flirt eventually disappeared into the crowd and Tatiana was on me again, laughing. She alternated between dancing on me and Limbo. When she noticed that I didn't mind the lack of a partner, she backed away, sensing my independence.

Jenna mastered the craft of dancing alone. Her boyfriend would try to bring her close, but she would always find a way to drift away from him, dancing freely to the beat without any restriction. My glances at her ended with a smile at how peaceful she appeared to be despite the heavy bass and EDM drops that surrounded us. For my first night out like this, I truly believed I could last until sunrise.

But my stamina was nowhere near Tatiana's. I felt my body tiring, not as bouncy as it was before as the aftereffects of Soju crept up on me, casting a spell that left me craving sleep. I'm kind of tired, I started to say. Tatiana pouted when she heard the fatigue in my voice. It's only

two AM, she tried to persuade me and the look I gave her was comically serious. She didn't protest any further, recognizing that I'm not experienced like her. I had no idea if I ever would be. Our group decided to end the night there, *a little early* in their words but their expressions masked tired smiles.

We gave tight hugs through mumbled chatter in front of the club. People still crowded us walking in and out of the doors as if it wasn't four hours to sunrise. But this was the life, the night didn't end until the night was actually over. There was a bittersweet feeling to departing these newfound friends of mine. Although they knew nothing of my personality, of my interests, of how introverted I actually was, we found a bond—albeit brief—in this outing.

Limbo offered to help find us a cab and as we departed with him, Jenna shouted to add her on Kakao. I waved at her, confirming that I would. I knew that even if I didn't see any of them again, at least I'd have some connection to them over social media. We waved down a cab. Tatiana and I used broken Korean in an attempt to tell the driver to go to our campus. His response was a confused expression.

Limbo chuckled and told the driver instead in his perfect native tongue; we thanked him in unison, too drunk to feel embarrassed, completely grateful that he was there to help. He closed the door. As the cab drifted away, I rested my head against the window, my vision blurring from a combination of heavy eyelids and watching the lights of passing buildings shine bright in my hazy state. I could fall asleep right there.

A nudge on my arm from Tatiana told me that we were back home. We fumbled for money in our purses. I never carried cash on me, a habit I couldn't seem to break even in a city where loose change was a necessity. Tatiana paid the fee and we walked the hilly path to our

dorm. On the walk, she told me about the crush she had on Limbo and I racked my brain, trying to remember where she dropped possible hints of liking him. I couldn't remember. Or maybe I wasn't paying attention.

I told you it would be fun. She gave me a smile when we stood outside of the doors to our rooms. She knew that I enjoyed myself more than I expected. Another plea to go out with her soon, and I said I would consider it. No more thinking of clubbing tonight. I needed sleep.

I was back at Angel-in-us the following weekend. Tatiana asked the day before if I wanted to go out with her again and I declined, citing a hiatus was needed before I could imagine hopping weekend-to-weekend with another an exciting all-nighter. Is Jenna going to bring her boyfriend again? I asked her, suddenly curious about their dynamic. They actually broke up, Tatiana told me. Well, she broke up with him.

I wasn't shocked by this revelation, even when Tatiana went on to say that she was pretty sure Jenna had another boy toy. I could only chuckle, thinking of how whoever—a foreigner, tall, conventionally attractive—was enchanted by her charming spell was sure to snap out of it brokenhearted. Tell me what happens with Limbo, I reminded her of her confession and her response was an eye roll that failed to hide her blushed cheeks.

Amy had asked me how the outing was, and I shrugged, a nonchalant move that I hope hid my smile. She noticed, but didn't press for an answer. I was back to real life, back to the quiet corner where we hid behind our laptops, discussing schoolwork and quarter-life crises stemming from a lack of creative expression.

Our little spot felt like returning home again—students in study groups, loners with coffee at hand while the other typed away at keys, the random couple who decided to stop by for Angel-in-us’ signature strawberry-topped Belgian waffle—the things that grounded me in reality, reminded me of the solitude that I sought out in the chaos of nightlife.

I thought of Tatiana, of what she would be doing at this same moment. When I stopped by their dorm room to meet with Amy, she was just getting out of bed. A midafternoon nap before she began her nightlife prep: another shower, music blasting from her laptop. A makeup tutorial on the screen, the smokey eye and bold lip that she wore so well. And the outfit—the most important part—her favorite pairs of black from shorts to a leather skirt, the platform heels that she found in Hongdae, and a flashy top. Always making a statement. She was a part of that world.

As Amy and I walked back to campus in the late hours, I wrapped my arms around myself to block out the brisk weather, clutching onto the same bomber jacket I had worn on my outing with Tatiana. It was her suggestion for me to buy it, one of those items that all the cool Seoul kids were wearing.

It sounded like a good idea initially, an easier way to blend in with the scene. With Tatiana by my side, I even believed it. But passing by those stylish nightcrawlers making their way to the next bar or club had me feeling restless again, spontaneity sparking at the sight of their presence. That same envy crept up on me in a rush before leaving just as sudden, a fleeting remnant remaining as the distance between us increased.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *‘Seoul Searching’ was one of the many essays that I wrote for my MFA thesis. I was taking a course on writing from memory when this particular experience came back to me.*

*From there, I started to write about my time in Seoul. I was surprised at not only how much I remembered but also what those experiences meant to me as I reflected on them in the present day. A driving theme in 'Seoul Searching' and the other essays I wrote is self-discovery, and how that journey can take you down unexpected paths. Although this experience is unique to me, self-discovery is universal.*

**BIO:** *Donnia Harrington received an MFA in Creative Writing at The New School in May 2019, where her concentration was Nonfiction. She also graduated with Honors from Columbia College Chicago with a Bachelor's in Film. Her work has been published on Columbia's website, Audiences Everywhere, soulhead and ComicBook Debate. When she's not writing, she enjoys foreign cinema, female-centered video games, movie scores, and Scandinavian crime novels.*