



**Guisin-dong**

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**Guisin-dong**  
*(Seoul dragedies)*

by

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'Guisin-dong'

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Photograph by Stephane MOT (Seoul, 2005)

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When Guisin-dong engulfed me, I was on my way back from Professor Bae's place, in Suyu. It was about four bottles of *makgeolli* past midnight. The winter streets were cold, dark, and empty. My phone was dead, my head buzzing foreign ringtones.

Then a big truck came, blinding me with its massive headlights. Well that's what I first thought, with that crazy old mechanic sound... until I realized that the light came from the sun.

Here I was, standing in the middle of a completely different street, in the middle of a bright summer day.

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"Can I borrow you a second?"

At least this street is not empty. I turn to face a thin man, about my (middle) age and height, in a not too wrinkled beige linen suit. He smiles kindly and his eyes radiate intelligence, but he still doesn't make much sense:

"Sorry. You're not from here, I gather. I just wanted to have a chat, if you don't mind of course."

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"Uh. Sure, sure. Excuse me if I'm a bit lost. Actually, I just woke up, and I can't even remember falling asleep... What time is it, by the way?"

"Oh here, it's always noon. Until it gets dark, that is. And you're not lost: this place is. Where are we, by the way?"

Uh-oh. This is not your usual hangover. The buzz in my head is still fresh and playful, so I mustn't have slept for such a long time. But this guy, my friends, this sober fellow is either in the early stages of dementia, or as ripe for the straight jacket as they can be.

"You're not from here either, I gather. Obviously this is Suyu-dong, Gangbuk-gu, Seoul, though I can't tell you for sure exactly where."

"Suyu-dong! It's been such a long time... and a long haul: yesterday we were over Sillim-dong."

"Rrrright (it keeps getting better). Amazing indeed. Myself, I live near Sadang. Pretty far from here as well."

"You don't get it: you're in Suyu-dong, but also in Guisin-dong."

Looks like I got myself a Class A madman.

"Guisin-dong? What do you mean by "ghost" neighborhood? Are they redeveloping the area or..."

"Guisin-dong is the place where we spirits land. A place that changes locations every day."

Okay, that's it, I've had enough. I'm tired. It's too hot. I need a cab. And a drink.

"Look. That's a great tale, and I'd love to hear more of it, but I need to go. Nice meeting you. I presume you have no clue where I could get a taxi around here, I can't hear any traffic..."

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I've already started walking straight ahead, in the opposite direction to an unknown mountain, about one or two kilometers away. The weirdo's following me with his nice smile and all.

"There are no taxis in Guisin-dong. And you don't want to ride the local Village Bus: the driver is a genuine lunatic. Over twenty people drowned with him in the Han River when he had that accident, but only he ended up in this place."

"Sure. And what did you do to land here? Heck - how about me? What's my crime? Did I drink myself to death?"

"You don't necessarily have to commit a crime. And as far as I'm concerned, I'm just in transit. I don't know about you but I told you: you don't look like you belong here. Sometimes this place swallows a living person during the Transfer, just like that."

"Good for me. Now the way out, please?"

"There's no way out. Guisin-dong decides. Just like it decides where it moves every night. And if you stay overnight you stay forever. That's how things work here, I'm afraid."

Another empty street, but it feels good to get some exercise. The buzz is receding. "You're sure you don't know the neighborhood? You're supposed to live here."

"It changes every day. The Transfer does that, it mixes things up. I can water a plant one day, and spend the whole next one looking for it. Oh. That's another thing you should know: never accept a drink or a meal here. You would lose all chances of leaving."

Yet another empty alley lined with low-rise buildings. I almost feel like banging on the first door, but now I see people in the distance. "Civilization, at last! Let's see if this pair of spirits have a notion where Suyu Station has gone."

"Remember: don't accept anything from anyone. And these old women are good at what they do."

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"Which is...?"

"Proselytizing. I don't know how they manage to stick together, but in this part of Seoul they've converted themselves to a special blend of their own."

"Dead again Christians, eh? Here they are. Excuse me ladies, could you please tell me where the closest subway station is?"

"Hell." Both answer in the same imperious voice, but only the short and plump one continues: "Don't look any further, you've reached it. The end is not coming, it's already here, so you'd better embrace it, and enjoy it. Join us! We offer free beer to all new members."

With a large Stan Laurel smile, the tall and slender woman uncovers a mini icebox in her large bag, and carefully removes the lid: four obscene OB beer cans expose their scandalous curves, instantly licked by audacious condensation rivulets.

"Come on, just have one anyway". Hardy pretends to look elsewhere, and in case I didn't get the message ("Don't worry, I won't tell anybody - funny how beer cans have a knack for evaporating on sunny days"), she adds as if to herself: "You must feel really hot with that thick coat."

All of a sudden I'm not thirsty anymore. I soberly meet the man's eyes, and he's not pretending to look elsewhere. Hard to read, but still smiling gently... Maybe this guy's just curious to see what I will decide.

For starters, I decide to take off my damn winter jacket. "You were right about the coat, and that's very sweet of you for the beer... but I think I'll pass. I just need to go back home and to get some decent sleep."

"This is your home now, young man." (Laurel, now an eerie Christopher Lee impersonator)

"Of course, the offer's still standing." (Hardy, as cunning as the original)

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They're gone, and my guide lets me gather my thoughts for a while.

"You must be wondering how many levels of madness exist in this little asylum of ours. Keep walking, and you'll eventually come to our marketplace - wherever it is today, it's going to be crowded. We don't need to eat or drink, but we like to pretend. We don't live in houses, just wander in the streets. Owning land doesn't make sense in a neighborhood like ours."

I don't know how I manage to smile at that one: "Wow. The only *dong* in Seoul freed from real estate speculation."

"Not quite. Here, most real estate agents - and we do have more than a few - trade time. We never measure time, but that's all we have. Thanks for lending me some of yours."

Thirst kicks back, and I quickly chase from my boiling brain the fresh memory of condensation on bare tin. I resume walking in the same helpless direction, and right now, the sanest thing to do seems to be shooting all the crazy questions that cross my mind.

"How big is Guisin-dong? How many souls?"

"Guisin-dong is big enough to accommodate all of us, with plenty of space left for each and every one to enjoy as much privacy as they want. In case you were wondering, we don't need privacy. We don't grow feelings, we don't feel love, hate, envy, anger. Not even boredom: we never walk twice down the same street. And we never meet people we knew *before*. We seldom bump into the same people anyway."

"You mentioned night time earlier. Do you guys sleep?"

"Not really. Whatever happens happens very quickly. When Transfer time comes - it doesn't seem to follow any pattern but that's how we measure our days, though you won't find any clock or calendar down here. When Guisin-dong transfers to another place, it suddenly gets darker, and next thing you know, it's noon again. Only you're in a different setting. It doesn't feel

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like you've lost consciousness, but I guess that's what actually happens."

"That's exactly how it felt for me."

"I told you: it happens. More and more frequently it seems. Maybe that's not just a matter of demographics. Maybe Guisin-dong is getting rustier. Or simply too big, who knows?"

"But some people manage to escape, right? People like me. Or yourself, you said something about being in *transit*..."

"We're all in transit. We've always been in transit, even before landing here. What's the point anyway? Here or there, we're all pretending, playing roles. The difference is that here, no one gets offended or hurt, there are no consequences. Social bliss."

"But how can you even tell somebody has left Guisin-dong? How can you know that? And how come I've never heard of this place, if people came back from it? How often does that happen? What are my chances?"

"Your chances are greater than mine: *I drank that beer.*"

He doesn't leave me time for the news to sink in and actually, I'm not too surprised to learn that my guide followed the same path. "What I know is that when someone leaves Guisin-dong, we all hear the chant of the *mudang*."

He doesn't seem to care now, but crazy as it sounds, I feel the pang for him.

"Sorry to hear that, man. We didn't even introduce ourselves. I'm -"

"Stop right here. If I know your name or you mine, you'll get stuck too. The least you know the higher your chances."

Is it me or is it already getting dark?

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I shut my eyes immediately, covering my ears and probably screaming.

I craved for a cold, long lasting night.