

I'm sorry.

I really am. I'm sorry if I've hurt anyone's feelings by writing this. I'm sorry, especially, to Annie Shapiro.

Having said that, I have decided to publish this document here because I believe in what I've written to such an extent that I am willing to take the additional heat. From an objective standpoint, this is a great yarn. It's so good, that it is not too much for me to ask for you to read all approximately 30,000 words of it. Someone accused me of being "crazy and obsessive." Maybe I am. But I know a great story when I see it. And so, I want as many people as possible to know what happened with ROKon Magazine.

It really is that good a story.

Somehow

A Memoir of Love, Publishing, Obsession & Betrayal in Seoul 2006-2008

By Shelton Bumgarner
@bumgarls

Author's Introduction

1.

I wish I could say this is a happy story with a happy ending.

It is not.

I started ROKon Magazine in Seoul with a young lady named Annie Shapiro in the summer of 2006 and all hell broke loose soon afterwards. The whole thing totally changed my life and now, years later, I still find myself thinking about what happened.

But what you're reading now all started with an attempt to write a novel about what happened with the magazine. It was going to be a roman a clef and be called "The Battle of The Old Free State" and everyone would love it and I would sail off into the sunset.

I spent most of a year working on it, and it was great fun. It was full of bad sex, but it was entertaining. It was very cathartic to wallow in self-pity and dwell on what happened with the magazine. I went through many, many drafts, writing about it at migukin.wordpress.com along the way. One problem was I enjoyed writing the beginning so much that I kept going back to the start.

Eventually, however, I got to the "end" after spending a few hours just writing as much as I could.

The last few dozen pages weren't very well crafted, but it was nice to be able to finally say "the end."

So I gave it to a few people to look at, just for fun and they hated it. With a passion. It was awful. “Not a single character was likable,” was a typical reaction to the first rough draft that I wrote. And, more unsettling, was the one comment that really hit home — “I didn’t feel like I was in Seoul.” That troubled me a great deal because I realized they were right. I realized that to write a novel, the bar for showing the reader the world of Seoul’s expat scene was pretty high. I was just relying upon my memories of what happened in Seoul. I thought that would be enough. But it wasn’t. The audience goes into the story expecting to be immersed in the world of Seoul’s expat scene and what I described just wasn’t cutting it. The only solution, of course, would be to physically go back to Seoul and return to my old haunts and try to soak up as much detail as possible. Given my dire fiscal straits, that just isn’t feasible.

There was also the comment that there hardly any Koreans in the story, but that was a criticism that didn’t bother me that much. I mean, in both the movie and TV show M*A*S*H there weren’t that many Koreans in the story. The story of ROKon Magazine is a expat story, and so it shouldn’t be a big deal that there aren’t really any Koreans in it.

But all of this was enough to give me a huge case of writer’s block. I gave up on the novel and put my effort into writing verse on Twitter. I pretty much gave up on telling the story of ROKon Magazine.

It then occurred to me that there was one way to fix the problems associated with the novel — turn it into a screenplay. I have long been interested in screenwriting and that was what I wanted to do with the story when I first came back from Seoul. What happened to me in Seoul, especially the “third act” was very cinematic in nature and is ripe to be turned into a movie.

So, I started working on a screenplay with great gusto. I spent hours and hours — 12 hours straight at one point — writing and really felt I was making progress. Having written a (failed) novel helped a great deal with the screenplay and I had visions of finishing the first draft and then handing it proudly to someone who was actually a screenwriter. They would help me improve it and I would finally, finally have something I could pitch to Hollywood.

And then reality sank in.

I followed a lot of Hollywood insiders on Twitter and soon enough it became apparent that I was being quite naive and delusional to think that’s how it would work at all. In fact, you’re pretty much supposed to hide your first draft of a screenplay in your sock drawer. You’re supposed to wait until you produce something of merit before you show whatever it is you write to someone important.

So, my screenwriting efforts came to a screeching halt. I was halfway through — not even at the “juicy bits” of the story and just couldn’t bring myself to write anymore. Out of frustration, I found

myself writing really long, pointless posts about who should be in some hypothetical movie that didn't even have a script yet.

But the fact remains that what happened to me with the magazine is pretty amazing, weird, special and worthy of a major Hollywood movie. If I could just get someone else to see what I see in my heart, then they would understand how great this story is. The story is pretty Shakespearean, what happen to me because of a combination of booze, obsession and women. Yeah, it happens because of a piddly little magazine for expats in Seoul, but the emotional torque that was inflicted upon my heart because of the magazine was immense. The whole experience left me devastated and walking the streets of my neighborhood thinking of how I could have done things differently if I had just been a bit more clear headed.

The story of ROKon Magazine is one for the ages and one that the masses could really get into with the proper screenplay. Now, I am well aware that you could say that about any number of stories floating around out there, but what happened to me in Seoul is one that I keep thinking about nearly 10 years after the fact. Anyway, the point is, the story of ROKon Magazine is ripe for a great movie of some sort. I wish I was a better screenwriter, then I would just write it myself. I need a collaborator of some sort to help me tell the tale the way it deserves to be told.

2.

For me, one of the crazy aspects of this story is how everything kept breaking our way during the course of it. In the first few months of the magazine's existence, we were extremely lucky. Things just seemed to fall together. I met Annie, Annie used her people skills to get others involved and away we went. Now, let me stress that ROKon Magazine was never, well, a very good magazine because it was organic and thrown together with pieces that were readily available. We made a lot — a lot — of mistakes. Huge mistakes. Epic mistakes. But the publication did have a lot of spirit and spunk and it was a fun read.

Another crazy thing that happened was the interplay between myself and the rest of the staff as things progressed. I don't feel comfortable saying too much here because I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings needlessly (I don't mind doing so in the context of a screenplay because the story is great enough and those bridges have already been burned long ago.) But anyway, the point is things did not go well. Annie tried her best to keep things ok, but there was a lot of trouble between myself and Annie's best friend Tahl. Now, things are ok with Tahl and I (for the most part), but back then she and I did not get along. Tahl back then was the bane of my existence. She wanted all of the power and none of the responsibility. At least, that's how I saw it at the time. I don't think even the world's best manager could have made that situation any better. Then there was the fact that Annie was kinda-sorta-seeing this guy Warner who we also were thinking of using to incorporate the magazine.

This doesn't even begin to address the crazy aspect of my growing obsession with the magazine and by extension Annie. I still feel bad about all of that, but I would tell you everything

you wanted to know for the sake of telling the story. The right writer could do something pretty special with the relationship between Annie and I. When things were good between us, it was kind of what was found in *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. When things went bad, well, let's just say they were Very Bad.

Other crazy things were the amount of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll going on all around us as all of this happened. There were good tunes, good lays and good drugs for all. I hate pot, but there was plenty of it floating around in Seoul's expat community in 2006-2008. There was harder stuff, too, but we won't talk about that right now. And there was a lot of good rock music being performed by expat bands back then that you could probably get to reform for a movie about ROKon Magazine, should it happen.

And last, but not least, there is the Dark Stuff that is the crux of this story that I simply refuse to talk about in this context. It is, for me, what makes this story so great and if you could get someone like Charlie Kaufman to do something with it, there would be Oscars all over the place. I am being vague and naive, but I know this story better than anybody else and I know if I were to tell you the Dark Stuff you would understand why I go for walks and just brood about what happened and why. The Dark Stuff is what I will tell you all about, should you be someone with some talent and interest in helping me tell this story. It makes the story.

3.

Now, let's discuss the title of this memoir — Somehow.

The name derives from my mother's way of telling a story and then "somehow" everything worked out. When I was growing up, I always wanted to know what happened during the "somehow" bits of the story. My brother's car broke down in a bad part of town and somehow he managed to get home safe. How, exactly, did he get home? Isn't that the best bit of the story? So, this is my attempt to tell the "somehow" of what happened from the time I met Annie Shapiro in Seoul in about July 2006 until when I left for home abruptly in about March 2008. I am not prepared to tell this story the way it needs to be told. At least, not yet. But I am prepared to tell it to the fullest extent possible. I am prepared for ridicule and anger associated with simply writing it and publishing, because I believe in this story. I feel I nearly died for ROKon Magazine and so I'm prepared for the consequences of spreading this story far and wide.

And, really, since I am going to tell this story to the fullest extent possible, I can probably get away with giving a lot of details that I remember that I otherwise would shine away from. I will lose a lot of people because they won't want to wade through the thousands of words I am about to write. They will click off and only the hardcore people will read everything I've written. Only time will tell if I will do that, however. Even though a long time has elapsed since all of this happened, some of the personal issues involved remain touchy and I am not doing this out of spite so I will simply gloss over them or not even mention them.

I don't do this out of spite, I do this because it will be extremely cathartic. And, when I'm through, I won't have any excuses to go on with my life. I will have told this great story to the fullest extent possible and I will have no excuse. I will have to finally let the past go. I will finally have to accept that I am never going back to Seoul and my fate lies somewhere in America. I really don't want to accept that, but there is no other way for me to be.

Somehow I'll go on. I don't quite know how, but somehow.

Prelude

I was on a dirt path in the middle of a Philippines' jungle in desperate need of a drink. I found myself feeling a pang of desire for booze that was overwhelming. But I was in the Philippines, flat broke, and booze was nowhere to be had. If I remember correctly, it was late June, early July 2006. I know it was probably about that time because I had come to South Korea in 2004, stayed at a hagwan (private academy) as a teacher for about a year and then started work at the EduTimes newspaper in Seoul in later part of 2005.

And it was the EduTimes that brought me to the Philippines.

I was really, really close with the staff of the EduTimes and me coming to the Philippines to teach English was something of a gift. I had come to the Philippines exactly a year before with my then-Korean girlfriend. She was mean to me, but I came to really enjoy the Philippines and hoped to come back. They say the first time you visit the Philippines you like it, the second time you love it and the third time you never leave.

But while I was something of the "golden child" of the EduTimes family because of the work I did for them came so effortlessly for me, there were dark clouds brewing by this point.

I was a drunk.

I was a huge drunk and I was becoming a lout that no one wanted to be around. And, so, the very nice Korean woman who was my "chaperon" for the visit always seemed on the cusp of freaking out and yelling at me. We had started out as friends when she first started working at the paper, but she was a Christian and she took offense at my loutish behavior. I got in trouble all the time for my poor behavior towards the female staff. If I had acted the way I did in South Korea towards any woman I worked with in America, I would have been promptly fired — and for good reason.

For the first two years I was in South Korea, I pretty much hung out almost exclusively with Koreans. It was a lot of fun (for the most part) and I greatly broadened my cultural horizons. I can make Koreans laugh for some reason, so that helped me out of more than one scrape. But, then, I was drinking a lot back then so that may have had something to do with it. I'm virtually clean sober now, so they probably would think me pretty boring.

The reason why I got my job with the EduTimes was because I suck as a teacher of young Korean children. I'm horrible. I enjoy teaching children, but they can sense that I'm kind of awkward around them and when it came time for me to renew my contract with my English academy, they politely declined to do so. I had a Korean girlfriend at the time and what was to happen at that point was the subject of much debate between she and I. She and I had a....uh...weird relationship, to say the least and it was obvious at least to me that we were going to break up once I left the academy (we worked together.)

A headhunter contacted me about the EduTimes job, but it was so cool that I simply could not believe that I could get it. So, I kept it as something of a secret. Eventually, the job came through and there was a moment or two when I reflected on the state of my life. I decided to break up with my girlfriend and move to the apartment in Bangwha that the EduTimes had gotten for me. (It was full of roaches, and was 40 minutes away from where I wanted to be, but it was free so I was content.)

The first few months of working at the EduTimes were pretty great. I drank way too much, wrote a lot (virtually the entire newspaper) and generally had a blast. I had a boss, Mr. Kim, who was a character and we gradually became pretty good friends. He even went so far as to buy me ketchup for my rice. (I had gotten so sick of eating rice that I would only eat it drinking ketchup.



From my EduTime's shoot.

One of the cool things that I got to do as part of my involvement with the EduTimes was be a “model.” They weren’t happy with the results, but they were forced to use the pictures, anyway. And use them, they did. They used the pictures from the one photoshoot I did for them in repeated newspaper ad campaigns and there was, at one point, an ad at a subway stop with my life-size picture there to be seen. I wish I had taken a picture of myself with the picture just to prove that it was real, but I never got around to it.

The EduTimes worked me to death, though, in various ways. So much so, that they would let me take power naps at work. But it was pretty cool.

There was a downside to all the fun, though. I pretty much became a raging alcoholic. (I don’t drink at all, now, so I don’t know if I would fit the clinical definition of one. But I was abusing booze, let’s put it that way.) I called it being “pickled.” I just wasn’t thinking straight. I was growing into a huge asshole and it was starting to affect my relationships at work. It was because of this, that I lost the private teaching I had that I got through work and suddenly had a lot more free time on my hands. That would happen just as I came back from the Philippines, if I remember correctly.

But this was South Korea and I was funny and obviously didn’t mean any harm by what I was doing, so I got away with it.

The path that I was on was one that led to a little run down resort just outside of Manila. I remember it being really, really hot and just being in desperate need of a drink. I thought maybe I could find a store or something at the end of the path, but I got about mid-way and saw that I was out of luck. I was going to have to be a dry drunk during the course of this working vacation. So I turned around and made my way back to the resort.

Something I was thinking about a lot at this point was starting a magazine for expatriates in Seoul. I had long thought about doing something like that, but the pieces just wouldn’t fall together. But all that had changed sometime before I came to the Philippines. I remember being at a bar in Seoul’s Sinchon area that I will refer to as “Lee’s Retreat” for the purposes of this memoir. I was on a bar stool when it came to me like a bolt of lightening — “I’ll start a magazine!” The idea was definitely in the air in Seoul. The main magazine for expats in Seoul, KScene, was widely hated and people frequently talked about the need for a new magazine in Seoul.

I had a background in small town newspapers in Virginia and had worked as a freelancer at a really cool underground weekly in Richmond called Punchline. I had also worked at the Virginia Press Association for two years where I had hobnobbed with the editors and publishers from all over the state and beyond. So I had all the tools to start a magazine for expats at my disposal, it was just a matter of putting them together.

To say I would do everything differently in regards to the adventure I was about to begin is an understatement. In fact, if I had had any sense about me, I wouldn't have started the magazine in the first place. I definitely wouldn't have started it with Annie Shapiro. I would have found a Korean business partner and figured out what the market wanted and gone from there. As it was, I just wanted a magazine that I, myself wanted to read and I just happened to randomly find Annie to help me. I had no idea that people would come to invest so much in the idea of the magazine and that I would feel like its "father" with Annie Shapiro being its "mother." The magazine, while I was involved, was always an organic creature and there was a titanic struggle between myself and Tahl (Annie's best friend at the time) as to what the magazine's vision was supposed to be. She saw it as a hippy commune with no one in charge, while I saw it as my personal kingdom with Annie being the prime minister. In fact, I called her "Number 1" as a homage to Star Trek: The Next Generation. That difference in view as to what the heck the magazine was in the first place only added to my troubles and led me to drink even more.

So if anyone in Hollywood tried to tell the story of what _really_ happened with the magazine they would have to address the cold hard fact that I was something of an anti-Hero. I wasn't really very likable before it was all said and done. That's why Tahl tried to get rid of me in the attempted palace coup when Annie came back from the States — I was a big asshole. And one of the many things I regret about my behavior during the course of ROKon Magazine is the fact that I continued to be an asshole even when they spared me from being fired. But it was the pressure of running the magazine. I would have found someone who could have been my equal partner to help me run magazine instead of Annie, who just kind of used her magical people skills to get people to stuff for the magazine without actually doing any real work. Really, I should never have submitted to the attempted palace coup in the first place, but I was so devoted to Annie that if she wanted to have a debate about me continuing to be the magazine's publisher, then that was that.

After I had made the decision to start a magazine for Seoul, I had contacted a man named David Tz. David's a good guy and in this memoir I will go out of my way to put him in a good light. I empathize with him a great deal and I mean no harm by anything I may ultimately say about him. I had contacted David because he had been involved in a magazine in Incheon called Waygook Magazine that I had causally been involved with. I remember going to their staff meetings at a bar called Goose Goose and being full of energy and ideas. They were doing it all wrong and I felt like I could lead the way, given the chance. I rubbed everyone the wrong way, and generally made a nuisance out of myself.

It didn't matter, anyway, I got a new Korean girlfriend who was very controlling and wouldn't let me do anything without her.

But I kept David in mind and when I contacted David, it was obvious he had been thinking the same thing. He lived all the way out in Incheon, while I lived in Seoul, so it was difficult for us to meet up. I sent him some articles to look at and he was shocked at how bad the spelling and

punctuation was. And, in general, it was obvious that things weren't working out between us and pretty much we dropped the matter of working together.

I was still interested in starting a magazine, though, so I started to post a general call for writers on various blogs that covered Seoul. And it was because of this that I first got in touch with Annie Shapiro. She was a writer for KScene and seemed really interested in doing something with me. So I had that to look forward to when I returned from the Philippines.

One fun aspect of my time at the resort was I got really close with the resort staff. They were a lot of fun and I flirted with the girls and hung out with the guys. They liked me so much that one of them even suggested that I hop on the back of his bike and go to Manila for a night of adventure. Not only was I flat broke at this point, however, but I knew if I got caught I would get fired. So I politely declined.

The highlight of the trip — the thing that kind of changed my life — was a trip to Lake Taal that I almost didn't take. I was so broke — and my "chaperon" disliked me so — that I thought I couldn't do it. And, weirdly enough, I visited Lake Taal one year to the day from the last time I tried to visit it with my Korean girlfriend. It had been raining, so we couldn't do it. We rode donkeys up the mountain to reach Lake Taal.

I rarely use the word "verdant," but that's what I saw when we rode up the mountain. It was a clear day and generally spectacular to see. We reach the top of the volcano that is the home of Lake Taal and I looked around, reflecting on life. What I saw changed my life. If something like this existed in this world, then life was worth living. In the coming days, I would be tested in ways I never thought possible. I would later come to think of the whole experience as The Battle of The Old Free State. That's what I called the failed attempt at a novel that I wrote, as well as the screenplay that I attempted to write.

Regardless, things were changing in my life.

When I came back to Seoul, my entire life would change within a matter of days.

When I got back to Seoul, not only did I start DJing at Nori, but I started ROKon Magazine with Annie Shapiro and secretly moved out of my apartment in Banghwa into an apartment in Sinchon that I rented out from, a man I call "Cabell Lee." In hindsight that was a huge dumb idea, but I was kind of desperate. It tore me up inside "betraying" my bosses at the EduTimes — they were like family to me and I hated doing it — but the time had come to make a change in my life and so I went for it. I think Cabell Lee (not his real name) had attempted to implant the idea of renting the apartment from him by getting me to move a big screen TV out of it one day and moving it to Lee's Retreat (not the bar's real name.) But I don't know. Maybe I'm being paranoid.

Now, had all of this happened in America, my employer would have quickly put the kibosh on me not only working as a DJ, but essentially starting a side business with my free time. As it was, I kept the DJ gig a secret for as long as I could. I would come to work on Friday with my backpack that had my CDs in it, and Mr. Kim was like, “What’s that for?” I never told him, I don’t think. But eventually I told them and I think they came to Nori Bar on occasion. When it came to ROKon Magazine, I tried to get them to place an ad in it, but they never would. At least not for any money. I think they may have put a free ad in it. It’s been so long ago, that I can’t remember.

Dark Matters In Sinchon.

I pushed the door open to the bar I’ll call “Lee’s Retreat” to “Cabell Lee” playing strip poker with two Russian women. I was drunk, it was I think a Thursday night and I was ready to party. I was a regular at Lee’s Retreat. Lee’s Retreat was located in Seoul’s Sinchon district. I was a regular at nearby Nori Bar and so it was natural for me to come to a expat bar like Lee’s Retreat.

Sinchon is kind of the little brother to the larger, more exciting Hongdae district that was nearby. At this point in my time in Seoul, I hadn’t even really ever gone to Hongdae. Sinchon is a noisy, colorful place near Yonsi University. As things progressed, I would come to really love Sinchon and pretty much spent all my free time there, even though I lived all the way out in Bangwha, which is near Gimpo Airport. It took me 40 minutes to get into the center of Seoul on the subway, to give you some sense of how far out it was. I only lived in Bangwha because I had a free apartment provided by the EduTimes.

I really loved Lee’s Retreat at this point in my time in Korea and was really close to Cabell and the establishment’s bartender who I will call Spike. Spike is a great guy and we frequently talked shit to each other. He was known to make fun of me brutally. He once spent way too much time talking about how one particular shirt made me look “gay” and he memorably dropped a beer on my head. He was from Australia and was something of a ladies man. For much of the events of the magazine he was dating a beautiful Korean girl. He also, it must be noted, gave me the name “ROKon” for the magazine. I don’t remember exactly when this happened, but it was sometime before I went on my Southeast Asian trip, I think.

Cabell Lee was a Canadian fellow who I kind of looked up to at this point in the tale. I didn’t know much about him, but I turned to him for advice a lot and he was kind to me so I confided in him a lot of stuff that was going on in my life. Cabell was a little older than me, I think. I was in my mid-30s, while he was in his late 30s. So, I saw him as something of an older brother, if you will. Cabell Lee was — and still is — something of mystery to me.

He once mentioned that he had gone to North Korea for this or that thing and he looked at me, expecting a response. I didn’t feel like giving him the pleasure, however, and ignored him. Cabell was a “business consultant,” whatever that means. And as this tale progressed, I would

discover that in his 12 years in South Korea, he had made a wide-range of connections in the Seoul expat community.

I had a very complex relationship with Cabell Lee. I respect his ability to hurt me. But I admire his abilities.

Now, I am going to try to tread lightly on a very significant piece of information. Even though this was a long time ago, I am simply not prepared to go into detail about what happens at this point. Let me stress going into this part of the story that I did not do anything so bad that I should be in jail. In America, I probably would have gotten in serious trouble, but it is debatable as to if I would have seen the inside of a jail cell for my deeds. So, even though I won't tell you exactly what happened, take that into consideration before you begin to speculate.

But I did do something bad. I take responsibility for what I did, but it was all a long time ago and the statute of limitations have probably run out. So, it wasn't what you probably think it was. I remember that about this time, there was a Korean woman floating around Lee's Retreat that I got the sense that Cabell Lee didn't really like that much. She was an attractive woman, but he found her annoying. And this night, I remember her nearby, kind of listening in to what happened. I was so drunk, though, that I don't remember exactly some of the details that I might otherwise remember. And, for context, let me observe that drunk women frequently would stay the night in Cabell Lee's spare bedroom.

So, Cabell Lee was playing strip poker with two Russian women named Tayna and Albina who worked at a bar called Las Vegas. It must have just opened because I had never seen them before. They were attractive women and I took an instant liking to them. I am kind of short and they were really tall, but life as an expat in Seoul being what it is, I believed I had a shot with one of them. And, as things progressed, I had a little mutual appreciation society going on with Albina. To give you some context about these two women, let me note that we would eventually learn that they were models. And for some weird reason they got painted a lot. A whole lot. I would see pictures of them with make up on and they really did look like models. It's just they were, like, undercover as bartenders.

Because of how drunk I was at this point, I don't really remember what specifically happened. I just remember joining the strip poker game and promptly losing my pants. I remember going to Lee's Retreat's bathroom with my pants down at my feet. I shuffled into the nearby bathroom while Cabell Lee looked on with amusement.

It grew late and instead of doing the logical thing, which would have been to go home and go to sleep because I had to work the next day, we all decided to go to Seoul's Itaewon district. Itaewon at this point was kind of like New York City in the 70s, at least relative to the rest of South Korea. It was sleazy and home to Seoul's Hooker Hill. Now, it is my understanding that the place has been gentrified and is considered quite "cool."

It was so late and the four of us were having so much fun, that we decided to go to Itaewon. We went to Itaewon in the wee hours of the morning and danced the night away. Or, at least, we tried to. I don't remember exactly which club we went to — I think it was Spy, but I can't remember.

The night finally came to a close and it was time for us to part. Since I lived all the way out in Bangwha and the time for me to go to work was fast approaching, I made a decision that would haunt me to this day. I asked Cabell if I could take a shower at this apartment. He said yes and before I knew it I was there. I was so completely wasted at this point that I barely remember what happened.

But let's just say something bad happened. Something really bad. I won't get into details, but the incident left me in shock. I felt that Cabell Lee had manipulated me into doing something that I would regret the rest of my life.

After the incident happened, I rushed out of his apartment and headed to work. I remember coming to work so early that the cleaning lady was there. She looked at me in shock. I put my head down on my desk and moaned. In my attempt to fictionalize this story — specifically the novel I tried to write — it was at this point that I felt the story of ROKon Magazine really began.

A Girl Named Annie

I left the subway stop and headed down the tree-lined sidewalk that lead to a bar called the Orange Tree where a woman named Annie Shapiro wanted to meet. To my left was the huge American military base called Yongsan Military Base. I passed a gate to the base and continued up a little side street line to the left with dark brown kimchi pots. It was growing dark and I could see the sign for the Orange Tree just up the slight hill. I got to the Orange Tree, opened the door, went up the stairs, opened another door and met my fate.

This building would soon enough be the center of what was going on with ROKon Magazine. As an aside, let me note that how to write the magazine's name would eventually become a bone of contention between Annie and me. I think of it this way — on the magazine's cover, it's ROKON, while every other instance it's ROKon Magazine. Annie, on the other hand, always writes it ROKON.

Besides the Orange Tree on the second floor, there was Indigo restaurant on the first. I would become a regular at both establishments, for better or worse, and as things progressed I did some, uh, wild things that I regret. A whole lot. I won't go into specifics, but, needless to say, I wasn't exactly acting on my best behavior.

I eventually found my favorite "seat" in Indigo that afforded me not only having my back to the wall, but a clear sight of the two major outlets in the restaurant. I could see the main entrance as well as the back patio that was open and let you see people walking around in the back of the

building. You could get a heads up if someone was going to probably come into the main entrance of Indigo. It gave you enough time to prepare for their arrival, if nothing else.

And I would become really close with the guy who owned both the Orange Tree and Indigo. We called him Orange Tree Steve and he was something of a father figure to me. He gave me lots of advice as to how to run the magazine and we would occasionally use his truck to drop off copies of the magazine. That was a whole different era in my life. I couldn't get anyone to help me open a paper bag now.

Annie was about 24 at this point, if I remember correctly. She had short brown hair and was sitting at the bar. She turned and smiled broadly. Annie was attractive, best described as "cute" rather than "beautiful." I was so wrapped up in my own mind, thinking about the magazine that I didn't even really notice all of this at the time. We soon enough got down to business.

I handed her the content that I had half-assed assembled for the first issue of the magazine and asked her if she thought we could come out in two weeks time. That would mean this meeting took place in early July 2006. While this is all a long time ago and I can't remember the specifics, that would make sense because I got paid on the 15th.

She said yes, and off we went. All of this was a long, long time ago, so I don't really remember the specifics of what happened, but we hit it off pretty quick. She worked at the Korea Times as copy editor and had access to layout software. I remember her complaining that the Korea Times was reluctant to give her a work visa because she refused to work Sundays.

Annie was from Boulder and it was immediately obvious that she was something of a hippy. She was also a vegetarian who was very much into Buddhism, Star Trek, Star Wars and meditation. She also was into Radiohead. I'm a huge Radiohead fan myself and that was part of the bonding process that helped us become friends. She told me that she'd at one point traveled cross-country to see Radiohead. I don't know the context of that story, but she claimed it to have happened. Her favorite Radiohead song was Street Spirit, but she was also big into the Velvet Underground.

She had gone to a great school — Bard in upstate New York — and had even had a class with Woody Allen's son. She told me about a boyfriend she'd had at the time who was in a band called Bunny Brains, if I remember correctly. This was back during the MySpace age, so eventually I would get to know a bit more about him than maybe I should have.

Things moved pretty quickly. We got into a groove where we pretty much spent all day talking to each other on GTalk. Like any new relationship, there was a rush of excitement in these first few days. It was magical.

Along the way, I don't remember exactly how, I met Annie's best friend at the time, Tahl. Tahl was a Canadian woman who was a little bit older than Annie. The two women had met on the bus and occasionally would occasionally say Annie's last name in a very funny faux

Jewish-mother way, “Sha-pi-roooooow.” Tahl and I are a lot alike and so as things progressed, conflict grew between us. There was a power struggle between my vision of the magazine and her vision, and because she was so close to Annie, she often got her way.

One day soon after Annie and I met, we were going somewhere to that required us to cross under the main street near HBC, as Haebangchon was also known. About a third of the way through the tunnel, Annie grabbed my waist. I jumped, not expecting it. That is the moment, in my mind at least, when the die was cast. Annie was about to totally change my life in ways I could not possibly fathom.

So Annie and I started dating.

I was dumb and asked her to actually be my girlfriend. I only did this because I had been dating Korean girls up to this point and some of the Korean formality in regards to such things had rubbed off on me. I was a significantly different person back then. Now, I wouldn't even begin to think of actually formally asking Annie to be my girlfriend when we first started dating. But, whatever. You live and you learn.

I pretty much instantly fell in love with Annie from the moment we started dating. Our formal status as boyfriend and girlfriend lasted for about a week. I remember hanging out at her really small, really dirty, really hot apartment with Annie, Tahl and a woman who had been in a month long temple stay. The last woman acted like she'd been in the Altered States isolation chamber. I remember a passing mention of college “cuddle parties,” which I found kind of annoying. It was at this point that it started to become obvious that Tahl and I were bound to have some friction. I remember that it was about this point in the story that the first instance of what I call the “eye thing” occurred between the two women. Annie and Tahl had a special way of conveying displeasure with me — which happened frequently. They were close enough friends that they knew what the other was thinking.



The first issue of ROKon Magazine.

At this point, I had mapped out my future — Annie and I would start the magazine, get married, have kids and live happily ever after. I came from a tradition in America where I worked for a lot of family-run newspapers and that made sense to me. I remember little things that Annie did that caused me to fall in love with her in a deeply profound way.

She had this cute way of multi-tasking at a computer that I found adorable. She had a cute little thingy animal on her cellphone. She had a wonderful funky smell about her that I couldn't resist. And she had agreed to go to Seoul's Insadong area to buy Christmas presents in the middle of the summer. When she did that, something in my heart clicked — I was in love. So, for about a week, I thought she would love me back and everything would work out. It soon started to grow apparent that I was deluding myself, however.

We went to a Buddhist temple and I hated it. She was totally in the moment and I was just miserable. I couldn't wait to get it over with. I don't remember the exact sequence of events, but I remember hopping up the three flights of stairs that led to her apartment in HBC with its large open patio and finding her hanging out with Tahl. I was so smitten with Annie at this point that I tried to steal a kiss from her and got caught by Tahl who was obviously unhappy with this. It was about this time that we would frequently meet in Insadong because it was near the Korea Times where she worked. We met at the two stone statues with the "BIG EYES" as she said at the time in a email message. I found something about that cute and endearing.

It was either this time or another day when I kissed Annie passionately in greeting and she looked at Tahl and Tahl looked at her and my heart sank. In my gut I knew it was over. She didn't have to say anything — she didn't want to be my girlfriend. So I just left. I left her apartment and didn't talk to her for a few days. Eventually I put a brave face on things.

Annie said something like, "I didn't want to tell you because I was afraid you would stop the magazine."

I mumbled something about it being ok and tried to pretend everything was cool between us. The sequence of events now grows fuzzy. I met a guy named Warner at this point, I think. Warner was a Korean American who had spent some time in the American military. He rode a motorcycle, wore attire similar to that of Buddhist monk and was a little older than me. In other words, he was pretty much exactly what Annie was looking for at that point in her life. It was in these early days that Annie tried I feel she tried to manipulate me into moving to Haebangchon. Had I moved Haebangchon when shed tried to manipulate into doing it, then the story of the magazine probably would have been a lot different. I had just met Annie and she went out of her way to pay her rent with me in her presence. In hindsight, I think she was trying to see if she could subtly influence me into deciding to move Haebangchon. I would, eventually, do so, but long after it didn't matter anymore. If I had moved then, I would have better understood the dynamic in Haebangchon and probably become a fixture of the community's insular worldview and been more attune to how to deal with the kooks that were floating around. Maybe, just, maybe, I would have not done the self-destructive things I did and the magazine would have taken a different course.

But I didn't move to Haebangchon when I should have.

So, I was always coming from Sinchon, and later Hongdae, and walking into the neighborhood as an outsider. I always wanted to start a rock band walk up the slight hill into Haebangchon, dressed as a bunch of thugs and smoking cigars. That would have been really cool. That is probably never going to ever happen and so I have to accept that is just a little dream to think about when I feel sad.

I don't know what Haebangchon is like now. Given the changes to the E2 visa regulations a few years ago, a lot of expat weirdos have left Haebangchon. Or, put another way, the last time I was there, it was really boring. Nothing wacky happened to me and I just found the noise down on the street below me really annoying. I just wanted to go to sleep.

Weirdly enough, I would one day live in one of the apartments above the Orange Tree for about a month. It was pretty cool being able to just walk down a flight of stairs and get drunk at the Orange Tree. I was flat broke during this period of time in my life, so I didn't get to enjoy it nearly as much as I could have in a different era. But it's a fun little memory, if nothing else.

Looking back upon it all, I can see some imagined similarities between Haebangchon and the Hollywood community. Both have a lot of colorful characters and there is a lot of politics that you have to deal with. Whenever kooky, creative characters are in proximity to each other, weird things are going to happen.

And, I don't know about Hollywood, but some seriously strange things happened in Haebangchon.

People would take off all their clothes and accost people. There were some...unexpected couplings...and if you want to get some sense of what I'm talking about, you should probably read the extended outline I wrote for a screenplay about ROKon Magazine. But I was something of an outsider because of where I lived and I would tell people at the time, "I feel like I'm in Hollywood, with all these creative people doing interesting things."

It was about this time that Annie took me to the park in Seoul's Hongdae area. It was the hottest day of the year, it felt like, and there was a large crowd of expats hanging out. I think it may have been at this point that I met the colorful group of people who would make such a difference in my life as things progressed — Chen Lie, Ripley, Amber Roo and Dave Hat. I was in awe. They were so cool.

And soon enough the first issue of the magazine was set to come out. There was a little bit of a panic when we realized we didn't have a front cover. I came up with something I had done in front of my apartment building one evening, but Annie hated it. This was before I moved to Sinchon, so I remember making the cover in front of my apartment in Bangwha. One day I came into her apartment and she was eating cereal, looking at the cover I had come up with and she looked at me in a strange way. It was one of those rare instances of emotional intimacy that we shared.

Annie, Tahl and me went to the Kinko's near my office in the middle of Seoul and tried to figure out how to lay the magazine out. I had picked 16 pages because that was the number of pages that the most recent issue of KScene had had in it and it took us a little while to figure out how to put the pieces of paper on the legal size paper that we were folding to make the magazine. I made a mistake at this point, when I allowed Tahl to contribute some money to the magazine's first issue. I invested \$100, Annie chipped in \$100 and Tahl put in what I remember as being about \$35. If I had had any sense about me at the time, I would have declined the money. But I was desperate just to produce something, and so it happened the way it happened.

The magazine came out and I can still remember holding the still-warm copies in my hand and looking at it with joy.

And it was all a lot of fun. I can still remember seeing Annie and Tahl coloring the front cover of the first issue and drinking a beer, impressed with their passion. I had a hunch something pretty cool was about to happen. Dumb me hadn't actually looked at any of what Annie had managed

to assemble in the way of content, so in the next few days I got some surprises. Tahl contributed a nasty article about an American she'd met that she didn't like, there was fuzzy nudity about something Chen Lie had cooked up and I honestly don't remember going through and reading the thing cover-to-cover. It was a strategic mistake that I would never make today. Today, as publisher, I would look through all the content before I signed off on paying for it. But I was dumb and in love with Annie and I just wanted a magazine that might make me friends. That's pretty much what happened.

The magazine was very much more a zine than a magazine at this point. It was a photocopied piece of crap and the layout was horrible. But it existed. And because I hadn't actually read any of the content of the magazine, things popped up that surprised me. Take, for instance, Pedro's column, Ask Pedro.

Pedro was ROKon Magazine's sex columnist. I told Annie that we needed a sex columnist. And I told her that typically a great sex columnist was either gay, a woman or both. So, we got Pedro. Pedro as I remember him, was extremely smart. He could pick up new languages like crazy, and if I remember correctly he pretty much taught himself Korean as a lark. What makes this little situation funny is in the first "Ask Pedro" column, Annie asked Pedro about something very personal that got me upset. As usual, I hadn't looked at the magazine before it was published, so I didn't know what to expect. This was during the brief heartbeat when Annie and I dated and so she knew some information about me that I'd prefer not to be disclosed in a magazine. While she asked the question anonymously, because it was our first issue and there was, like, only two questions — one from me and one from Annie — it was easy to figure out what was going on.

Anyway, from the beginning, the basic issue of distribution — the lifeblood of the magazine — was a very slipshod affair. We spent all this energy producing the zine that later became a magazine, but no one other than me really wanted to physically do the hard work of distributing it around town. It was kind of ironic. But as publisher, I enjoyed handing the magazine out to people with a smile on my face and it was great fun. One of my fondest memories of my time in Seoul was seeing an entire room of people looking through ROKon Magazine over their brunch. My love of handing out the magazine to strangers caused any number of incidences of the famous "eye thing" between Annie and Tahl. They hated it when ever I would hand the magazine out to strangers in front of them, thinking it very gauche. But it was fun to do, and another pleasant experience was when I was walking around Itaewon with a backpack full of magazines and I handed it to someone and they said, "Wow! ROKon Magazine! I'm so excited!"

But, really, I was the only one distributing the magazine for the most part and I just randomly distributed the magazine because I had something of a circuit that I did that made it easy for me to distribute. I lived in Sinchon (and later Hongdae) but hung out a lot in Haebangchon and Itaewon, so it was easy for me to distribute magazines. And I quickly learned that distributing magazines was a great way to get a sense of how ready people were to advertising in the magazine. I also learned that if you pissed people off — like the time we pissed off the entire

gay community in Seoul's expat community with an article about how Iranian people weren't gay, just, well, Iranian, I was able to sooth things by talking to the gay proprietor of a hip club in Itaewon called B:1. He also owned a gay bar on Itaewon's "Homo Hill" which was quite popular.

Anyway, it was while distributing the magazine that I was able to not only chat him up about maybe advertising, but also explain to him that we didn't mean to offend him. That it was a goof. Which it was — even though I was the publisher, I rarely read what was in the magazine before it was published. What can I say, I was busy doing the hard work of getting the magazine out the door and I relied upon Annie as editor to do that. But she never did do that.

ROKon Magazine, Nori Bar & Talking Crap



The front entrance to Nori in Seoul.

I got the job DJing at Nori Bar through a combination of dumb luck and persistence.

At some point around the same time that I co-founded ROKon Magazine with Annie, I had noticed that Nori Bar — my favorite bar in all of South Korea — lacked an expat DJ on Friday nights and the place was not as popular. The guy who had been the Friday night DJ, Daniel, had gone back to Canada to be an air conditioning repair man. I had a talk with the owner of the bar — who I never really got along with, sad to say — and I impressed him enough that he told me to come back a few days later for an “interview” of sorts.

Nori Bar is a unique place, to say the least. It, really, is a character unto itself. It has cool graffiti on its walls and at the time all of this was happening, a kooky cast of regulars who could populate a novel or movie if you had the talent. While generally I wouldn't want to join any club that would have me, there was a little clique associated with the bar that I longed to be a part of. Once I became a DJ at Nori, I would play the B-52's song "The Deadbeat Club" whenever they walked in, in their honor. The Deadbeat Club consisted of a group of people who had known each other a long time. A few of them had lived in a youth hostel in the Las Vegas area. One of the regulars, in fact, was nicknamed Matt Vegas in honor of that event. He was a very unique character and I fear nothing I write here will do him justice. He claimed that his nickname among the whores in Bangkok was "Mr. Boom Boom." And he talked constantly — constantly — of the women he'd bedded. But he was an honorable fellow.

The person who I was most in awe of was Ben, the Saturday night DJ of Nori Bar. He was a really cool cat and had a Korean girlfriend who was really cool, too. I frequently compared them to John and Yoko; they were so cool. Ben is a pretty droll fellow and nothing seems to phase him. He was the first expat "star" I knew of. I first ran into him when I was still living in Incheon. Nori Bar was the coolest place I had ever been to. I was banned from going for a while because my Korean girlfriend hated the place. But once their relationship ended, I quickly became a regular to the bar. I would hang out at Lee's Retreat and then go to Nori Bar where I would stay all night long because the subway ended and I usually didn't have the \$15 to get me back to my apartment. One sweet little thing that the couple did was he would play "All Through The Night" at her request. Occasionally, she would request "Ben" in his honor as well.

The last person in this little clique — who would change my life greatly before this saga was over with — was April. She was the manager of Nori Bar about the time I started DJing. She left soon after, however, to start her own bar with her boyfriend, Mike. It was going to be called Mike's Cabin.



Me working at Nori Bar in Seoul

I had my “interview” for Nori Bar DJing gig one dead night in the middle of the week when no one was there. I was determined to get the job. I took it all very seriously. The fellow who was showing me the ropes thought I was acting really weird, but I did my thing for maybe an hour and when it ended, I thought I hadn’t gotten the gig. I was distraught. I left the bar, nearly in tears and got on the subway back to Bangwha.

And then my life changed.

I got a phone call from the bar, saying they wanted me to come back — the owner wanted to meet me, because I’d gotten the gig!

For some weird reason, I agreed to DJ not only on Friday nights, but Wednesday nights as well. I started the next Friday night and I felt it was a disaster. People just got up and left when I played the wrong type of song and by the end of the night I was distraught. But, a weird thing happened. When the night was over, the little clique that I had so longed to join opened up and let me in. We all went to a restaurant really early in the morning — I DJed from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. on Fridays — and talked about the night’s events. It was magical. I, for once, felt I was part of a group that accepted me.

A problem quickly popped up from all of this, however. I lived in Bangwha and I was so broke all the time that I had to ask the bar to give me some money to get home at end of the night on Wednesdays. So, I started seriously thinking about doing what before would have been the unthinkable — I would “betray” the trust of my family at the EduTimes and get an apartment somewhere closer to Nori.

I knew just in general that Cabell Lee had a spare apartment, and despite my growing distrust of him, I looked at my options and decided that I would risk it and rent an apartment from him. It was very small, had no bed and it caused a man I didn’t like to be my landlord, but its location was strategic enough that I rented it despite myself.

About this time I first got my first real interaction with Talking Crap. As I have repeatedly written, if you were to make a movie about ROKon Magazine’s story, then you would need to use Talking Crap in some way. They really were that funny. I can remember DJing on a Wednesday night when Talking Crap and Annie popped in through the door and I was like, “Wow! Annie has such cool friends!”

The little group that made up Talking Crap — Chen Lie, Amber Roo and Dave Hat — really were one of the highlights of my time in Korea and I regret that I didn’t manage to be a better friend to them. They made these delightful little 30 second videos that left me in stitches whenever I saw any of them. Now, one aspect of Talk Crap was those guys could drink like nobody’s business and whenever I hung out with them I felt like I was running with the big dogs.

I really enjoyed those few times they let me into their little comic world, and I even went so far as to suggest I be their “producer” and put their show on the road around Korea. They really were that funny. We would eventually hang out, but I quickly grew smitten with Amber Roo and that caused problems with Dave Hat who liked her. He had a special relationship with her and I should have respected that. But I wasn’t thinking clearly during much of all of this period in my life, so such misunderstandings were bound to happen.

Chen Lie is a very very very very special, unique woman. In my eyes, she is a star, and I write about her and the rest of the expats of the ROKon Magazine era the way you might talk about movie stars. One of my bigger regrets of the ROKon Magazine experience is I did not establish a better relationship with her from the get-go. I did not appreciate what a mover-and-shaker she was in the Seoul expat community at the beginning of the magazine. Had I not been such a drunk asshole most of the time, I probably would have understood that sooner and been able to harness her unique abilities instead of being at logger heads with her most of the time.

I really like Chen and wish her the best. She is one of the larger-than-life characters who make the ROKon Magazine story what it is and she is so unique that I couldn’t figure out a way to describe her in the rough draft of the novel I wrote, so I kind of combined her with Tahl. If you were a better writer than me, what you would do is talk to her and get her perspective on things. Chen Lie was kind of the ringleader of Talking Crap. Chen was into goth and wore black all the time and lots of jewelry and was just really unique. I called her a “magic factory” at the time because she was always doing cool stuff. I had a few run-ins with her over stupid stuff at the beginning of the magazine. If I had had any sense of how things were going to develop, I would have treated her with much more respect.

Amber Roo, like Chen, was Australian. She came from Perth and the origins of her friendship with Chen was somewhat nebulous. In fact, everything to do with Talking Crap was kind of mysterious. For a brief moment, I was kind of close to them and I can remember getting a phone call from Amber that felt like was licking my ear she was getting so much detail from the conversation. It was a very odd sensation. Amber is so special that in the rough draft of a novel I wrote, I couldn’t think of how to explain how special she is.

She’s the type of woman you just have to meet to experience and enjoy. She is a lovely woman and I have a huge soft spot for her and something of a crush to this day.

The chief thing about Amber that you have to remember is she’s cool. She’s also very sensitive and that’s why I have been reluctant to talk about her, even though she played an important part in the ROKon Magazine story. Amber was a regular contributor to ROKon Magazine and she is a great writer. She’s so good that probably SHE should write a novel about ROKon Magazine, not me. She has a great voice in her writing which as I as I recall reminded me of what I imagined Dorothy Parker would be like. She’s got such wit and grace that she’s easy to fall in love with.

Dave Hat was a great guy who is really cool and I wish him the best, where ever he may be. He always wore a hat — hence his name — and a black trench coat. He was from Canada and was extremely witty. Dave Hat and I are a lot alike in some ways, although I believe at this point he'd probably say that was just a part of my obvious huge delusion. But I really like Dave Hat and wish him only the best. He was the third member of Talking Crap and he is very, very funny.

Put him together with Chen Lie and Amber in a room and just sit back and watch. They have a very unique humor that is good enough that it should be on TV. I had to cut Talking Crap out of the rough draft of the novel I wrote simply because I'm not funny enough to properly convey what those guys said on a regular basis. Dave Hat is really cool and unique and yet another one of those lager-than-life characters that makes the ROKon Magazine story so ripe for either a novel or a movie. You would need a young actor with really good comic timing to play Dave Hat.

In August, things were working pretty well for the magazine. I made a lot of fundamental managerial mistakes out of cluelessness, but I didn't know what I was doing. I was just enjoying being a DJ at my favorite bar and running the magazine with Annie. I should have established more authority over the staff of the magazine at this point, but whenever I did try to do that I only succeeded in pissing people off. This is when it started to develop that I had all of the responsibility and none of the power when it came to getting stuff done with the magazine. Whenever I suggested things, typically people do them, but Tahl was always around. She was always demanding things — especially from me.

At some point, Annie lost her job with the Korea Times. I was talking with her on GTalk when she suddenly stopped typing. She then wrote, "Hold on, I think I'm getting fired." I don't remember when that happened, but it was sometime in early first days of the magazine. Before it was all over with, Annie would magically get a job at a university as an English teacher.

If I remember correctly, I would meet someone very important at this juncture in the magazine's history who would greatly influence things down the road. Her name was Kari.

She would act as a Greek chorus to the events of ROKon Magazine as it progressed. If I remember correctly, I first met Kari in Sinchon one day coming out of the alleyway that led to my apartment. We nearly ran into each other. She said she had lost her beret at Nori the night before. We spent the entire day together and it was pretty wonderful. We never dated in any formal sense — I was too big a screw up and was obsessed with Annie for that to happen — but Kari really was the person who saved my life at least once during the course of what I consider the magazine's whole story. The story I would tell if someone approached me to write an official memoir of what happened with the magazine. And I'm not being figurative — she saved my life. She saved my life the same way that "Cabell Lee" saved my life. I owe both of them a debt of thanks that will last for the rest of my life.

In the novel version of this story that I attempted to write, I made up a character who wore all red named Phoenix. I just liked the idea of a character who wore red. And I needed a "sidekick"

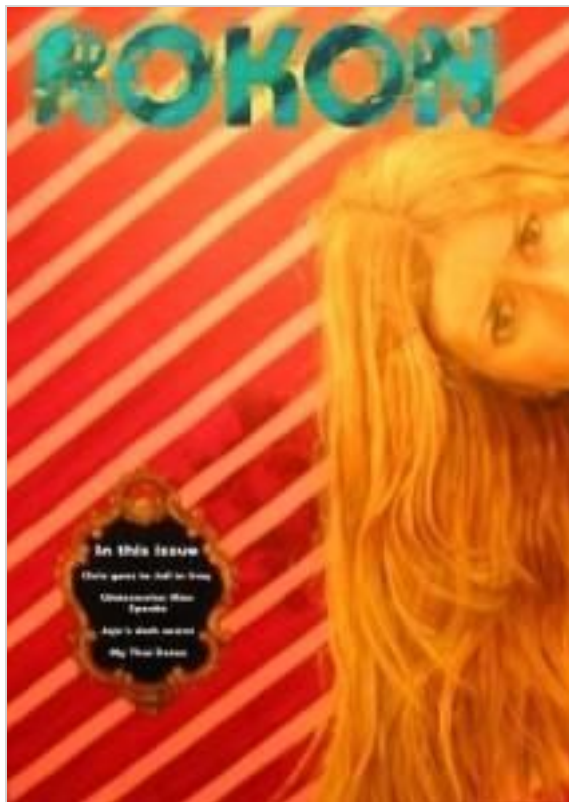
of sorts for my anti-Hero. It didn't go very well. I just am not a good enough fiction writer — or maybe I'm too close to the story being told — to be able to give the Kari angle of this story the nuanced retelling that it deserves. Kari is a beautiful woman and I love her. All things being equal, if I was just a little bit different man, we would have gotten married in Seoul and I'd be living there now with her and a kid. But that honor — and it is a honor — has gone to another man who is a great guy and I wish them the best.

But as I said, during the course of the ROKon Magazine saga, Kari was kind of the person who looked upon it all and observed. She was there at crucial junctures and made a few important observations that helped me make decisions.

At this point in the magazine's development I was funding it out of my pocket. So, we came out around the 15th of the month. I don't remember the exact sequence of events, but I think the magazine came out in mid-July, I got the gig at Nori at just about that same time and moved soon afterwards. So late July, early August 2006 was a very dramatic time in my life. Everything was changing and I was experiencing all these wild things for the first time. I was probably the happiest of my time in South Korea at this point.

I really miss this period in my life. I think about it way too much.

The Beach Party & The End Of The First Act



The second issue of ROKon Magazine, when things were going really well with me and Annie.

From the beginning of the magazine until the Anmyeondo Beach Party on Sept. 30, 2006, my life was pretty idyllic. I had a great second job DJing at my favorite bar, I was having fun being the publisher of a cool underground zine and generally things were working pretty well. I was living rather delusional life, but I was happy. I don't really remember the details of this period of extended bliss, so I don't really have a lot to say about it.

It was about this time that I first got to know Roar Sheppard. He ran a meditation facility in the Insadong area of Seoul that Annie frequented and he seemed a nice enough guy. While I didn't really understand what exactly was going on with his facility, it was relaxing and gave me an excuse to be with Annie. Tahl would frequently tag along as well and sometimes even Warner would pop up.

People really seemed to enjoy the magazine and I freely gave of my time, energy and money for the cause.

It was about the time of the beach party, however, that things began to change. Things began to grow darker. With the magazine's increase popularity, people began to expect things. They saw themselves as stakeholders who could tell me what to do. This began to get to me, to say the least. I felt like I was doing all the work and had no power. This, of course, was all my fault, but I was dumb and naive. Now that I have this experience under my belt, I would do things dramatically different should I ever be given the chance.

I must note at this point that I generally did not read ROKon Magazine. It is one of the great ironies of this tale that I didn't read the actual publication that would so dramatically change my life. I just couldn't bring myself to read it and see all the errors that were in it that I couldn't change. I was growing to lean on Annie to be something of an "editor" for the magazine at this point and so that gave me an excuse not to really do the hard work of looking over the magazine's content before publication. I would never do that now, but that's life.

So, I really have no excuse when it comes to the beach party being an issue. If I had simply read the damn magazine, I would have known when it was going to be and I would have been able to make an informed decision as to if I wanted to participate or not. I think I remember I had some sense that it was going to happen and I felt that with all my hard work for the magazine, the expat community would go out of its way to make sure I went.

Sadly, that is not at all what happened.

They all pretty much snuck out of town. Everyone — including Annie — just took off and left me in the dust.

The beach party was done by a woman named Mary. She did it to honor her boyfriend who had died suddenly and tragically.

I heard so-so reviews of the actual party itself, but everyone I had come to know through the magazine was there and I kind of felt left out. I heard later in an off-handed remark on Annie's part that she had had a "psychedelic" experience of some sort at the party, apparently with David Tz. Don't know the details of that, but something about it bothers me to this day. I guess I think I missed out on something cool that Annie experience that I could have been there for if I had been "invited." The beach party was the moment when reality sank in. It was when I could have ended the magazine out of spite and that would have been that. But I didn't and that was an sign that the magazine was beginning to grow in importance in my life.

What I should have done was better understood that the magazine was now larger than me. If I had better understood that, then things would have worked out much better. But I didn't. I continued to see the magazine as my personal fiefdom and that, in the long run, would be my downfall.

The magazine — at least while I was involved — was never an actual organization in any legal sense. We couldn't accept money without violating our work visas and I couldn't legally own the magazine even if we did incorporate, so for the duration of my involvement that was a huge issue. I liked and trusted Annie's kinda-sorta-boyfriend at the time, Warner and he was a double citizen so we kinda sorta pinned our hopes on him doing something as the publisher. In hindsight, of course, he wasn't all that interested in being the publisher, but was sure as hell interested in spending as much time with Annie. I don't hold it against him, but that's pretty much what was going on. I was so obsessed with just getting the magazine out the door every month that I the strategic issue of, like, who would be the legal publisher kind of got away from me.

As things progressed, the magazine became something of a cult-club. I was its leader, but because Annie's friends made up most of the staff, their allegiance was to her, not me. Or let's put it this way — there were Her Friends and My Friends. That would become significant later when things went haywire. But in the early days of the magazine Annie's ability to get people to do things was pretty magical and a lot of things broke our way because she had the connections and the networking skill. The core group of people connected to the magazine were very passionate about it and that sense of being the leader of a "family" that produced a product that came out once a month was the single most addictive thing I've ever experience. So, as September became October, there were dark clouds brewing over the horizon of the magazine. Things were changing in ways that I could never have imagined.

Somehow — Thick Paper, Venus & An 80s Prom



My favorite cover of ROKon Magazine with Venus.

I can still remember when I met Venus. She was wearing a pink or purple wig and she was acting like a giggly, giddy school girl with her friend Anna. I took a liking to her right away, but this must have been early October 2006, so my mind was very much on Annie Shapiro and the magazine. Venus is special to me to this day and I frequently think of her. She's a really interesting person — probably one of the most interesting people I know — and she plays a part in the later stages of this story. Unfortunately, I don't feel comfortable telling you now exactly why she is important, so she may kind of fade out of the story unexpectedly as things grow vague.

She was the highlight of this period of the ROKon Magazine story — from the end of September until when KScene mysteriously folded. I started this post with her as a treat for myself. This story kind of begins to get weird at this point. I don't remember what the exact sequences of events are, but needless to say, ROKon Magazine during the stage of things was changing quickly.

As the magazine got bigger, and more people cared about it, problems arose.

I went on a distribution run with "Cabell Lee" (not his real name) using his bike and it was horrible. We had something of a little fight during the course of it and he exacted his revenge by giving me bad advice about how distribute magazines. We really screwed up, we gave too many copies to people in some places and not enough to others. It was during this distribution run that

Cabell claimed to have seen a roach at the Orange Tree. It wasn't there, but he was making a point — he didn't like the fact that I was going to the Orange Tree instead of his bar, Lee's Retreat.

And there were other little interesting bits to this story. I went all the way out to the W Hotel to distribute magazines as the magazine got better. It was a huge trek to go to the W Hotel and the clientele of that very posh hotel isn't anything like what ROKon Magazine was interested in catering to, but it gave me an excuse to have a little adventure every month. As things progressed, and I grew more and more overwhelmed by the magazine, it became more and more tiresome to do previously "fun" things like that.

When Annie Shapiro lost her job at the Korea Times, the magazine was at a crossroads. We lacked access to layout software and we didn't quite know what we were going to do. Somehow — there's that word again — David Tz popped up again. I don't really remember how it happened, but I remember meeting him on the way to Haebangchon and him being really excited to participate. That is one of my fonder memories of this period of the magazine. Things were beginning to happen with the magazine. People were beginning to believe in it and it was really cool.



The cover that David Tz did for us.

Because I couldn't pay David, I gave him the next best thing — the right to pick the front cover. Or at least suggest it. So we ended up with a really crazy cover. But we were establishing

ourselves and an independent voice in the Seoul expat community and it was kinda cool to be out there. At some point along the way we had picked up people who wanted to help us with advertising. One of them was an Iranian guy named Peter. He's a great guy, but he got us in trouble on at least one occasion with something he wrote in the magazine. He wrote something about "improve your gaydar" that said people too often thought people from the Middle East were gay it was just their culture. Or something. It got us in trouble, big time, is all I remember. People were furious. But, if nothing else, it gave us some buzz. At least, that's the rationalization I gave the staff of the magazine.

Now, I am unclear when KScene folded. I think it was probably either the September or October issues of the magazine, but I will address the consequences of that later.

Let's address what was going on with the magazine right now. I kept giving Annie more power as the magazine grew. And I started to grow more obsessed with both she and the magazine. It was growing ever more apparent that Annie was not really all that interested in me and that she was interested in Warner.

As I recall, there was an issue with the stock of paper in either the first or second issue that David laid out. It would make more sense if it was the first one. Anyway, for some weird reason, the magazine's stock of paper was like cardboard. I about popped a gasket. We didn't have all that much money and the cost of the magazine was growing each issue — so little things like that added up. It didn't help that I think Annie was interested in the printer who provided us with magazine. He was a Korean guy named Charlie and Annie got all flustered whenever I mentioned his name. So, of course, I mentioned his name as much as possible because it was so rare to see her show any type of demonstrative emotion.

One aspect of the magazine that was beginning to cause trouble was the fact that it came out in the middle of the month. As the magazine grew in popularity, we began to realize that we needed to do something about that. The reason it came out when it did was I was paying for it directly out of my pocket and I got paid on the 15th of the month.



Me and Chen

The really big event of this period was Chen Lie's 80s Prom. It seemed as though the entire expat community was there. I almost didn't go. I remember being in a foul mood and not wanting to go. But Annie called me and all but demanded I come. So I did. I can still remember walking down the steps of Club Ta in Hongdae where the 80s Prom was being held and seeing all the people. It was pretty impressive what Chen had managed to pull off.

And then Annie got up on stage and made me furious.

She got up on stage wearing only a slip and made me very angry. She went about giving a suggestive monologue and it was just horrible, at least from my point of view. I felt she was making the magazine look bad. That's what made me so angry about the whole matter. I remember Ripley — a good friend of Chen Lie's who was the drummer in an expat band called Jet Echo — talking to Annie after she finished her little chat. That was one of my earliest memories of Ripley. Ripley is a great guy and he had sort of a older-brother relationship with Annie and Tahl. He plays a significant role later in this story.

Tahl was really close to Ripley who was really close with Chen Lie. I haven't really talked that much about Ripley because, well, he threatened to hit me with a brick the last time I communicated with him. Later in ROKon Magazine's history, he did one of the single funniest things to happen to me while I was in Seoul.

I was acting like a drunk ass at a party at this really cool club called Club Oi in Hongdae. I was kissing women and generally being a drunk clown. I even went so far as to kiss Chen. I was sitting on the floor, minding my own business, when he did the following.

"Hey," Ripley said.

"Hey!" I said.

WHAM! He hit me on the face.

It was very funny at the time because it was so unexpected.

Anyway, Ripley was in a band called Jet Echo which was probably the best expat band in Seoul at the time. Ripley was a mover and shaker in Seoul's expat community (at least relative to ROKon Magazine because of his connection to not only Chen Lie, but Annie and Tahl as well.) He is a very unique individual and I can't begin to think of who would play him in any movie of ROKon Magazine's story. He is so unique that I didn't even attempt to put him in the script I outline I've written. You'd have to be a much better writer than me — and you'd probably have to talk to him — to be able to properly show him on the screen.

We decided to use a picture of Venus as the front cover of the next issue, so that means the 80s Prom probably happened in early October of 2006. I really like the picture we used and it remains my favorite cover of the magazine to this day because it summed up its spirit so well — Rock on!

KScene's Demise & Its Consequences

I can still remember going to Lee's Retreat soon after I learned that KScene had ended publication. I don't remember if it was the September or October issue of that magazine, but it changed the fate of ROKon Magazine dramatically. Suddenly, ROKon Magazine was no longer just a underground little zine that people really enjoyed, it was the only monthly reading material for expat in Seoul.

I remember walking into Lee's Retreat and I was on cloud nine. It was one of several highlights of my time with the magazine. I felt like we had a shot at changing the world. Annie and I had a shot at doing something pretty wonderful.

Of course, we blew it, but tragedies are always more interesting, right?

A lot of things happened at the same time at this point.

I decided to recruit the two name-brand writers for KScene — Johnny Red and Ms. Tiff — and I started to get serious business inquiries from people who wanted to do something with ROKon Magazine.

I have zero business sense, so I started to lean upon Cabell Lee's business sense out of desperation, if nothing else.

When KScene folded, I was determined to recruit the two writers who I knew as named brands — Johnny Red and Ms. Tiff. Johnny Red was the magazine's Itaewon area "nightcrawler" while Ms. Tiff was the DnB expert. I never really read anything they wrote, but I knew they were well known in the expat community, so I wanted them for ROKon Magazine.

And I got them.

Ms. Tiff holds a special place in my heart for several different reasons. One, I think she's kind of hot and I have a crush on her. At the time, it helped that she looked enough like Annie Shapiro that the two women could be sisters. Tiff is a very interesting woman, but if I were to magically get my way and someone where to play her in a movie of ROKon Magazine, I have no idea who would do it. She is important to the story of ROKon Magazine, however.

I recruited Tiff at a Thai restaurant in the center of Seoul's financial district near my office. She's a vegetarian, so it was something of a compromise. We chatted over Thai food and came to an agreement. It was a little bit in awe that someone like her would lower herself to work at my little magazine — for free no less. Tiff became important because the magazine's staff meetings were completely bonkers and she was the one person with the authority to bring some order to them. Weirdly enough, she worked at the same university as Annie, so the two became pretty close.

The other person I recruited from KScene, the person I think Bill Murray would be a good pick to play him in any Hollywood movie of the ROKon Magazine saga, is Johnny Red. I don't remember how I recruited Johnny Red, but it happened. Johnny Red provided me with sage advice and a connection to the "hivemind collective" of all the old long-term expats who hung out at bars in Seoul's Itaewon area. But Johnny Red is an interesting character and he kind of resides in the darkness. I can't figure him out. He has the ability to say a lot, but without actually conveying any useful information. I don't know how he does it.



Annie and me in the good old days.

Before this tale ends, Johnny Red would tell Cabell Lee of my belief that he was the “devil.” I only know that happened because Cabell Lee (not his real name) told me in an email that it happened. I don’t really think Cabell Lee is the devil, but at the time of the magazine I wasn’t thinking clearly. And I was really paranoid during much of ROKon Magazine’s existence that somehow Annie and Cabell Lee would conspire against me. Which, in a sense, I fear they ultimately did.

I have nothing against Johnny Red now. All of this was a long time ago and the magazine doesn’t even exist anymore. I can only be so mad. But it all was an interesting experience, to say the least.

Also about this time, a guy who had had a falling out with some people who wanted to start a new magazine for expats called The Groove contacted me. He and I met at Seoul Pub and I got mad when he wanted to change the name of the magazine. I loved the name of the magazine and simply wasn’t going to let an outsider change its name out of the blue.

If I remember correctly, we had a staff meeting at Lee’s Retreat at this point. And this is when things started to get dark. This is the point when this tale goes from a great little story about a boy and a girl and the magazine they started into something sort of scary. Annie was at a table at Lee’s Retreat with the rest of the staff and something about the way she looked at Cabell Lee

freaked me out. She was interested in him in a way that instantly made me fear she would sleep with him behind my back and he would somehow manage to take magazine away from me. Soon, this was all I was talking about. It was really weird. I pressed the issue with Annie on any number of occasions and it got so bad that she called in Roar Sheppard to do something about it. He came all the way out to Sinchon from Insadong to talk to me about it, in fact. After his chat about the situation I felt a lot better and stopped obsessing about it so much.

It was at this point that I made the strategic decision to skip a month in publication so we could come out on the first of the month like a normal magazine. So, for November there wasn't a magazine.

Trouble, however, was brewing.

All About Halloween

Halloween 2006 in Seoul was when things really started to go strange with ROKon Magazine. I was clearly beginning to feel the strain of being the magazine's publisher and started act, well, weird. Or at least weirder than normal. Halloween was also the event that gave us an example of Tahl's unique personality.

Despite having been dissed at the beach party in late September, I was still pretty close to the rest of the staff. In fact, I was close enough that I got roped in to participating in Halloween by Annie. In hindsight, I am kind of amazed that she would continue to be so nice to me, given everything that was going on. But maybe she was beginning to realize that she was just going to have to deal with me for the time being and the more she was kind to me, the more she could influence me. And at this point she had a great deal of influence over me. I was become obsessed with her, in fact.

And this obsession came out at Halloween.

I took a huge number of pictures of her getting ready for Halloween. A huge number. An obscene number. I don't know what came over me. I don't know why I did that, but I did.

As for Tahl, she painted herself blue and went as the Indian god Kali. Her costume was quite elaborate and she was topless. Topless and blue. We took a picture of her in her costume that would end up on a sticker we made for the magazine. I would later find that sticker everywhere in my apartment and realize that Tahl had taken over my life.

Halloween was probably the last event where Tahl and I got along well. After Halloween it was all down hill. The magazine was growing in importance and Tahl saw herself as just as important as me because she saw the magazine as a hippy commune without anyone in charge. That, definitely, was not the way I saw the magazine. So, there was conflict.

A huge amount of conflict.

But at Halloween, for one bright moment, I felt like I was in a group of people who liked and respected me. I don't know how true it was, but that's what I felt. It was pretty cool, having a little band of people to hang out with. Because they were nice to me — I felt directly because of the magazine — I felt a huge responsibility to keep the magazine going, to improve it. As October became November, however, the internal politics of the magazine began to grow more heated.

November Growing Pains & Thanksgiving

November brought great changes to ROKon Magazine. It was all a long time ago, so the details elude me, but it went something kind of like this. At some point around this time, April of Mike's Cabin had donated \$1,000 to ROKon Magazine's coffers. I was getting pressure to make the magazine more professional from people I respected — notably the owner of the Orange Tree, Steve.

While David Tz is a great guy and I wish him the best, at this moment in my life I was driven to make the magazine better and I acted like an asshole to him. I was beginning to drink a lot and was pretty much drunk whenever I wasn't at work.

So I "fired" him.

I don't remember exactly how it went down, but somehow a guy named Dennis Mitchell magically appeared on the scene. He is an intense, sophisticated man and shares a birthday with Annie. He was reluctant to get involved for free, but the momentum of the magazine was such that he was helping us before he knew it. He did make one demand, however. He demanded that we have an actual "production night." I was really in no position to argue with him, so I readily agreed.

But that happens later in the story.

I also recruited around this time a guy we all called Regan Teacher, who drew these really cool one-panel comic strips. He was a great guy and we was loyal to me for a lot longer than he needed to be. He would end up doing something really horrible to me, but that is much later during the course of the story. I think it was a regular at Nori Bar and that's how I met him.



Me and Tahl about the time I called her a “cold hearted bitch.”

The big event that happened at this point was Thanksgiving.

I love Thanksgiving. It is probably one of my favorite secular holidays and I asked Annie well in advance if she would have Thanksgiving with me and she agreed. Even though I was paranoid about her sleeping with Cabell Lee, I wanted to have Thanksgiving at Lee’s Retreat. So, Thanksgiving came and she and I met up in Seoul’s Insadong district...and Tahl was there.

I was furious.

What’s worse, Annie said she’d eaten at work and so she really wasn’t interested in having Thanksgiving at all. I can remember the women skipping with me between them to a a tofu restaurant somewhere in Insadong. I was extremely angry at this point. And it only got worse. Much, much worse.

We reached a tofu restaurant and wouldn’t you know it, Warner popped up. He was kind of like, “I got your message, what do you need?”

And so there was the Great Debate in which Tahl forced Annie to listen to me and Warner explain, in a round about way, why she should like each of us instead of the other. I got so mad. Tahl asked the question, “So, what would you do if you had a lot of money?” I explained that if would use the money to help print publications convert themselves to the digital economy. Warner, meanwhile, said he would — essentially — walk the earth like Cain in Kung Fu. Eventually, I had enough and left.

This was the point when my relationship with Tahl began to sour. I really started to dislike her. Now, I don’t care. It was a long time ago and she “won,” and there is little more to say. But back then, I was in love with Annie and she did everything in her power to make it difficult for me. I went to Lee’s Retreat and almost started to cry. Everyone was having fun, but the turkey was eaten and the evening was wrapping up.

The next morning, I called home while at work and burst into tears. I tried to explain what was going on between Annie, Tahl and me and my parents were at a loss. They just didn’t understand what I was talking about.

Little did I know that this was just the beginning. This was just the beginning of a very strange tale, indeed.

The Release Party



The poster for the release party that we had for ROKon’s first full-color issue.

Late in November is when things began to grow dark in this tale of woe. After Thanksgiving, all I did was tell people how I thought Tahl was a “cold hearted bitch” and I waited to pounce. Sometime after Thanksgiving was when I was forced to make a fundamental decision about two things that were very important to me — Nori Bar and ROKon Magazine. My thought process was beginning to be cloudy at this point. I had given Annie responsibility to organize a release party for the magazine because we were going full color and she did so with gusto. She really got into and did a great job.

There was only one problem.

I hadn't told her not to schedule the release party on a Friday because I had to work as a DJ at Nori.

So there was a conflict.

I thought it wouldn't be a big deal, so I casually let it drop on the way to my apartment to hand her the money for the magazine's publication that I wasn't going to be able to make it to the release party.

She was furious.

It was no contest. I folded after just a moment of reflection.

It was the moment when the magazine became the single most important thing in my life. It was the moment when I really became the publisher, in a sense. It was now my-full time job in all but name.

We had production night and it was a success. Then things kind of went haywire, yet again. After a few days of intense worry, the magazine came to Haebangchon. It came in a truck that stopped in front of Indigo. I don't remember the exact sequences of events, but when it came out I was as proud as any new father. The magazine looked like a real magazine. It looked like the type of magazine that you would find in North America.

I was so excited that when I was alone with Annie I made a pass at her. She was like, “Huh?” Soon enough, I left her apartment and went to Sinchon to distribute the magazine. I went to Mike's Cabin expecting to be greeted as a conquering hero. But I had goofed. I hadn't done what I should have done — which was spend as much time as possible with April to make her feel important for giving us \$1,000. So, when I came to Mike's Cabin and there was no picture with a tiny little write up of the bar, she was furious.

She screamed at me in Korean for what felt like an ice age. It was long enough, regardless, for me to be stunned. I turned around, leaving the bar nearly in tears. I would not see April for months and months after that. I make a huge mistake in not being a man and going back to

make amends as soon as possible. I tried to make amends by giving her a free full page back ad the next issue, but the damage was done.

Now, as an aside, while we're talking about back page ads, I have to note that Tahl and Annie did something at some point that made me really mad. You see, Orange Tree Steve had promised to pay the full rate for a back page ad. The ad that was produced was comical. It was so bad — it was really artistic, if nothing else — that when I came to Indigo to get paid for it, Steve said no way.

And, just as I was learning this information, who should walk into Indigo but Tahl. I screamed at her the worst I've ever yelled at anyone in my life. And what did she do? She just looked at me for a moment and turned around and left the bar. She didn't cry, she didn't get upset. She just left.

But back to the main story.

The release party came and it was a huge success.

I got my opportunity to pounce on Tahl. I called her a "cold hearted bitch" to her face. It felt great. It felt great to get that off my chest. It didn't help my lot down the road, but for a moment I felt like I had gotten the upper hand.

I can still remember shaking hands with the fellow who owned the club where we held it and feeling like a man. I felt like we'd done something professional. We made some money from the release party, but not nearly enough to keep us afloat for much longer. It cost us \$1,200 to get printed full color each month and there was no way I could afford to pay that kind of money every month. We were still not incorporated, so we still couldn't accept money legally for ads.

I was getting the occasional free ad here and there from people, just enough to make us look like a "real" magazine, but I simply did not have the business sense — or the time and energy — to do what I should have done: come up with a business plan and hit the streets looking for cash.

For a night or two, though, things were bright for the magazine. For a few days, things were ok.

The Zany Holiday Antics of ROKon Magazine's Staff

After the magazine's Dec. 1st release party in Hongdae, things probably went as well as they were going to.

It was around this time that I moved apartments from Sinchon to Hongdae. It happened because Warner moved out of his apartment in Hongdae and moved to Haebangchon. He sent out an email to everyone he knew, asking if anyone was interested. I was definitely interested. Cabell Lee was really beginning to freak me out at this point. Sometimes I would have girls over

and he would lurk around, trying to catch me with them. It was really annoying. And he was gouging me for the apartment I was renting from him.

I took one look at the apartment in Hongdae, and I was like, "I'll take it!"

It all happened very quickly. I marched to Lee's Retreat. I remember Cabell Lee was sitting at a table. I told him I wanted to move out of my apartment as soon as possible.

"You smell like vomit," was his reply.

Now, I was having problem with body odor at this time because the magazine was causing me to not take showers on a regular basis. And I said as much to him. But he allowed me to move and so I did. And because Ripley and his band mate Al Hell lived in my new apartment building, I started to hang out with them a lot. Ripley is a very interesting guy and I fear nothing I write here will do him justice. But, needless to say, I ended up spending the holiday season when the members of Jet Echo. It was pretty cool.

I think it was at this point that The Groove came out. I don't remember for a fact. But The Groove claims that it was founded in 2006, so it would make sense that they came in either November or December 2006. The magazine was horrible compared to what ROKon Magazine was looking like at this point. We heard through the grapevine that they were really paranoid about us stealing a march on them, but they had nothing to fear. ROKon Magazine was so wrapped up in its internal politics that it was the gang that couldn't shoot straight.

Because Annie and Tiff were uni professors and got two months paid vacation, they were going to leave early.

I initially was going to name a woman named Anna, Venus' best friend, the "managing editor" of the magazine. She had taken pictures for the magazine and I liked her, so I thought she would be perfect. But I forgot to put her name on all the pictures she gave us, so she wouldn't work with the magazine anymore. It was for the best, because Tiff was perfect to be our managing editor. I don't know if she ever actually got the title, but that's what she was, in essence, at least for a little while. She ran staff meetings and people would actually, like, listen to her.

One funny little thing that happened was we had a staff meeting at her apartment and because of my obsession with the magazine I was smelling at bit more than I should have. Everyone noticed that there was a bad smell and it was me. I still feel pretty sheepish about that. My inability to take a regular shower because of the magazine would cause me all kinds of trouble. It was what caused Cabell Lee to declare that I "smelled like vomit" when I told him I wanted to leave the apartment that I was renting from him. And my Korean co-workers would get so upset with my BO that they forced me to go home and take a shower on more than one occasion. It was really embarrassing.

I gave Tahl the task of doing the front cover of the magazine and she did a really good job. It was a great cover and to this day I'm shocked at how great it was. This made Dennis Mitchell annoyed and I promised him he could do the next cover. I keep pressing for us to do cover story about Venus. Venus is a beautiful woman and I felt the magazine would be around forever, so I wanted another shot at us having her on the front cover.

Around this time there was this guy, who was connected to the American military base in Seoul, who somehow got interested in advertising his "healing crystals" in the magazine. I think we charged him \$200 for the space. He was the only legitimate ad that we ever sold, as best I can remember. And we totally suckered him, me and Annie. This was as things were getting a bit frayed between she and I, and so it was probably the last time we were close. It was the last time we were more than just two people with a common interest in a magazine. We sold the ad and nothing happened when the magazine came out.

The guy lived in the Haebangchon area of Seoul where Annie lived and he was furious the next time he saw her. I didn't live in Haebangchon, so I could get away with stuff like selling ads to people and then not seeing them on a regular basis when nothing happened. We learned a basic concept about advertising — under promise and over deliver.

We pretty much delivered nothing. It was just one ad in one issue and not one person contacted the poor fellow. I still feel bad about that. But all of that was a long time ago. All water under the bridge now. I just need to move on. But writing about all of this helps the process. Soon enough I'll get a new job and my fate will definitely be with America and the future, not South Korea and the past.

Anyway, so December rolled around and we had another production night. I think we had it at Dennis Mitchell's very nice apartment. I think it was that issue. I can still remember being sick as a dog and Tahl riding my ass to edit the magazine's content as we were going to press. She did not endear herself to me that night. And there was the cute visage of Annie and Tiff hard at work on the magazine, looking like sisters. They both have the same color hair and at the time the same style hair so they really did look a lot like.

We finished up the magazine for the month and had a holiday party of sorts.

We went to a noraebang — I remember it being the dodgy, dark one in Haebangchon — where Tiff gave a rousing rendition of Blur's Girls & Boys. We all bounced around the dark of the noraebang and had a grand old time. It was a lot of fun and it is a pleasant memory that I hold dear to this day.

Along this time I promised Annie that I would write her a poem a day and email it to her. While she was gone, I had no idea what I was going to do about essentially running the entire magazine by myself. And my behavior was growing ever more erratic because of all the booze I was drinking, so that was causing all sorts of problems for the magazine.

The holiday season started and there was even talk of us stopping printing of the magazine given that there wouldn't be that many expats in town for a while, but I would have none of it. The show, as they say, had to go on.

I don't remember exactly when the following happened, but it was sometime during this general period of time. It is an interesting enough anecdote to share. When all of this was happening, I was a significantly different than I am today. I got wrapped up in stupid things and one of them was I got upset that a writer for The New York Times by the name of Jennifer 8. Lee had an "8" in her byline. I wrote a lot about this online and, wouldn't you know it, Jennifer 8. Lee came to Seoul for some reason — she was writing a book about fortune cookies — and she wanted to meet me.

It was really cool.

I had it all planned out that I would use the opportunity to share some fun with Annie and Tiff. But it didn't work out. Annie and Tiff couldn't get their act together and since they were vegetarians, anyway, they weren't all that interested in having Korean BBQ with Jennifer 8 Lee. But I tried. Had we managed to work things out, that would have helped my relations with two important women in my life. But it didn't happen and I feel sad about it to this day.

Annie left the country before Christmas came, so she gave me the responsibility of giving people Christmas gifts. Because this is about the point when my mental state began to deteriorate because of the stress of the magazine, the details of what exactly happened have grown fuzzy. I think I was supposed to give Tiff and Johnny Red presents and I only gave Tiff hers.

The reason being, Johnny Red's Christmas present was so embarrassing that I just couldn't bring myself to give it to him. His Christmas present was these God-awful business cards that looked like someone's mind had exploded on them. They were, as I recall, purple and weird and just horrible. I don't know why I allowed them to be produced, probably because I was so busy doing other things and I trusted Annie that I let her do whatever she wanted to do.

Now, these business cards would get me in trouble. When Annie came back from America in February, one of the reasons she was so angry at me was I hadn't given Johnny Red his Christmas present.

Much later — a year later, in fact — when Rome had fallen and my involvement with the magazine was at an end, I would sneak into the Korea Time's offices where Johnny Red worked and put those damn business cards on his computer's keyboard. I still find a bit of perverse glee at that little trick. Something about that is just funny — he got his business cards, just a year too late.

The Attempted 'Palace Coup'

Things leading up to the attempted palace coup were bad. Really bad. While Annie was gone in January, I became a raging alcoholic, to such an extent that Venus called me up and said she was no longer interested in me doing a profile of her for the magazine. I found her really interesting and wanted to do a cover profile of her, maybe in conjunction with a magazine that would be all about "expat girls." Or something like that. I didn't really yet know exactly what I wanted to do with the concept.

And all kinds of wild stuff happened at this point.

I was a PC Bang (PC Room) one day when I could have sworn I saw Annie pop up next to me. It was a really strange sensation. I felt her "presence" next to me, even though she was nowhere around. And the poems that I had promised her soon became ranting e-mails that culminated in a nasty e-mail entitled, "You Suck — A Love Story." It was the title of a book I had heard about that was about a vampire.

I didn't hear much from Annie while she was out of the country.

And, yet, it was about this time that I realized that Annie was probably talking to Cabell Lee behind my back. I don't remember exactly what it was that caused me to believe this, but it may have been when he randomly used the word "bro" in conversation. It was totally out of character for him to do that and the only place I could think of that he had gotten it from was Annie, who used the word all the time. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe that's not what happened. And, really, if had been thinking clearly, it wouldn't have been a big deal.

Annie was a grown woman and she could do as she pleased.

But I was so Goddamn obsessed with her, that I wanted to control her absolutely. I wanted to not talk to Cabell Lee, ever. It took me years and years to get over my anger at the thought that she had talked to Cabell in any way. But I'm over it now. Meh. So what.

And I think it was at this point in time that Cabell Lee mysteriously came to Nori early one morning and proposed he just out of the blue give me money. I found that very odd. Very odd indeed.

Things really came to a head production night for the February issue. I was furious that Annie was in love with Warner (or at least a relationship) and wrote some really nasty things in the magazine that had to be about her. They were so nasty that the magazine was published, people stopped me and said, "Did you really mean to put that in the magazine?"

But from my point of view, because of my obsession with Annie it was my gift to myself. I had to pay for the entire run of the magazine and there were some things about what was going on between Annie, Warner and me that I wanted to get off my chest in a very public way. If I was going to pay for the magazine to come out, I at least wanted to get something out of it.

And so when Annie came back from the States sometime in February 2007, all hell broke loose. Tahl demanded we have a staff meeting to determine if I should continue to be the publisher of the magazine and Annie complied. This was another point when I made a decision that I didn't have to make. Dennis Mitchell called me up at the height of the crisis and said, "You know, you and I could keep going with the magazine. We don't need everyone else."

He was right.

But I was so overwhelmed by the magazine and so loyal to Annie, that I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

So, I agreed to have the meeting.

I stayed at the Orange Tree with my best-friend-in-Korea Kari and waited for the staff to have a debate about my fate. After they were done, they called me and I angrily walked to the Russian restaurant where the meeting was being held. They told me I had been spared and I turned around was a royal asshole. Everyone was in shock.

"We just got done saying what a nice guy you are and this is what you do?" is essentially what someone said.

And, really, even though I was spared, the attempted palace coup was the moment when I got fed up with the magazine. It was the moment when I decided the magazine was over and I was simply biding my time. I was trying to figure out a way to gracefully exit the situation without dying.

The Birthday Party (From Hell)

My birthday came in late February and I just wanted to be alone with Annie. But things kept getting in the way. It was almost impossible get her alone and maybe that was the whole point of the matter. About this time I lost my gig at Nori Bar and was in mourning for a day. I really loved that job and to this day it's the best job I've ever had.

I thought, maybe, for my birthday it could just be me and Annie alone.

But it was not to be.

Annie assembled half a dozen people and we had a grand old time. If it hadn't been for how unhappy I was in general, I would have been really happy that that many people wanted to be in my presence.

What should show up at my birthday party but the book whose title I had used as the subject of an email, “You Suck — A Love Story.” You can’t make shit like that up. Regardless, things were kind of slipping out of my grasp at this point.

The magazine had no money and I didn’t know how we were going to come out the next month. Of course, what happened was Annie paid for a month. We were going to do a cover story about St. Patrick’s Day with three people’s faces painted the three different colors of the Irish flag, but it turned out horrible. They looked really creepy and I don’t even know if we used the picture or not. And what’s worse, at the photo shoot, Tahl got mad at my mere presence. It was horrible. Things in late February and early March were just horrible with the magazine. It is notable that about the time of the photo shoot I was in a subway car with Annie’s notebook. I opened it on a lark and there was a note that said, “I should have told Shelton not to go to the photo shoot.” She had been the one to decide if I went to the photo shoot or go to a demonstration that was taking place somewhere in Seoul.

It was almost like she’d known I would check the notebook. That was her spooky nature. One day around this time, I remember lying on Annie’s mattress relaxing and I felt what I can only be described as...energy. It drifted over me slightly touching my body. It was really wild. I’ve never felt anything like it since. It was almost like I was experiencing Annie’s presence... her soul. It was one of the strangest experiences of my life. I was also around this time when Annie looked at me and asked me what we were going to do with the magazine’s finances. It was like a mother asking her husband how he was going to pay for their children’s new pair of shoes. I was reading a magazine on her bed when I said, “You take care of editorial, I’ll take care of the finances.”

I was bluffing.

We had no money and I knew it.

We were doomed.

Then everything went back to being horrible.

And, really, I think it was my fault that Tahl was so difficult to manage. If I had just given her some sense of power, given her some sort of an assignment to give her some sense of being a powerful stakeholder in the magazine’s fate, she probably would have been much easier to deal with. But it took me years — years! — of reflection to come to this conclusion. At the time this happened, I was so obsessed with the magazine and how to make it better that I wouldn’t delegate.

It was about this time that we “lost Tiff” because of my personal screw up. She was the center of the magazine’s screwed up style of management and things somehow worked despite themselves. As things totally went bonkers, however, I got the sense she was fed up with

dealing it all. I mentioned something to Tahl that we were “about to lose Tiff,” and what did Tahl do, but tell that to Tiff who quit the magazine soon afterwards.

The Summer Of Our Discontent

At about this time, it became clear to me that the magazine was over. I remember walking the foyer of the office of my “real job” at the EduTimes, pondering my fate. I knew for the greater good, I should just step aside. It was around this time that Annie gave me an “exit interview” in which she told me the things I had done right. She mentioned strangely enough that “Cabell Lee is not the devil.” I was so out of it that I didn’t have the mental energy to ask, “Uh, and why do you say that? Do you know for a fact that he’s not the devil?” But I let it slide. I thought the magazine was “dead.”

So I walked around Seoul being miserable and thinking about how much I had failed the group. I was devastated. Annie’s birthday party rolled around and I was a huge jerk. I sang a song that implied she was a slut. The lyrics of the song were:

*My girl's no saint
maybe even a slut
but damn
I can't keep my
hands off that
gut*

She kicked me out, but not before she grabbed my glasses and threatened to throw them over the side of the building. (Her small apartment was on the third floor and had a huge open patio.) I left, but she felt bad and eventually called me back. It was at her birthday party that I sang Blur’s “Tender.” I did a pretty good job and it was then that I realized that I wanted to maybe start an expat band as my next creative “project.”

During the course of the next few months, I tried to start a band with a woman named Tiffany (Not Ms. Tiff) who had sorta helped the magazine with advertising. She never sold any ads, but she was interested in the magazine. She had a friend who was also interested in starting a band, so the three of us spent a lot of time talking and drinking and drinking and talking. We never had practice and the full extent of me ever doing anything with a band was people asking me what instrument I would play and me pointing to my mouth and saying, “I sing.”

The stress and strain of ROKon Magazine failing really began to influence my entire life at this point. I eventually was just pretty much mad all the time and I couldn’t summon up the mental energy to do my “real” job at the EduTimes, even though it was really easy. I feel bad about how it all ended, but I didn’t have any control about what course the magazine would take.

When it came to my “secret” apartment, they eventually found out. They found out because I tried to date a flibbertigibbet who worked in the office. I had moved to Seoul’s Hongdae district by this point and when she asked me where I lived, I confessed and said Hongdae, not Bangwha. She, of course, told everyone in the office and I came pretty close to getting fired.

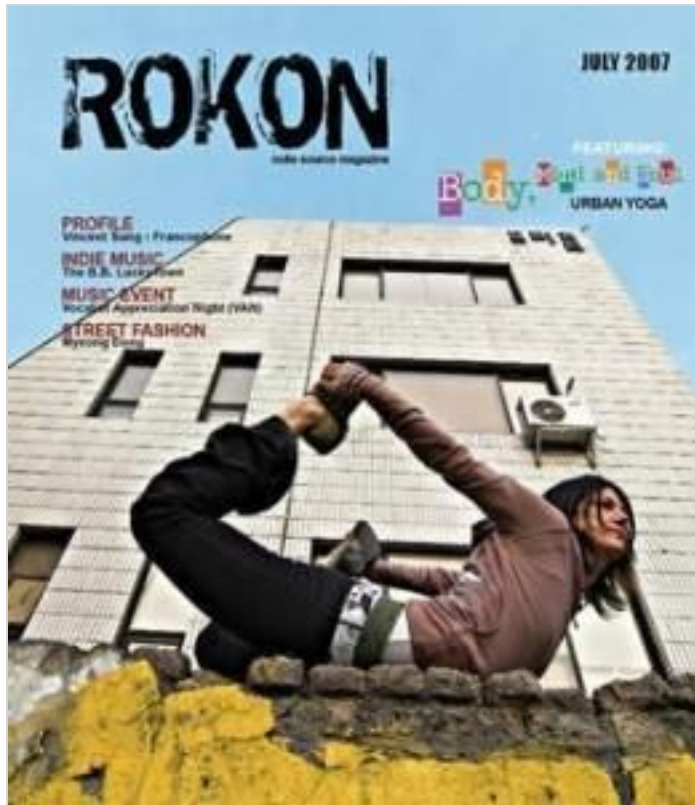
In fact, I think they even went so far as to tell a foreign visitor that they were going to fire me, but they choked and couldn’t do it. This happened in large part because I had a chat over lunch with a man we called The Professor. He was the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper and a real hardass. But I respected him and he asked me cryptically, what would happen in America if a father bought a son a house that he didn’t use. I said, thinking quick on my feet, that the father would still love the son, regardless, because he was his son. I lived to fight another day.

It was during the summertime that Ripley and I hung out a lot. We would sit in front of the convenience near our apartment building and drink. We got fairly close and I talked about how I wanted to start a band. He pretty much shot down all my nascent songs, saying they were pretty much just songs that were popular that I had heard a lot. I think because he knew all the songs I would write would be about Annie, he didn’t really want to encourage me.

Around this time something happened that gave me some sense that what had happened with the magazine was pretty magical. Or just a great yarn that deserved to be told. Someone with direct knowledge of what had happened with the magazine was talking to me when a friend of theirs came up and wanted to know about what happened with the magazine. I was so upset about the magazine at this point that I said, “I don’t want to hear what you have to say. Tell me when you’re finished and I’ll come back.”

It took the woman 30 minutes to explain to her friend what had happened with the magazine. I kept coming back to their table and woman would look at me with an expression that said, “I am no where NEAR done explaining THIS story.”

Also around this time Venus popped up. Now, I could write 10,000 words about what Venus means to me now and still not be anywhere done. But let’s just say, as my obsession with Annie began to fade my interest in Venus began to grow. A lot of stuff happened — and would happen — in the next few months that simply is too personal for me to write about in a blog post.



The first issue of the new version of ROKon Magazine that came out without me being involved.

And then....ROKon Magazine came out without me. It was the single worst experience of my life. I remember seeing Annie having a meeting with the new publisher, Julian Kang. I didn't make anything of it, but soon enough I discovered that he was a really good layout guy who was wealthy and a friend of Warner's. The magazine looked better — by far — than anything I had managed to produce while I was the publisher and it was like a kick in the gut seeing that damn magazine come out without me.

And the reason that is the case is due in large part to the fact that the magazine completely consumed my life at its height. When it was through, I would wake up in the morning, not knowing what to do with myself because I didn't have to worry about the magazine coming out again. And for the magazine to come back without me — and be so good! — was the ultimate shock. It was a kick in the gut, the likes of which I have never felt before or since.

I can remember using the phrase "Keep the faith" as my little phrase whenever I left a room. And before it was over with one of the people who was kind of an advertising person for the magazine, Peter, said, "No, you keep the faith!" And he was right. I lost the faith in regards to the magazine. In hindsight, if I hadn't been so overwhelmed by the magazine and its running out of money, I would have brought it back in some way instead of letting Annie do it for me.

So, the question is, did Annie even betray me at all? In hindsight, the answer is, of course not. I just had no idea that she would manage to bring back the magazine with it being so great. Those first few issues of the magazine were pretty much my vision of the magazine, only without me being involved. I compared the new, and improved ROKon Magazine as like dating a model — “It’s beautiful, but boring.”

What it lacked, of course, was me.

It was at that point that I vowed my revenge. I would start a new magazine. One called Zine Magazine.

ROKon Magazine’s ‘Third Act’

I am not going to get into as much detail in the third act because, well, what happened in the third act is kind of sensitive even to this day and if you’re really all that interested, then either read the extended outline for a movie that I wrote or track me down and talk to me in person about what happened. Needless to say, the third act is completely, totally crazy and interesting and it should be seen on the big screen.

I grew into a larger-than-life character at this point. I mean, everyone knew me (or knew of me) in Seoul’s expat community and I was kind of acting deranged. I remember going to an event with a lot of expats and the MC noticed me taking pictures in the audience and said, “Look, everyone, it’s Shelton!” Something about that rattled my cage. I didn’t like the fact that everyone began to pay close attention to what I said. Now, of course, I can’t get the cat to pay attention to me. But back in the day I was something of eccentric man about town in Seoul. In fact, it got so bad that someone put me in a book about weird expats. That was pretty tough, seeing myself portrayed as a weirdo. What hurt the most was they used my name. If they had just made it obvious that it was me without actually using my name, it wouldn’t have been so bad. I was going through a rough time because of the magazine and seeing my name in that book reminded me how brutal Seoul’s expat community can be.

ROKon Magazine came out without me and I was furious. So, I assembled what few people would work with me and started a photocopied magazine called Zine Magazine. I gave it that name because I had had a fight with Tahl over whether ROKon Magazine was a zine or a magazine and so I thought I’d settle the question by naming my next magazine Zine Magazine. One of the worst things I have ever done in my life is the production of Zine Magazine.

The idea of Zine Magazine came to me the moment the new version of ROKon Magazine came out in, I think, July 2007. The night I held the new version of ROKon Magazine in my hands, I was like — “I gotta do something about this.”

So I found an illustrator and started from scratch. I was actually able to produce something that was pretty good, even though it was extremely angry. It was just photocopied, but I liked

how it looked. It reminded me of the first few issues of ROKon Magazine when it was just me and Annie against the world. Much of the content was devoted to me in a round about way bashing Annie Shapiro for continuing ROKon Magazine without me. Now, to her credit, I think she tried to get me to help her with the new version in a half-hearted way.

I can't say I blame her, I wasn't exactly the type of guy you would want to hang out with at this point.

But every month, I wrote angry pieces about "cute girls with cute hair cuts" who would destroy you if you didn't watch out. Given how small the expat community in Seoul is, everyone knew who I was talking about. I kept this up much longer than I should have. I should have just given up after ROKon Magazine came out without me, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. In hindsight, I could only get so angry with Annie. She had believed more in the magazine than me and so she got to go to the promise land, while I could just see it from across the river. (So to speak.) It was about this time that things were so bad between Annie and I that she wrote the now famous email (at least to me) when she said simply, "You're a delusional jerk with a good heart. No more communication."

We kept communicating, regardless, and there was an open mic night at the Orange Tree bar in Haebangchon one night and I sat on the front row with my best friend in Korea, Kari. Annie got up with a guitar and started to sing a slow, sweet song while staring straight at me. The lyrics were, in part:

I hate the way that you talk
I hate the way that you walk
I hate everything about you

To this day, I don't know if this was an original composition or if she had found it somewhere. But it was clear that she was talking about me. Something about her doing that stays with me to this day. What an odd thing to do. And it was very much an example of Annie's personality.



My state of mind during the “third act” of the ROKon Magazine saga.

About this same time — hell, it may even be the same night — I realized not only was it too late for me to get the last subway train to Hongdae where I lived, but I was too broke to get a taxi there as well. If I had lived in Haebangchon, things would have been dramatically different because, well, I would have had to put up with all these people on a more regular basis and I probably neither would have felt like such an outsider, I wouldn't have done half the crazy stuff that I did.

Somehow — always a fateful word whenever I'm telling a story — I got Annie alone in the foyer of the Orange Tree and plead my case for her giving me some money to get back home. Along the way, I grabbed her ass and accused her of doing something with “Cabell Lee” (not his real name) behind my back. She screamed and some random guy got in between us, asking what was going on. I said something about, “It didn't happen if no one saw it happen!” Yes, I was hammered when all of this happened. This was not a highlight of my time in South Korea. My behavior during this time was atrocious and I feel bad to this day for what I did. But I can't go back and change it, I can only just write about it and hope it means something to somebody.

So I believe those two little anecdotes give you some sense of how weird and special my relationship with Annie was while it existed. And I know there are plenty of people who have led weird and interesting adventures and no one cares what I have to say, especially since I can't

manage to produce a script. But this is just one little corner of a significantly larger story. I'm trying to give you some sense of the magic that existed between Annie and myself. It eventually became really dysfunctional and horrible, but it was also kind of in its weird way fun. I miss, in a way, the weird and wacky things that happened between she and I during the course of the magazine's existence and beyond.

Around this time Annie shaved her head. When I first heard about it, I didn't believe it. It just didn't seem possible. It just was so totally over the top that it just didn't fit with what I believed to be real. But she did it. She was the talk of Haebangchon for a day or two, but she definitely did it. Warner had done it for her, as I recall. And it was about this time that she went to Thailand as I have mentioned.

It was around this time that she went to Thailand and I thought Cabell Lee had gone to have a romantic meet-up with her. They were screwing with my mind, big time and it did nothing to help my state of mind.

It was also around this time that I would go to work and just listen to sad songs all day on YouTube and not do much of anything else. I was so upset that I was completely paralyzed emotional and mentally. The only thing I could find the energy to do was to write twisted little fairy tales that explained how I felt about the magazine to six year old Korean children trying to learn English.

Thanksgiving happened and Annie went out of her way to show up. I took a lot of pictures of the event, and there was an uneasy peace between Annie and I for the time being.

It was also during this third act that I made up with April of Mike's Cabin. This was before YouTube and Spotify made it easy to listen to songs on demand, so I would wake up every day with an absolute desire to listen to Keane's "Everybody's Changing" and no way to hearing it. I knew that The Bar, the place above Nori Bar had the song and so I became a regular there. One day I ran into April and her boyfriend Mike and it took just a moment for everything to get worked out between us. I said I was sorry and it was like nothing had happened. Everything snapped back into place and we were friends again. I would eventually DJ at Mike's Cabin every once in a while. The people at Nori Bar found out and they were furious. But it was fun. That, really, is where I got my closure when it comes to working a Nori. I got people dancing again. I still had it.

That was pretty cool.

Now, some things happened at this point that I will try to work around as best as I can. But, really, this third act of the story is probably the most interesting part of what happened, even though I don't feel comfortable giving you nearly as much detail. As I recall, around this time, Tahl got kicked out of the country for drug possession. Or something. She was given two weeks to leave the country and she knew damn well she had time to leave, but she made it into a big

deal. She had a huge party for all the cool kids. It was the end of an era. Tahl, the bane of my existence, was leaving the country.

It is at this point when things got really, really dark.

It was during this third act that Cabell Lee was at his most sinister in some respects. I didn't want anything to do with the man at this point. The magazine was dead and I never visited his bar anymore and I generally just tried to forget that I had ever known him. But he kept contacting me. He kept suggesting that I work "PR" for the bar he owned, Lee's Retreat (not it's real name.) It was like he was trying to nudge me over the brink or something. Like he knew what the effect of him contacting me at all would be on my mind.

Now, about the same time I had a chat with my best friend in South Korea, Kari. She pretty much told me I was being a wuss with respect to Cabell Lee and I should just go talk to him.

So I did.

But I did it under my rules. I bought a shirt in Seoul's Itaewon district that covered explanations of the different uses of the word "fuck" and marched to his bar. When I walked in and he ran from behind the bar into the kitchen, he answered my question about if he had been talking to Annie.

Yep.



Zine Magazine

He had.

Anyway, I don't think I actually even had a conversation with him.

But I think we exchanged emails a few times after that and he all but told me he would tell me the truth of what happened between he and Annie if I came to the bar and talked to him in private.

I pretty much blew him off.

I didn't feel like giving him the satisfaction.

One funny little incident that took place around this time was I took a picture of Annie giving me the finger. I promptly put it in the next issue of Zine Magazine.

The last time I saw Annie, I was on my way to the Orange Tree and she was talking to Venus' boyfriend J Park. The way she looked at me said it all. It was a really weird smile.

Something happened to Annie that I don't feel like giving the details about. But, needless to say, soon after this Annie left the country. I remember simply not believing it all. I woke up in my bed in my apartment in Hongdae to a phone call. They told me what had happened to Annie and I was distraught. In hindsight, I worry I was at least partly responsible.

And, maybe, I was.

I went to Annie's apartment (why, exactly, I don't remember) and felt horrible. The Tibetan Book of the Dead was there, there was a strangely drawn image on her computer monitor (which was on the floor) and there was a note from her two closest friends at the time.

One of the more annoying things that "Cabell Lee" ever did to me happened when Something Bad happened to Annie and I wanted his help. He asked me how to spell Annie's last name — even though I knew damn well that he knew what it was — and there was silence on the phone when I struggled to spell the name. I am just not good with spelling names over the phone. He really thought I was a big doofus, and maybe I was — and am.

It was at this point that Regan popped up again. He called me to tell me the strange news that Annie's father (who was in the country suddenly) was furious with me and he was out to hunt me down. Given my state of mind at the time, it was one of the crueler things someone has every done to me. To this day, it is a mystery why he did that.

Annie left Seoul abruptly during the holiday season and I finally decided to move from my apartment in Hongdae to one in Haebangchon. I kept telling people that "Sinchon is my past, Hongdae my present and Haebangchon my future." I found an apartment that was strategically located in Haebangchon and began to soak in the the idea that ROKon Magazine was behind me and I could concentrate on my next creative project — starting a band called Break Something.

The night I moved into my new apartment in Haebangchon, I was at a bar called New Phillies having a beer when suddenly half the bar jumped up and took off. I followed them and discovered that there were flames coming out of the windows of the Orange Tree which was just down the street. I yelled "Somebody call Korean 911" and rushed down the hill. I got to the Orange Tree's door — the bar was closed for renovations — and discovered the door was locked. I grabbed a fire extinguisher and attempted to crash through the glass of the door. I didn't get too far before I felt a sharp pain on my wrist — I had cut myself.

The cut was a little too close to my vein, so I stopped what I was doing and walked down the steps of the bar, in shock at what had just happened. No one really liked me at this point, so no one gave a shit that I was bleeding. Someone finally — finally — took pity on me and got me into an ambulance. The emergency room people wouldn't work on me, though, because they said I was drunk (I wasn't). So within a hour I was back at New Phillies angry as hell that no one seemed to be giving me my proper credit for attempting to save the Orange Tree. ("I could save the Sweet Baby Jesus out of the River Han and no one would say a word," was the quote of the night.)

The next morning, the owner of the Orange Tree, Steve, would take me to the hospital to get patched up.

It is at this point that things went totally, completely haywire. I won't go into detail, but before it was all over with, Cabell Lee would save my sorry ass from certain death. So, in essence, I owe him my life. And, for that, I am grateful. I would soon find myself on way back to America suddenly. It was horrible. Just horrible. And, really, that is the end of this story. But if you wanted to get kind of arty with the ending, you could do something with the following little very real anecdote.

I came home from South Korea to a very uncertain fate. I would return to South Korea two more times and that is one of the reasons why the ending would be a bit garbled. I would combine some events from the various times I return to South Korea for the sake of the dramatic arch. But having said all that, one ending would be on a couch, dying. At least, that's what it felt like.

I was on my sister's couch — where I would lose the key chain that had one of the things that had been with me throughout my adventures in Seoul, natch — reflecting upon my time when suddenly my heart began to pound like I was having a heart-attack. It was one of the scarier things to happen to me during this period of my life and it would be the perfect ending. Have darkness on the screen, with me breathing heavy and then I just open my eyes and that's it. I would live to fight another day. Or maybe more symbolically, I am "reborn."

That's one of the reasons why I named my anti-Hero in the movie I want to write about the ROKon Magazine experience, The Battle of The Old Free State, Topher. His full name is Christopher, but he goes by Topher. And some people know him as Christopher and some

people know him as Topher. Just like some people know me as Shelton and some people know me as Lee. And I kind of see my character in the ROKon Magazine as “of the Christ.” He’s a Christ figure in the sense that he kind of dies for the sins of everyone else on the staff by the time it’s all over with.

Epilogue — Some Final Reflections



Annie Shapiro and I at the height of ROKon Magazine’s success.

So that’s it. That’s the story of ROKon Magazine. I have written way too much about it all on this site — way too much — but I believe in it and believe it should be a Hollywood movie. Will it ever as long as I don’t have a script? It’s doubtful. But it’s fun to reflect upon what happened with the magazine and see if I can convey to you, gentle reader, what happened and why. Some really wild things happened with the magazine and I believe they should be shown on the big screen.

What happened with the magazine totally changed my life — for better or worse — and it has enough life lessons built into it that it would be potentially Oscar-bait should it ever be made into a movie. But, of course, it would all depend on the script. Which I don’t have. But I do have a lot of memories and I am passionate about this story. I have long stopped caring about it on a personal level — the magazine is dead, who cares — but the story itself is compelling enough to keep writing about it. What I wanted, sort of an “scene” zine that was offbeat and a lot like Punchline Magazine back in Richmond, Virginia, Annie and I actually created those first few months. ROKon was cool and served the “underground” scene in Seoul just fine.

And then, things beyond our control happened. The collapse of KScene opened up a the mainstream market and that was the moment when that little bit of pixie dust that was the connection that Annie and I had just didn't cut it anymore. Had we found a business partner the first thing they probably would have done was to change the name and fire Annie. And then I would have quit in protest and ROKon would have died and the whole thing would have been snuffed out in its first few months.

When I was the publisher, I simply couldn't find anyone who not only had money, but shared my vision and I trusted. And that's what broke my heart when Julian took over as publisher. It seemed as though Annie found someone with not only money but the willingness to keep the magazine's street cred. (To this day, I don't know the details of exactly how Annie was able to find Julian and probably never will.)

But I have to give Julian credit — he put out a great magazine. It did lack one thing, though — me. At the time I said that his version of ROKon magazine was like dating a supermodel, "It's beautiful, but boring." If I had continued to participate with ROKon it would have been the best of both worlds — it would have looked great and been interesting.

In hindsight, there was no way ROKon could have been the magazine I wanted it to be originally. We would have had to "sold out" to survive and probably would have been called something else. It was one of those "burn the village down to protect it" type of situations. I simply had not thought things through enough at the beginning and we all suffered as a result. Now, of course, I would be very cautious. I would find a business partner, interview prospective "editors" and have a dedicated copy editor if not be the copy editor myself.

The key lesson I learned was that I should have planned out the whole thing a lot more than I did. Also, we should have been more concerned with what the content actually looked like and had a devoted copy editor. But the whole thing was simply so organic and fast-paced that I can only hope that one day I can use my experiences with ROKon Magazine in another publication. The twists and turns of the magazine are just pretty crazy and make for a great yarn. And since I am going to try to stop writing about ROKon Magazine now that I have written its tale in memoir form, I can only quote the title of the last episode of M*A*S*H — "Goodbye, farewell and amen."