

With This Ring, I Thee Wed

“If anyone feels this couple should not be united in Holy Matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

Katia broke into a sweat under her beautiful ivory gown. She was hoping that somebody, anybody, if not Junki, would stop this sham wedding.

She looked down at her gloved hands and swallowed hard. The silence grew as the Seoul elite looked around at one another, mentally echoing their objections to the matrimony of one of South Korea’s most eligible bachelors to an unsuitable foreigner.

Breathe, *breathe*, she told herself.

But nothing happened. Everything went spectacularly well. Nobody objected to their wedding, the best man did not lose the ring and the priest didn’t suffer from a seizure or stroke despite her fervent prayers.

Long story short, she was now married to the only son of, and heir to, the Kwan family.

Outside the church there were guarded smiles across the faces of the hundred-odd guests. She smiled and posed for photographs with a steely reserve.

Jihan, her new husband, noticed her nervousness but said nothing. He should have known better than to propose a contract marriage. Had he picked an actress, she would have put on a spectacular show but he’d picked a heartbroken middle-class girl. She looked like she’d come to her own funeral.

On the other hand, a glance at his father convinced Jihan that he had made the right decision in picking Katia. He had never planned to agree to an arranged marriage—of his father’s choice. This way, he felt he had won the day. His father however, was like a hawk and Jihan knew any overacting by either of them would raise his suspicion.

The father of the groom watched his son and his new bride with keen interest. The girl was clearly no gold digger; she was far too independent and self-reliant. He knew she was pursuing a fellowship

with one of the best hospitals in Seoul, and was being mentored by Dr. Park Minhø, a close friend of his. Clearly, she was not in love with Jihan—so this idea could not have been hers.

It was his son, so much like himself, who had conjured this plan. So the boy had gone against his wishes, like he did all the time. He knew Jihan hadn't wanted an arranged marriage, yet this wedding was exactly that. He could see it a mile away.

He was going to keep a close eye on them, he promised himself, as he walked across to the newly married couple standing on the steps against the backdrop of an idyllic church.

Katia was on edge; her back was ramrod straight and her eyes darted every time someone in a black suit moved. She smiled nervously when her father-in-law greeted her.

"Katia you look very beautiful today," he said taking her hand in his. "I'm sure Jihan's mother would be proud of the woman my son has picked for a wife."

He wasn't lying. She felt strangely familiar to him.

"Thank you, Mr. Kwan. You speak fondly of her; I would have loved to meet her. She must have been a beautiful woman."

"She was the most beautiful woman in the world for me. My daughter Eunhee takes after her in looks, but my wife's nature was much like yours—free spirited and true. I'm sure she's watching you from heaven now and smiling."

Katia felt a lump in her throat. She was duping this old man and the rest of the world. She was lying though her teeth, but there was no way of getting out of this wedding now.

In truth, Jihan's family had been welcoming from the moment the wedding was announced. From meeting the florists and caterers, to helping with her wardrobe and jewelry, they had assisted her with everything, and for that Katia was more than grateful. Her father-in-law actually took out time and accompanied her as she oversaw the wedding preparations.

Katia reminded him of his wife in so many invisible ways. The similarities were all in the details. He noticed Katia never showed any malice towards anyone. She could have been angry and resentful towards the many Koreans who had been arrogant and rude to her. At stores, restaurants and almost everywhere they went, she had been

forgiving, assuming the best of people—his wife had been the same. At every corner he saw his wife in Katia. Suddenly he realized, that Jihan probably did too.

He reflected on Jihan's choice. It was hard to find anyone who had not heard of the Kwans and their wealth. It would be harder to find a woman who would marry Jihan for any reason other than his money. But somehow, Jihan had managed to find a woman who was not blinded by his wealth.

Jihan turned towards his father and bowed formally, before the couple proceeded to the wedding car. Once inside, Jihan lost his smile. He gunned the Ferrari and they drove to the wedding hall.

“What was my father saying?”

“He talked about your mother.” She glanced towards him before saying, hesitantly, “It seems he really loved her. He must be missing her, especially on a day like today.”

Jihan gave a snort but didn't say anything. His relationship with his father was strained, but Katia was still unaware of the full extent of the estrangement.

Nevertheless, it struck him as odd when Katia asked to visit his mother's grave after the church ceremony. As per custom, he should have brought her here the day they were betrothed.

Katia laid her bouquet on the simple gravestone and they stood silently for a few minutes before they left for the reception.

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The celebration in the hall was a big affair. Katia was tired from all the greeting, smiling and pretense. She had dressed carefully, choosing a lace gown that made her alluring, and a veil that showcased her long brown hair, hoping she could make Junki, her ex, regret dumping her. Let him stew in his own juice. Damn him for leaving her.

Junki showed up all right, in all his blazing glory, with his wife, the daughter of the hospital director. He stuck to his wife during the whole reception and danced only with her; the two idiots looked like bananas glued together.

This was the guy she had given up a fellowship at Tulane for, following him blindly to god-forsaken Seoul. She had given up her career, her home and her future for this imbecile.

What was she thinking when she followed him halfway across the world? Had she been thinking at all?

Lost in thoughts of ‘what else have I given up for this asshole’, Katia was jolted back to reality when Junki and his wife came over to congratulate the couple.

Jihan had his own reasons for disliking Junki—not just because he was Katia’s ex. He thought Junki was a rat—just like Junki’s mother; both parasitic, opportunistic gold diggers.

She had destroyed his parents’ marriage and Jihan had always felt the need to compete with Junki, and to upstage him at every step. That, in fact, was one of the first reasons he had taken a closer look at Katia.

The first time he saw them together, he realized Junki was in love with her—enough to ask her to come to Seoul with him. She did seem like a catch, with her long brown hair, creamy golden skin and beautiful features—not quite western, not quite eastern.

She was educated, attractive, independent and intelligent—all qualities that set her apart from the many women pursuing him for his bank balance. He was intrigued.

Jihan put his arm ever so lightly around Katia’s waist.

“Lee Junki, this is my wife Katia. I’m sure you must have run into her at SGH. She is a gynecology-fellow there.”

Junki smiled narrowly.

“Oh, I don’t recall all the fellows there,” he pretended, “but yes I think we used to be on the same rotation. Maybe we’ve shared the same patients.” He punctuated his words with a false smile and handshake.

Jihan knew they had shared more than just patients. Smug bastard, he mused to himself. With an effort, he pulled his mind away from that line of thinking. At least Junki wasn’t broadcasting their affair. Good for all of them. The last thing he wanted was the media dragging Jihan’s carefully-built name in the mud.

“Well it’s wonderful to see you both. Congratulations.” The couple nodded and left.

Jihan noticed the death grip Katia had on his hand. It hadn't escaped him that she had been uncharacteristically silent throughout the exchange.

Katia quietly smiled and bowed to every one of Jihan's business associates, relatives and employees. There were three floors of people partaking in the sumptuous Korean fare laid out before them. This was far grander than anything she had expected. She knew the family was wealthy, but the magnitude of that wealth was just dawning on her.

Not that it mattered; Katia didn't require anyone's money, not even her husband's. She had done well for herself and over time had set aside quite a nest egg. In addition, the family property in her name back in India was worth millions now—most of it in suburban Mumbai.

Her silence lasted till they reached home. Katia was nervous about their wedding night. Jihan had not spoken about it.

His sister asked her to change into a lace chemise that concealed nothing. Katia found herself spilling out of the lingerie but wore it to please a giggling Eunhee. She walked to the French windows and sat against the cold granite, with the lights dimmed.

How did it get to this? How did she get dragged into a doomed, loveless marriage?

* * *

Junki was her only friend when she moved to the US to study. In a way, they were like peas in a pod. He could understand her reasons for escaping to a new country. Katia was running away from an overbearing, alcoholic mother and Junki was escaping his own smothering parent.

Katia was also fed up with her frivolous Anglo-Indian lifestyle. In all Anglo-Indian families, an ancestor somewhere along the line was British. In Katia's case, her paternal grandfather was a Scot and her grandmother was Indian. On her mother's side, her grandmother was British while her grandfather was Indian.

Anglo-Indians were given government jobs and housed in special quarters, setting them apart from the rest of the Indian folk. They spoke English at home and followed British society closely. They were

considered liberal and progressive, largely because theirs was the first community in India to give their women so much freedom, including the freedom to work outside the home.

All that changed after 1947, when the British left. Anglo-Indians everywhere were thrown out of their government jobs, evicted from their subsidized homes and treated with disdain by the locals.

Katia's parents had still lived well as they had inherited land and homes from their parents. Her father continued working for the railways while her mother worked as a secretary to a barrister. As a child Katia, had loved everything about her family, despite her mother's addiction to alcohol and the constant trouble it caused.

Her father's death when she was ten changed everything. Her mother struggled to make ends meet, her alcoholism, under control till now, worsened rapidly; the victim of her anger, grief and drunken rants was young Katia.

As she later found out, like Katia, Junki had also lost his father at a young age.

When they met for the first time, they were both outsiders in their class and were quickly labeled, 'the new Asian kids'.

It was their commonality that drew them together. They understood each other through their difficult pasts.

It only seemed natural then, as they began their residency at New York University and saw more of each other and less of everyone else, that they ended up together. Through four years of their residency, they saw each other every day. They were labeled a couple and neither of them denied it. She was there for him when things got rough and he became her anchor in difficult times.

When her mother passed away, he travelled with her to India. If it weren't for him, she would not have been able to bear the grief of losing the only family she had. In reality, other than him, she had nobody else who cared about her. He had become the central pillar of her life, without her realizing it.

During their residency, she brought up marriage several times. They were both physicians, had trained together and could set up a clinic together, with him as the pediatrician for her obstetric patients. As a team, they could have done very well, both at work and at home,

and it seemed only natural for them to take that step. But Junki shied away from commitment.

‘I can’t do it now, we’re too young’, ‘Can’t do it now, medicine is a bitch’, ‘Can’t do it now, twelve-hour shifts are killing me’, ‘Can’t do it now, I have to enlist in the military!’ and then finally, ‘Can’t do it now, because I’m marrying someone else.’

Bloody idiot! What a bucket-full of lies! All her dreams came crashing down when she heard that.

“Someone else? Since when?” she had asked heatedly.

“It just happened. I finished military duty and my mother had already picked the girl. There was no time to talk and explain our situation. Believe me, if there was something that could have been done, I would have done it. I’m sorry but nothing can be changed now. The wedding date has been confirmed; our families have exchanged gifts, we...”

“That’s it? You’re just fucking sorry?” She didn’t care if others could hear the expletive, not that they understood. This was Korea after all.

“You could have told me that you’d never convince your mother before I wasted the last five years with you, or before I gave up my offer at Tulane and accepted the freaking fellowship at Seoul General Hospital. Damn you Junki! Just sorry?”

Everyone in the hotel could hear her, knives and forks clinking like warning bells of a storm approaching.

“Look, calm down,” he whispered, stroking her hand.

She pulled away and flung her glass of water in his face, hissing, “Don’t touch me you smug son of a bitch. You finished military service yesterday, and today you’re engaged! This doesn’t happen all of a sudden. I wasn’t born yesterday. You must have had this planned from the very beginning. My only question is—why did you leave me hanging? You could have ended this months, years ago.”

Junki wiped his face with a napkin, and tried desperately to calm her down. “I don’t know Katia, I thought you might...”

“I might what? Be so in love with you that I would wait around forever? Not complain that you used up the best years of my life and threw me away once you were finished? How could you do this to me after everything we’ve been through together?”

“You asked me to come here remember? Begged me in fact. You promised me you would bring your mother around, and that after I adjusted to the culture it would be fine. I waited for you while you finished your military training. How can you just dump me now?”

He wiped his mouth carefully with the napkin, folded it neatly, and then stood up. He pushed his chair in and bent down to meet her eyes.

“You know what? I don’t give a damn. I came here to make a clean break of things, but you’ve been a real bitch today. I mean come on, we’re two different people. You’re an Anglo-Indian and I’m Korean. I can do much better than you. My fiancé owns SGH, yes you heard right, she’s the major stakeholder at SGH. If I were to marry you, what would I get? Tied to you, I would have to work my butt off just to have a practice, let alone a successful one. Besides, you’re an outsider. No one really likes you here. I would only feel shackled with you.”

He threw a bundle of notes on the table. “I’m engaged Katia and I can’t afford a public scandal—so this is it. It’s over. I hope we never have this conversation again. Your mother was right; you’re not worth it, Katia. No man in his right mind could ever want you, least of all a Korean man.”

Katia felt the sting of his words. Her eyes blinded with tears, she caught hold of his wrist as he walked past her. She remembered everything—her mother’s sharp criticism, the rejection from her peers and now this cold treatment from the only person that mattered to her—and couldn’t bear it.

“Did you ever love me?” she choked out.

He heard the cry caught in her throat, could almost touch the unshed tears, but he stared straight ahead at the door. He couldn’t believe he had just said all those things to her. But he had to.

He had tried to convince his mother but she would not budge. She had even threatened to destroy the girl’s career if he persisted. All he wanted now was for Katia to go back so that she would be safe.

“I did love you Katia. I still do. I loved the woman who taught me to experience life in its simplicity. I loved that girl who had few dreams but filled them with larger-than-life characters. But that dream isn’t for me.

“In Korea I am with my own people. They will never accept you. You don’t belong here. I have tried, but my career is dependent on the

support of other people and with you...” he paused, searching for words. “Go back Katia. Forget me. I tried telling you that it was not working out before I left for the military, but you just didn’t get it. I don’t want to struggle for a better life when I can have it now. This is the choice I have made and I will have to live with it. Forgive me.”

He pulled his wrist out of her grip and walked away.

She took the bundle of notes and slowly walked to the bar in a daze. She didn’t notice the men sitting on the stools. She ordered two tequilas and made a request to keep them coming, throwing the wad of notes to the bartender. He raised an eyebrow but kept pushing the drinks.

Katia had a drink and let her tears run. All those years wasted! All that time down the drain, waiting for Junki to marry her; she had turned down so many other men for the selfish bastard. She downed another tequila; her tears weren’t going anywhere but south. She tried to smother her emotions with the tequila, but it didn’t help.

He had changed after they had come to Seoul. But she had been too blind to see it. He didn’t like to be seen in public with her. If they went out, it was to faraway places, miles away from Seoul, where no one would recognize them.

Most weekends he would go to *soju* drinking parties with his friends, leaving her feeling lost and lonely. She didn’t have many friends as few Koreans were open to making friends with an outsider. To add to it all, Hangul was not an easy language and she had needed help in learning it; help that had never come from Junki.

She had held on, hoping that one day he would remember the girl he saw when they first became friends. Today, it seemed like the boy she had met and known all these years was lost to her—lost in Seoul.

Katia downed another drink, sighing heavily and banging the glass down with a thud. There was a slight buzz in her ear and the drinks made her feel distinctly dizzy. Her tears had dried up, and she suddenly realized that the bar was empty, except for one man.

“I asked everyone to leave,” the handsome stranger on the barstool said in response to her bewildered look.

“Aww, you shouldn’t have done that. If you thought I was causing a scene, you should have asked me to leave instead. I would have been happy to oblige,” she said bitterly.

She was feeling reckless; who knew a few drinks would give her so much confidence? In fact, her conversation with Junki would have gone more in her favor if she had downed a couple of these before the whole episode. She made a face, disgusted with herself and the wasted opportunity.

Jihan was mildly offended. He was expecting her to be grateful for his chivalry. After all, it was her problem that she had expected commitment from a man like Junki.

“Dealing with a break up is bad enough, but putting on a public display of that pain is worse. We Koreans are very sensitive people,” he said gently. Then added, “Not to mention the wonderful after-effects of tequila come morning.”

“Gee, thanks Dad!” she said, eyeballing his drink.

Jihan looked at his neat whisky and ran his fingers through his hair.

Was she this uninhibited because she was drunk or was she always like this? He was even more intrigued.

He had to see this woman again.

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The next morning, when Katia came to her sense, her roommate Hani told her that a handsome man had brought her home. She was grateful to the stranger that she vaguely remembered. Truth was—everything was a blur after that fourth tequila.

Hani drove her to work that day and by mid-afternoon, Katia was staring at a dozen white roses from a secret admirer; that’s what the card said. She wondered if Junki regretted storming off yesterday. Were the roses some sort of peace offering or truce?

Even though she had been dumped the night before, she was secretly hopeful, wondering if the flowers were a start to salvaging their relationship somehow. Love cannot be just uprooted and buried in a day.

At the end of a long day, which included three C-sections, she walked to the parking lot.

“What’s with all the flowers? That guy must really like you.” Hani said when she saw Katia carry the bouquet to their shared accommodation.

Katia brushed the comment off. When she reached her room, to her surprise, four more bouquets of white roses greeted her.

Any illusions she had that the flowers were from Junki died. He would never do something this impulsive or expensive for her. They must be from the man who had brought her home last night. But she couldn't care less. Her heart was broken and there was no room for anyone else.

Katia was filled with despair. What was she going to do now that she didn't have Junki? It wasn't like he had been there for her during the past two years. But she had built all her dreams around him and they had been shattered in one go. She had expected him to propose to her after he came out of the military; had hoped she could convince him to move to New York. Now she felt like a fool. He had left a huge void and she didn't know what she was going to do. Without him, her life had become hazy, with no goal or purpose.

She began to visit Seoul's Grand Park in the evenings and walk for hours on end, till the pain in her legs eased the pain in her heart. She didn't look around her. The families and couples walking there only reminded her of what she had lost out on. The trees and flowers dancing to the music of the wind soothed her when she felt claustrophobic and lonely.

When she had first come to Seoul she had fallen in love with the fine balance between nature and architectural sophistication. Now she felt broken and that love turned into contempt.

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A few weeks later, Katia travelled to the Cheongnam district where the female workers of a particular company had volunteered to be part of her study program. It was a welcome distraction.

Kwan Jihan, who owned the factory and had engineered the collaboration, keenly observed her as she met with the volunteers. Her nurse seemed to be translating for her.

He watched her smile and laugh with the women and children. She seemed happier today. Her long, brown, almost waist-length hair swayed in the breeze. She looked beautiful and serene.

“The people are very happy to see you here, Doctor. It's nice that SGH has chosen everyday working women as part of the study.”

Katia looked up from her paperwork and gawked at the guy in front of her.

His suit was immaculate and obviously very expensive. She knew her anatomy well enough and this guy was a wonderful specimen.

At six feet tall he was lean but toned. His sleeves fit well which meant he worked out. And his smile melted her insides. But she didn't want to be nice to him. She didn't want to let him know he had an effect on her.

“Most studies are done this way, I assure you,” she replied with ice-cold reserve.

He didn't expect her 'go to hell attitude.' Had she forgotten who he was by any chance? Might be best to refresh her memory.

“Don't you remember me? We've met before.”

Katia looked unfazed. She didn't remember who he was; if their meeting had been significant, she would have. He was probably using a line on her. The thought of Junki crossed her mind and she wanted to lash out.

“I usually remember faces, but I guess for you I made an exception.”

The smile on Jihan's face vanished and his eyes turned glacial. This woman knew how to use her words as weapons. He feigned indifference.

“That's a shame,” he rolled out smoothly in impeccable English. “Keep up the good work,” he added, and walked away.

Katia felt chilled to the bone as he left the large building. She knew she had made him angry; that had been her intention. But in hindsight it didn't seem like the right thing to do.

Jihan didn't like being brushed off. He simply wasn't used to that kind of thing. He was the Kwan heir, the man whom nobody refused, least of all a woman. But *this* woman, spitfire that she was, didn't seem to care.

He would *make* her care. Somehow.

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