

Will You Do What It Takes?

By Jina Kim

It was during one summer late-night study session at school when I first noticed him—his pale face, blood-red lips, and long strands of dark hair falling perfectly into his forehead, like a hot vampire. I was re-reading a math problem that was on one of the practice college exams for the bajillionth time, but at almost midnight, it was hard not to mindlessly trace the harsh chalk lines of ‘LATE NIGHT STUDY SESSION’ written in giant letters on the blackboard in front or to notice how the gray walls of classroom 3-2 remind me of prison walls. I painfully forced my dry eyes shut. I knew it was probably time to take a breath, but my stubborn pride refused to let go of the question. *This is literally middle school math. You should be able to do this.* I chastised my incompetency as I combed through the equation. I walked myself through the steps in my work. I tried to stay calm and logical. What pattern wasn’t I seeing? What had my calculus teacher said about these kinds of questions before? Wait, had that minus sign always been there? Well, shit. That changes everything. I erased all the scribbles on the paper. It tore slightly.

Exasperated, I sighed, taking off my glasses and rubbing my eyes. My brain was crashing on me. *No, Haeun. Get back to it. Just this last question and you can take a break.* I told myself. I just couldn’t accept the fact that something so insignificant as this math problem was kicking my ass. It wasn’t actually insignificant at all though. I could have moved on from one math question, yet this one question held the influence to make or break my ranking and the duality of its immense power and inconsequentiality made me question everything I knew. Resentment bled into my mood as I cursed the Korean education system for making such a “one size fits all” kind of test, my older sister for setting an impossibly high standard with her Seoul Uni

acceptance, but mostly myself. For failing over and over and over again. At what, I didn't know. Even this uncertainty felt like a failure.

My mom's voice echoed in my head. "Triumph is never giving up." She said these words often to be encouraging. The idea that success is nothing else but tenacity could be comforting to some. But to me, those words have always felt like extra weight on my shoulders. Like if I do anything else but study, I'm not trying hard enough to achieve the results I want. I was thinking about those words as I debated whether or not to stand up from my small desk, tucked by the broom closet in the corner of the classroom. Maybe go to the bathroom and refresh a little. But I couldn't ignore the feeling that making any move away from this question would be me accepting defeat. It's a slippery slope from an unimpressive college exam score to the dreaded gap year to a no-name college, and finally, a dead-end job doing menial work at a small company where all the employees are in denial of their aggressive mediocrity. A senior's worst nightmare.

Hot-Vampire-Guy awakened me out of my spiral. He was sitting right below the window, 2 seats behind the girl who ranked number one school-wide on the most recent exam. I squinted at him, wondering—*Has he always been in your class? Damn, you really gotta start paying attention to your classmates.* I examined this mysterious guy. His self-suredness caught my eye. Actually, no, that's a lie. His resemblance to Jin from BTS is what caught my eye and kept it there...staring...for a few good minutes. His self-suredness was certainly notable. It was rare for a student in my class. Even the smart, high-ranking ones always seemed to be chasing something, as if they knew their position was precarious, always being sought after by all of us underneath.

He was working on something, scribbling away. He ran his hands through his hair, never letting his gaze leave the page. The only thing in the world that mattered to him at this moment

was him and his question. He was giving it attention, love—coaxing out the answer to its mystery. When he was done, he smirked as if the question had requested to be solved and he had satisfied its wish. He put his hands on his hips and stretched in his seat, turning his body from side to side. When his back faced me, I couldn't help but look at his shoulders that seemed to go on for miles—they seemed like they could hold the weight of the world. My eyes traced his biceps, peeking out from under his uniform sleeve, then his forearms, veins popping, and then his big hands. He was still holding his black mechanical pencil, the kind with an eraser at the end of it. It was white and clean. In a split second, irritation rose to the surface. *Why are you gawking at this guy, Hauen? You must have a lot of time on your hands right now.* I shook my head and snapped out of it.

The feelings of inadequacy crept in as I glanced at my unsolved math problem and my worn-out strawberry cake eraser on the paper right next to it, barely even recognizable as a strawberry cake now. I remembered I had bought that eraser with earnestness on a back-to-school shopping spree with my friends, thinking—hoping—that this small symbolic thing would bring some whimsicalness into combatting what is the most intense, most difficult, most depressing time of a Korean adolescent's life. Yeah, right. All it turned out to be was evidence of my countless mistakes. And a reminder that I have to buy a new eraser.

Hot-Vampire-Guy turned my way, still stretching. He met my eyes, and, with no change of expression, waved. I glanced behind me because he couldn't have been waving at me. My neighbor had her earphones in, head stooped down, lost in the gibberish of her textbook...Possibly falling asleep? I looked back towards the windows, confused, and I waved back a little cautiously. Handsome guys usually never take interest in me.

Break time came. Relieved for a legitimate excuse to stand up, I left my desk to go to the hole-in-the-wall convenience store downstairs. As I was walking down the darkened and empty halls, I quickened my pace. It was starting to get creepy and the urban legend of the senior that haunted the women's bathroom started to roam rent-free in my mind. Hot-Vampire-Guy seemed to materialize in front of me as I turned the corner. He had been walking back to the classroom with two Banana Milks in each hand.

"Oh, shit!" I exclaimed, nearly falling back, my heart pounding in my temple. "You scared me."

"Sorry, sorry. Are you okay?" He grabbed my waist just as I was about to fall. I vaguely felt the coldness of the Banana Milk he had in that hand pressed against my lower back. He had the most perfect skin. His eyebrows were furrowed in concern. When was the last time someone's gaze pierced through me like this? I blushed and pushed myself out of his grip, trying desperately to compose myself.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks."

"I didn't mean to scare you." Pause. He bashfully looked down at his drink. "I actually got this Banana Milk for you. I noticed you earlier. You seemed really frustrated with your studying and I thought you could use some encouragement." He handed me the drink.

"Wow, that's really nice... Thank you."

We slowly trudged back to the classroom. Some guys ran down the hallway past us to get a snack from the convenience store before break was over, nearly knocking Hot-Vampire-Guy down. They didn't seem to notice. *Rude*. I was used to being invisible, but I was surprised that he seemed just as unnoticed by everyone else.

"What's your name?" Hot-vampire-guy asked.

“Haeun.” He was making me nervous.

“Do you go to cram school?”

“Yeah. I go to one in Daechi.”

“Wow, Daechi. Must be expensive.”

I felt embarrassed for some reason. I wondered how he would react if he knew I was paying all that money for my mock exam score to be on the lower side. If someone wasn't getting a near perfect score while attending a reputable Daechi cram school, that typically warranted people to assume this person was stupid. *I* would assume I was stupid.

“My parents think sending me to the best cram school will automatically get me into the best university. They're very big about wanting me to get into Seoul Med School...My sister's a 3rd year there right now. My parents are both doctors, and if their children don't continue their legacy, they're pretty much excommunicated by the doctor community apparently. So they're very willing to pay the money.” I drawled, as I rolled my eyes.

“So, is that where you want to go?” He asked, curiously.

Isn't that where everyone wanted to go? I opened my straw wrapper and fiddled with it, taking my time opening my drink, hoping he wouldn't notice that I was stalling at what a difficult question that was to answer.

“I guess I do. I mean, that's the only place that can 100 percent guarantee a job right after graduation, right?”

We stopped in front of the classroom door, and he leaned against the wall, crossing his legs. He studied the ceiling, deep in thought. “That's what we're told. I think there are different paths to any end. It depends on what you want.”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty sure *everyone* wants to go to a good college and then get a great job. Then they get married and have kids and then want that all over again for their children.”

He chuckled. “Maybe you’re right, but some people just want peace. No need for the fancy degrees or the 80 hour work weeks. Shall we?” He smiled and gestured towards the door.

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I took my time walking home that night. When the supervising teacher dismissed us, Hot-Vampire-Guy had been the first to leave. He flashed a white-toothed grin at me and raised his hand.

“See you tomorrow, Haeun.” He called out from all the way across the room, the deep pitch of his voice vibrating through my body. Not even the teacher looked up, but I awkwardly smiled back.

The giant department store, Lotte World, and the world-renowned skyscraper on my walk home seemed lifeless. Their blinding neon lights were off, the normally hypnotic signs shockingly unremarkable. The moon was shrouded by the wispy, fog-like clouds of late night air. As I entered my apartment complex and got closer home, the gray brick roads and the towering apartment buildings darkened my vision and I felt like I was being swallowed by nothingness. *Nobody would miss you if you were gone.*

The encounter with my new mysterious classmate lingered in my head. Did it really matter what I wanted? I was never asked what university I wanted to go to, or if I even wanted to go to university. It’s a known fact that any serious employer would not just reject, but laugh at a mere high school graduate. What other possibilities could there have been? My parents had told my sister and I repeatedly, since we can remember, that going to med school would be our life goal and that there was no better place to go than Seoul Uni. I remembered announcing to my

parents, when I was about 10 years old, that I wanted to be an actress and star in Hollywood movies. It was obviously the naive dreams of a 10 year old who had just seen *The Lion*, *The Witch*, and *The Wardrobe* in theaters. My mom freaked out so hard that she sat me down at the kitchen table. She scolded me about how she would never raise an entertainer and her shadow loomed over me as she dictated words for a contract that I was to handwrite, vowing that as long as I was her daughter, I would go to medical school. Even as a child, I was so confused. I didn't want to go to med school, but I didn't want to stop being her daughter. How was I supposed to fight back against that?

It feels like since I was born, my time was expected to be invested into figuring out the most stable future, risks taken in anything other than what is known to achieve a certain reliable success looked down on. The only accepted paths were the ones that fit into the mold of duty, stability, and money. But really, it was more than that. If I didn't achieve exactly what my family expected of me, I would cease to matter to them.

I arrived home and walked into the kitchen. "I'm home!" I yelled out. I rummaged through the fridge; I was always starving after late-night study sessions. My mom walked in.

"Haeun, you got your score for your mock exam today right? How'd you do? Did you rank?"

I froze. Telling her now was sure to ruin my snack. My parents thought so little of me already. "It was...okay. I didn't do terribly."

Pause.

"What did you get?"

I felt my heart pounding and the blood rushing to my face. We had this conversation over and over. It never ended well, yet my mom never got tired of having it. What tactic would I take

this time? Act angry about her confrontation—much angrier than she would probably get—so she couldn't say a word? Could I get away with completely avoiding her and this whole conversation, disappearing back outside where I was isolated but protected from the scrutinizing eyes of my parents?

No, I was too much of a chicken for any of that. I didn't have the guts to face my mom's relentless and nasty sentiments about what I was supposed to be doing with my life. I yielded, as I always did. I told her my score.

She wordlessly sighed and sat down. I closed the fridge. I didn't want my snack now anyway. We sat in the heavy air for a minute. I could tell my mom was also contemplating her own tactics on how to approach this. The tension was making it hard to breathe. I tried not to make it obvious that I was tearing up, keeping my shaky breath as level as possible.

"Haeun-ah."

I kept my eyes on the ground.

"Where is your mind these days?" Her voice was strained, as if she was making an effort with these stinging words to be kind. "You need to get your act together. What have you been doing?"

"Mom, I've been working hard, I swear. It's just difficult."

She was sick of hearing that one and I knew I struck a nerve. It would become a yelling match now. Her voice rose.

"If you were studying so hard, you'd be doing better! Do you know how much I invest in your cram school education? Do you think the Daechi cram schools are cheap or easy to get a spot in? The waitlists are insanely long. Some students would be dying to take your place! I don't understand, Haeun. You have all the resources. Are you just dumb?"

“What mother calls her daughter dumb? You always assume the worst of me! You always assume I’m never trying, but I am! What can I do if I’m trying but still not improving?”

“Then you just try harder! Do you think the real world will be kinder than me? You have to strive for perfection to move yourself up and that goes for out there too! Is that so hard to understand? You lack the grit and you’re not calculating enough about your future and sometimes, I think if you were on your own, without me and Dad, you’d never survive.”

My dad came out of the room. “What’s going on? It’s the middle of the night.”

“Ask your daughter.” My mom spat out.

My dad looked over at me. I couldn’t anymore. I grabbed my wallet and stormed out the front door, heading to the 7 Eleven a block away.

“Haeun, where are you going?” I heard my dad calling out, but I didn’t look back. I hated them. I hated myself. Why couldn’t they just love me for who I was? Why couldn’t I just be what they wanted me to be? *You’ll never be enough for them.*

I ran all the way, legs burning, tears streaming. I was sick of it all. Of feeling like I always had to defend myself. Of feeling like nobody in the world was interested in what I had to say or in my well-being. Of feeling like there were no exceptions or excuses I could give for not meeting the impossible standards. Of feeling like all there was to life was learning how to survive it.

When I got to the store, I walked in to get a cup ramen, cool myself off and head back home. That usually did the trick. Maybe a spicy one to sweat out all the anxiety. After that, I would go home and slip into my room before anyone had a chance to say anything else to me. As I got my ramen, filled it with hot water, and sat down at one of the white plastic patio tables, I

saw Hot-Vampire-Guy again. He was heading into the store, dressed in black Adidas sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt. He stopped in his tracks when he saw me, smiled, and walked to my table.

“Hey, do you live in this neighborhood?” He asked.

“Yup.”

He peered at my face, still puffy and hot. “Have you been crying?”

And before I knew it, I was spilling everything to this stranger about my mom, about my insufficient exam scores, about needing to go to Seoul University or else, about feeling like if I didn’t meet my parents’ expectations I wouldn’t be worthy.

“I feel like there has to be more to life than just school. There’s so much that I don’t know about myself, about what I want. But if I said this to my parents, I’m pretty sure they would stop talking to me. They’ve stopped talking to me for a lot less. One time I told them that I wanted to join a non-academic club during my freshman year and we got into a fight about how that was a waste of time. They wouldn’t look at me for weeks after that conversation. I don’t even remember what club it was, but that really woke me up to the fact that they’re not really interested in anything about me other than how I’m doing in school.” He listened intently with an expression of sympathy, and touched my shoulder ever so gently.

“That must be so hard.”

“Even the girls I used to be friends with back in middle school, we don’t talk about anything real. When we catch up, we only talk about our grades, and I feel like we’re secretly just trying to check if we’re doing better than each other. I feel so alone that it’s exhausting. You don’t feel this way at all?”

He placed his warm hand gently on top of mine. “Of course I feel that way. All the time. I don’t really have any family or friends. To be honest, I’ve...actually stood on top of a bridge at Han River before. I would have jumped if someone hadn’t called 911 on me.”

I was shocked. I never would have guessed that he had thought about something so extreme as suicide. “I’m so sorry to hear that..”

“It’s okay. It’s not something that’s super dark or scary for me. To me, it’s just another path. It feels safe and welcoming on the other side, like it has the answers on loneliness and happiness that this world simply doesn’t. I just need to be brave enough to pursue it. Maybe this is what you need, too.”

Just then, a drunk man came up to me and pointed to the chair Hot-Vampire-Guy was sitting in, asking “Heeeeey miss, this char...no...chair...empty right? You using it?”

I glared at him. “Obviously, someone’s sitting there right now.”

He looked at me strangely and then at the chair. As he walked away, he grumbled, “The fuck is she talking about...Empty chair..Bitch just doesn’t want to share...Rude.”

I turned back to my friend, but he was already up, ready to leave. Stroking my hair, he said, “I have to go, but we’ll talk soon. I’ll see you at school tomorrow.” With that, he left.

After I slurped my ramen quickly, I snuck back into my house successfully. I laid down in bed and thought about Hot-Vampire-Guy’s hand on my shoulder, his touch loaded with compassion. I blushed and pulled the covers up to my face. It was a warm feeling, to be validated. One small thing was nagging me, though. What did he mean when he said that’s what I needed? He probably meant bravery. Or maybe he meant I needed to find my own path to happiness. I didn’t know, but he said we would talk about it soon and I believed him.

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Over the next few weeks, we continued to get to know each other. Our conversations and his growing presence in my life quickly became the highlight of my life. He brought out a side of me I never knew I had. We skipped class and late-night study sessions. He taught me how to smoke cigarettes and all the while, he listened to me talk and complain. He never once made me feel like I had to be more. It was thrilling and refreshing, to be able to talk without fear of judgment, and it became excruciating to sit in the suffocation of my day-to-day life. I slept during class and I stopped doing homework or studying for tests. I cut out my old ‘friends’ entirely and I avoided my parents as much as I could. None of what held me together before sustained me any longer in any way. I felt no desire to further my life, to think about the future or to do anything other than what I felt like doing in the moment. One time, instead of going to late-night study session, Hot-Vampire-Guy shoplifted a bottle of soju from a convenience store manned by an uninterested part-time worker, and we drank it on a bench overlooking the gray river under the giant Jamsil Bridge. It made me feel like I wanted to vomit at first, but after a few shots, I sunk into the seat, feeling relaxed. I leaned on his broad shoulders, pushing my nose into his shirt, shamelessly smelling his detergent.

Looking at me fondly, he tapped my head. “Haeun, you okay?”

“Yeshhhh” I groaned.

He smiled and turned his head back to the view. “Do you think the water would be cold?”

“Hmm...Probably make your balls fall off.” I closed my eyes.

“I still think about it sometimes, the night I almost jumped.” I was suddenly wide awake, stone-cold sober. “I wonder what you would have done, if you were there with me that night.”

I sat up. “I would have stopped you, of course. You deserve to live! Don’t even think about that. Don’t leave me here by myself.” I said, choking up.

“I don’t think I could ever be happy alive, Haeun.”

“I’ll make you happy. I promise you. I’m doing everything you want me to. I’m letting you show me all these new things. It’ll get better. Just don’t abandon me, please.” I gripped his arm tightly, afraid that if I let go he would vanish.

“I don’t want you to talk me off the ledge.”

“But that’s the right thing to do. If you died, I could never live with myself. If you feel like there’s nothing else to live for, look at me... I’m here.” I begged.

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The bleakness didn’t disappear. At this point, I don’t think I even wanted it to. It felt too deep-rooted, as if it was a part of me, a part of my nature that came by honestly. I wanted to drown in it. I wanted to give everything else up. The more I allowed Hot-Vampire-Guy to immerse himself into my life, the more my life seemed to stop. My teachers noticed too and today, I got called into the office by my homeroom teacher, a short, balding man with a pot belly and quick temper—the kind of teacher that was a little ruder to his girl students.

“Haeun, sit down.” He said, pulling out the wooden back scratcher he had furiously been scraping his chest with from underneath his untucked shirt and pointing it to the seat in front of him.

I sat down.

“Do you know why I called you in?” He said as he lightly swiveled his chair. He sat with his body slid down to the edge, accentuating his round belly. Condescending prick.

I stayed silent. There was no satisfying answer I could give him.

“You’re falling behind. You should be improving but your scores are dropping. You haven’t been doing your homework and your teachers say you aren’t focusing in class. You need

to get your shit together. The college entrance exams are in a few weeks. Think about your parents who are slaving away for you so that you could have a future.”

The shame hit, but I persisted. “Mr. Ahn, I don’t think this route is for me. Is there anything else out there that I could do?”

“Haeun. Come to your senses. You’re not musically or artistically talented nor are you particularly good at a sport. You’re not a very interesting person either. I mean, you don’t have a bright personality at all. In fact, you always look depressed to the point where it annoys me to look at you. Who are you to ask for something else? No, I’ve seen a lot of students like you and the best thing in my expert opinion is to just stick it out. I’m sure you can stick out a few more years, since given your last mock exam score you’ll probably have to do *jaesoo*.”

This was all I could handle. I was done. Mr. Ahn’s words cut deep, but rather than pain and humiliation, something different stirred within me. It was wrath and bitterness and the need to do something drastic. I rushed out of the office and in the hallway, I found him—my savior.

“I’m so tired.” I told him.

He hugged me, his cheek resting on the top of my head. “Let’s rest. This world is not for us.”

I looked up at him and it all came together. His words finally made sense. He didn’t want me to keep him from jumping off the bridge. He was talking about something greater. Something irreversible. I understood now what my destiny was—what happiness was mine to pursue. It was him. It was Death.

I nodded resolutely and, holding out my hand, asked “Shall we?”

I walked to the gym with Death. We went up to the 2nd floor viewing platform above the basketball court. It was high up enough where it would be immediate. He took the rope from me,

beaming at me with pride. He murmured in my ear how brave I was, how rewarding it would be, and how grateful he was that he found someone that would do this for him. It felt so gratifying to be acknowledged. I would finally be free. I watched in a trance as he tied the ropes to one of the railings, making a tight knot, tugging at it a few times to ensure its secureness. He then handed me one noose, wrapped it around my neck and then one to his own, and tightened it ever so tenderly, as if he were tying a scarf on my neck and not the instrument to my end.

I took a deep breath and jumped. This felt right. I was never dedicated enough to cut through fierce competition. I wasn't meant to climb my way up a corporate ladder. I wasn't destined to survive this merciless world any longer. I chose peace. I once heard on the 11 o'clock news my dad is always watching when I get home from cram school that everyday 37.5 people commit suicide in South Korea, meaning out of the 51.63 million Koreans 13687.5 of them annually jump off a bridge, hang themselves, inhale carbon monoxide, or in some way or another make an extreme decision in order to prioritize themselves over paying the unreasonably, immorally expensive price of living. I'd never been in the top 0.0003 percent of anything. Now I am.