

STEAM IRONS OF SEOUL

I.

We all have our tribulations – those of us who live far from our native lands. We all want to square what we feel is just and fair with the unfathomable human nature on display around us. Mostly, though, we just want to *understand*. For months now, for instance, I've been trying to figure out what Koreans do to their steam irons on the weekends. I do not know what they do, but I believe they must grievously mistreat their steam irons on the weekends.

The situation is this: My phone number is 8-6-1-1. The phone number of the Philips people – the Dutch company that markets quality steam irons here in Korea – is 8-6-6-1. (I won't burden you with our three-digit Seoul prefix. And I get my share of phantom rings and crank pranks these days as it is.) Every Monday morning I receive at least one wrong number phone call. It's always somebody who wants to talk to Philips. Or *Pee-leeps*, if you like. It's always a guy with a hoarse hungover wheeze or else a lonely sounding lady in a state of near panic who wants me to connect them to the Steam Iron Repair Department.

This is as much as I care to get out of them. I tell them I'm a foreigner – *Waykook saram imnida* – and then they hang up. Sometimes they call right back again with the same routine and sometimes it takes them just the one shot to figure out who I'm not. I'm not the Philips Steam Iron Repair Department. Never was. No connection to them at all.

Of course nothing of this speaks to my original perplexity, which is what Koreans do to their steam irons on the weekends. Quite frankly I'm baffled. I know this is another culture and I'm not supposed to question their ways. Their ways are just as beautiful as my own – only different. But they are doing something to their steam irons on the weekends that is probably not nice. Maybe I should call up the UN. Maybe they could refer me to

some do-gooder NGO that handles missions like this. Or maybe I should just shut up and mind my own business.

It's just that on Monday mornings I like to start the week right. I like to get off on the right foot, so to speak, on the first morning of the new week. Especially after the things I do and don't do on the long, lonely weekends here in Seoul. And I don't even own a steam iron here in Korea. I don't have one, which upon reflection may lie at the root of all my bewilderment.

II.

So I go out and buy myself a Philips steam iron. A nice one. Top of the line, in fact. A Philips Propavore Aurora Mistral 4000 with a Karezza™ soleplate, nine heat settings, continuous steam output of up to 40g/min as well as a 90g Shot o' Steam™. I even buy an ironing board to set this baby on. One of those Asian-style ironing boards that sits just a few inches off the floor. One of those ironing boards that look like they're designed for legless amputees or other unfortunates.

The weekend rolls around and I wait to see what's going to happen. Friday night. Nothing. All day Saturday and then Saturday night. Nothing and again nothing. Sunday morning and then Sunday afternoon. Ditto. Nada. So it's Sunday night. My new Philips Propavore Aurora Mistral 4000 sits there on the ironing board with its four stubby legs like some sort of prehistoric earth-hugging creature mounted on its mother's back. Good, I decide. At least something's happening. In my imagination, anyway.

Of course Sunday nights are lonely times for bachelors like me. All the pent up frustration of a thousand misspent weekends begins to seethe. The sense of wasted life. The intimations of a profound and nameless disconnectedness and despair. I plug the steam iron into the wall socket and crank it up to Heat Setting Nine because I am fed up with

feeling so damn lonely on Sunday nights.

I want what people call an “objective correlative.” Some damn object out there in the world that feels what I feel. That knows and shares my solitude and isolation. The steam iron starts to get hot. Hotter. Cocked back on its haunch now, it’s even heating up the room. I mean it’s really cooking. I wet the tip of my finger with a film of saliva and touch the steam iron’s smooth underbelly. YOWCH! That’s HOT! So hot and yet so smooth too. I stroke the steam iron’s smooth underbelly again, this time without the protective film of saliva. It’s HOT as HELL. I mean it’s really HOT. With a blistered fingertip I press the Red Button on the handle of the steam iron and marvel – SSSSSST! – at the sheer primal force and energy of its 90g Shot o’ Steam™.

But it’s not enough. It’s just nowhere near enough. I want to touch the damn thing in a way no steam iron has ever been touched before. I want the smooth underbelly of the damn thing tonight and I don’t care what happens to either of us. Steam irons of course are not designed for this sort of relationship. This sort of household *ménage*. They are designed for ironing clothes. And not even all kinds of clothes. Certainly not for the kind of thing I have in mind. Not for the kind of thing that seems to me, now, suddenly, inevitable.

I unplug my Philips Propavore Aurora Mistral 4000 and let her cool down, let her slip deep into the untroubled dreamless sleep of unplugged home appliances. Helpless now, she rides there on the back of her ironing board mother like some forlorn species of fabulous sleeping snail beast that Time forgot. I reach out and pluck her off, cradle her iron shell in my aching arms, and hiss into her smooth soleplate my basest secrets, my crudest yearnings, my purest and most unspeakable human animal needs.

III.

The next morning – Monday morning -- I call up Philips and ask for the Steam Iron Repair Department. I talk to a sweet young thing who I imagine is sitting primly at a desk in a cluttered office. Perhaps she is sitting behind a window that looks out on the shop floor. Perhaps she is wearing a name tag that identifies her as “Miss Kim.” In fractured Korean I try to tell her what happened. What I need. She listens attentively, the soul of patience and empathy. She understands exactly what happened. How these things happen. What a client needs. She understands exactly what is wrong. I don’t have to explain. That, she assures me intimately, is why she is there.