

# “The changing fall leaves”

## *A Time of Transformation*

Written by Erin Hassanzadeh  
December 2014

---

It's pretty remarkable - the crisp fall breeze feels the same no matter where in the world you are.

When the cool, autumn air sweeps through this city – I swear, there's no better feeling. Fall is synonymous with change. The start of this transformative season brings the potential to start anew.

**The *idea* of starting-over can be as intoxicating as the fall air itself.**

For me, the familiar, cool fall breeze has this ability to put me in a trance. I can put my headphones in, stroll down the street and forget – even if for only a moment - where I am.

I snap out of my fall-induced trance to frantically dodge the deceptively attractive, mustard colored 은행 fruit blossoms that fall from the trees in sync with the dropping leaves. I still think it's strange that such a beautiful fruit can smell so awful.

A long, intense stare from a stranger is another guaranteed way to wake me and remind me, “You're not from around here.” “You're a foreigner...and you *look* like a foreigner...so people stare.” The strangers passing by on the street are too snapped out of their daily routines to stare and wonder, “What is she doing here?”

**I didn't come to Korea for a job.**

Let me rephrase that: I came to Korea for *much more* than just a job. I came to challenge myself and to make a transformation.

I am here serving as a Fulbright Korea Grantee. Which means I work as an English Teaching Assistant at a public school. The United States Fulbright Scholarship Program selects recent graduates to come serve not only as English teachers, but as “cultural ambassadors.”

The Fulbright Korea program is centered around the idea that grantees will have a “dual” experience during their time in this country. Not only working as a teacher but taking serious time and consideration to purposefully experience Korean life. We come to Korea knowing we will live with a host family to help us do just that. Our job goes beyond teaching classes. We are sharing our culture and language with Korean people and in exchange, we're absorbing as much about Korean culture as we possibly can. The idea being that we will share our discoveries about Korea with our friends, families and communities back in America.

There are 13 Fulbright teachers here in Daegu but the Fulbright Korea program has well over 100 English Teaching Assistants scattered in different cities throughout the country. It would be an understatement to call our group a random bunch. We have aspiring doctors, professors and journalists. We have history buffs and IT geniuses. We have people who can speak Korean fluently, people whose extended families live here in Korea and people who couldn't even

read Hangeul before stepping off the plane. So labeling our group as “random” doesn’t quite begin to cover it. And our motivation for coming to Korea varies as much as our future job aspirations.

I’m here to make a transformation; to transform into a more cultured and understanding person. I’m here to experience the nuances of daily Korean life. Of course, I am also here to teach. I love my students and I prioritize them and their learning above everything else.

But I’m here to learn that Koreans say if you make pretty 송편 (Songpyeon) during 추석 (Chuseok) you will have pretty babies. Or to learn that Korean families have separate kimchi fridges and that having a “small face” is beautiful by Korean standards. I’m here to see “couples outfits” in real life. (Let’s be honest, everyone remembers the first time they saw one in action.) I’m here to try to understand the tensions that still exist between Japan and Korea and to experience the American influence on Korean culture that came about as a result of the Korean War.

I’m here to stroll down the street and breath-in the crisp, fall breeze. I’m here to experience the little, insignificant moments of life in a different part of the world.

Growing up in America, fall always represented a fresh start for me. It was the start of a new school year and the time for back-to-school shopping with my mom for new notebooks and pencils.

This year, that autumn air certainly represents a new start - but not the start of a new school year or even a new job. It’s the start of my transformation

into becoming a more understanding person - a person who accepts and tries to understand the culture of this country. Taking the good with the not so good - the crisp, fall air with a few of the beautiful yet pungent 은행 blossoms.