



## Asian. Woman. Alone.

**Ayoung M. Kim**

Feng Liu Productions (April 2004)

Unknown \$14.95 (184pp)

978-0-9727089-1-3

A month before her wedding, the author abruptly calls it off, much to the displeasure of her family, who want to see her married and a mother as soon as possible. As a thirty-three-year-old Korean woman, her shelf life is about to expire. She is, however, a fiercely independent American woman and will not capitulate. Five months later, she sets out on a yearlong trip through Southeast Asia and Korea. What she sees on this journey is a mirror of the turmoil inside of her: beauty and ugliness trying to dominate each other, ultimately finding balance.

Any woman traveling by herself is bound to have adventures, and Kim has plenty of them. She spends eight days on retreat at a Thai Buddhist temple, trying to find “a deeper love,” but rebelling against the imposed outward asceticism. The fact that one of the monks can’t keep from molesting the male mediators doesn’t help. She travels through Laos and sees unspeakable cruelty—livestock animals treated as if their lives are already over. In Vietnam, she eats a fine dinner in a well-known restaurant, while out front, a young man drags a boy into the street, beating him severely, and no one does a thing to stop it. Kim, who is trying to become a good Buddhist, explains the frustration she feels about doing nothing, with a Buddhist’s rationale: “I ask for the ability to experience [love] in a deeper capacity because there is no other way. This life is too hard if you don’t have that shield. Life is unpredictable; at once exquisitely beautiful and painful.”

Her travels also take her to Korea, where she and her mother visit halmonee, her ancient grandmother who cannot understand why her granddaughter is so ungrateful for her good life, so ungrateful that she won’t marry like a good Korean woman. At first, Kim’s mother defends her, but she later confesses that she is afraid of her daughter, that she too does not understand her independent spirit. Kim admits to being full of ego, and at times, there is a danger that her writing will become slightly solipsistic. Yet she is a gifted writer and poet, one who speaks four languages and has published in *A. Magazine: Inside Asian American*. Her powers of observation produce a wisdom that is impressive in one who is still so relatively young.

OLIVIA BOLER (July / August 2003)

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