

Thieves Like Us	A Maintenance	2021
—	Man and	10
Documents	His Two Jobs	12
	—	
	The Double	
	Income Thief	

He was what is typically known as or called a 'soo-wee ajushi,' a position that perhaps has an indefinite translation or description in English. In the dictionary, officially it is presented as 'security guard', 'janitor' or 'caretaker.' From what I can see, it is truly a combination of them all. Perhaps even 'maintenance man' might be an accurate definition. Regardless of the terminology, these types of people are all over Korea. More often than not, many of them are tied or connected to a particular building, institution or space. It is their job to care for this building and all of the things that happen with, around, through and by this building. Together, perhaps akin to a clownfish and a sea anemone, two distinctly different organisms, with different purposes, that somehow reside together in perfect harmony. They need each other.

But this position, at best, is not a taxing position. When you pass these gentlemen on the way in and out of any of these buildings, you can see they are often battling nature. Fighting sleep. Fighting time. Or the passage of time. It is both an easy and difficult job if that makes any sense. Some days they must receive packages. Some days they must monitor parking situations. Deliveries. Some days, odds and ends around the building. Slight accidents. Borrowing out equipment. Very random things. But, never, almost never, ever a full day of work.

They are often required to remain on duty during odd hours. For many there are sleep quarters tucked inside of their offices and also required to sleep for twenty four hour maintenance or on-call responsibilities. So they sometimes are truly one with the building. A symbiotic relationship. But what perks may come with such a job. Not many. But perhaps, well, lots of doing nothing. Lots of time. Lots of monitoring security monitors with at the most, air passing by being recorded on them. In a place as safe as South Korea, well, again, this is not the most demanding job by any means.

How does one find this kind of job? Typically, or more often than not, this kind of work just kind of falls into your lap. Or comes by word of mouth. There is no active recruitment here. No job postings. A recommendation of a recommendation can slot you in. With that, comes not the greatest salary. But a salary nonetheless. And again, about as much stress as a bowl of ice.

Some folks fall into these jobs later in life. Rare, but not unusual for young folks to find themselves here as well. But for many, and for

whatever reason, their previous occupation did not work out. And they just ended up here. A kind of later life job to bring in some income where there was none before.

Jangok Soo Kyung was his name. A very uncommon name originating from Japan, he had never met anybody with his surname in his life. Despite his unusual name, he was about as normal as one might find on any given day in Seoul. He was a 'graphics' guy. In his previous job, he worked at a 'graphics' shop in Euljiro(an industrial area of Seoul). Producing for the most part, flyers, flimsy business cards and fabric banners for sales and events. He could be considered a 'graphic designer' through very generous definitions. He was educated via the unofficial apprenticeship system found in Euljiro. A friend of a friend recommended him. He comes to this job, knows nothing and is trained on the job. Mostly using illegally downloaded versions of Adobe products with similarly, lots of illegally downloaded fonts, the apprenticeship system here is extremely functional. Learn how to get it done, enough to get it done, then get it done. Most of the designers in this industry only use Adobe Illustrator. No such thing as InDesign or Quark here. No need for fine typography. Just enough to get it done.

He knew nothing when he came. But he eventually learned that Adobe Illustrator can do many great things. From moving things around to eventually figuring out how to output files, and then learning how to print things. Sooner than later, he knew enough to do quote, unquote, design. Enough to create some real beauties. Flyers for local Chinese restaurants. Menus for delivery, that had magnets stuck on the back so they could be placed on refrigerators. The use of lots of big, terribly designed, free fonts from websites with thousands of free fonts. Unnecessarily bright colors. Copyrighted images which they had NOT received permission to use courtesy of the internet. And because they were from the Internet, these images had the always classy extremely low resolution and some nice pixelation when printed. Yes, some real beauties were coming out of this shop. But he knew no better. This was work. This was design to him. This was food on the table.

But anybody who knows design, knows it's not for the old. It is a young person's game. And one day, as can happen, along comes another young fellow. Just like he did, ten years before, who knew nothing, was a recommendation from a friend of a friend, who similarly

went through the rough and tumble apprenticeship, trial by fire. And as young people do, he picked all things up extremely fast. So fast, so competent and even aesthetically, was able to accomplish things better than himself. What do these three things mean? When shit hits the fan, when work is no longer abundant, somebody has to go and that somebody is the one who no longer works fast. No longer is competent. And no longer makes things aesthetically pleasing. He was out of a job.

And he remained out of a job for quite some time. Almost a year exactly. This year was the first time ever he could feel the weight of stress. No income. Living off of the small amount of money he had put aside. Lost hair. Gained some weight. Not a good year. But as had always been the case for him, somehow, through yet another recommendation, he kind of fell into another job. One day, the phone rang and he had found his next job.

He would be now, a building maintenance man. A friend of a friend of a friend had recommended him. This building was an older Villa in the north of Seoul. The owner of the building was one of those old school types who believed those who he said he could believe. So no resume. No application. One day after meeting the owner, he had a new job.

It took some time to get used to. This new job. The commute, quite far up north. The new neighborhood. The lack of dining options in this residential part of the city. The work space itself, was extremely small. Claustrophobic. Almost suffocating. The residents of the building, were for the most part nice, but there were, as with most anywhere in the world, assholes. These assholes, as assholes sometimes do, spoke down to him, just because they could. Obviously a new kind of shitty feeling. The night shifts were also painful. A place to sleep next to his office for sure, but not ideal sleeping conditions. Not a mattress, but a sheet of polyurethane flooring over some wood. Just enough to sleep, but not comfortably.

Despite all of these things, this job was pretty as they say, 'cush.' He had time. Lots of time. Lots and lots of time. There would be days, where he would wonder, what he should be doing. There would be days where he would feel a tinge of guilt. Guilt for getting paid for this kind of job. For there would be days, hours at a time where he truly would be doing nothing. Accept and sign for a package here and there. Receive

a call about a parking spot mixup. That would be it. Then silence. So it was a struggle. Sometimes, this was the hardest part of the job. Doing nothing.

One day, it occurred to him, that if he was doing some things on the computer, he might be able to pass the time and it might appear as if he was working on something. At first he began to play the pre-installed Microsoft card game solitaire. This was good. Eating up a good several hours at a time. Mind numbing, yes. Exhilarating, no. But better than doing the nothingness that was so difficult to do. Better than staring out the window and hoping a bird might fly by. He had mastered the art of operating system window minimization. When somebody, if ever, would walk by, a simple click. Shrink. And nobody would know the better. Or he sometimes did the window switcheroo. Click on the window behind. Click on the window fullscreen button. In two clicks, two microseconds, nobody would ever know. He had mastered this.

And this went on for a few months. He eventually called his computer savvy friend to get him something besides solitaire. He could not take it anymore. And he received a USB stick with some crack/illegal games. Installed them. Not great games again. But the time started to fly. No more excruciatingly long days. No more staring at the sun.

One day, out of the blue, a former client who he had done some design for at the graphics shop rang him. Not knowing he no longer worked there, he had called requesting some design. Some updates to their menu. Some updates in price and perhaps a new look to catch up with the times. When this person called, his first gut reaction was to immediately tell this client that he no longer was at that graphics company and that he no longer was doing that kind of work. But a lot of thought can happen in a few microseconds. A lot of thinking can take place in this short amount of time. And he caught himself in those microseconds. Before admitting he was at a new job, he suddenly did the mid-sentence U-turn. One of those, 'ummmm, actually well, yes, yes, I can do that, 'we' can do that, sure, we'll get that to you right away' For he realized, he was sitting at a machine that could probably do what he needed to do. And with all his old contacts, he could probably get this sorted. He could most definitely do what was necessary to get the job done. He could do it.

He immediately called a buddy who happened to have a CD with all of the illegal software. Check. He then called another buddy who happened to have all of the illegal fonts that he had been using before. Check. He then called a buddy who was now working at another print shop to see if he could print with them. The answer, yes. Check. Within a day, he was up and running. The solitaire Windows machine, old, yes, but functional, yes. Adding a copy of Adobe illustrator, adding a few fonts, he was actually pretty good to go. And like that, he finished said design request. Sent it out. Had it printed. Bank transfer. Done. And during this time, during the daytime, he minimized his operating system windows only twice. Twice during those two days. And nobody had known otherwise. What had just happened? He had inadvertently, figured out, yet another way to kill time. But this time, he also, flipped a few coins. Made some side cash. And now, the wheels of his 57 year old brain, were in full motion. He got it.

So this restaurant owner, with low standards and a low budget, was obviously pleased with the results. And pleased to be reconnected, said he needed some other things updated too. New business card. A couple promotional flyers. And a banner in the front door to advertise that they would be open during the holiday season. One, two, three, he did it all. His aesthetics, suspect, his font choice, equally suspect. But this client, well, he didn't care. He could not tell it looked amateurish. It was clear, people could read it, that was enough. He was happy. He was happy enough that he also recommended his cousin, another restaurant owner, who also needed an entire new graphic setup for his new restaurant as well.

One by one, these kind of calls slowly increased. Slowly continued to come in. He was happy. Time was being killed. And now he had more money coming in. But ever so occasionally, father guilt would sometimes call him. Talk to him. Was this right? He was doing the operating system window minimize several times a day. But it was cleanly done. Discretely done. Nobody knew any better. Nobody knew what he was doing. But in a job like this, actually, nobody cared. Would they? But he did know what he was doing. He knew. He knew he was a double salary man. He knew he was getting paid one salary, while doing work that earned another. All at the same time. He was a two timer. He was meeting Sally, while also meeting Jane. He knew it was not kosher.

But again, nobody knew. Nobody would ever know. So he just kept minimizing the window. He was 57 years old. He was still designing. At a design office where he paid no rent. A design office that paid him. To be there. Paid him to look at the air. Just minimize that window. Minimize it one more time.

© Copyright 2021
Chris Ro
D / P
All Rights Reserved