

Logline

A middle-aged, Korean-drama obsessed widow from Singapore trying to find a new purpose in life travels out of the country for the first time to Seoul, and promptly gets lost.

AUNTIE is a middle-aged Singaporean Chinese widow who spends her nights in line-dancing classes at a local park and watching DVDs of Korean drama series. After her husband passed away the previous year, her son SAM decides to take her on a trip to South Korea for Chinese New Year. When he is called for an important job interview he cancels the trip at the last minute. Auntie learns that he may move to the San Francisco if he gets the job, leaving her behind in Singapore.

Auntie decides to take the trip on her own and travels out of the country for the first time with hopes of seeing the famed location in Busan from the Korean drama series she has been following religiously – a village seen in an episode where the lead character JAE SUNG finds his birth mother.

Auntie arrives in Seoul and finds herself assigned to a tour group from China to make up the numbers. She meets her guide, KWON-WOO, a man preoccupied with familial problems. As the tour leaves Seoul for Busan, Kwon-Woo lets his personal matters get the better of him and makes a detour to a building complex. Auntie is accidentally left behind.

The first day of winter arrives as Auntie searches for her missing tour bus and is approached by RINGO, a middle-aged security guard at the building complex who offers to help reunite her with the tour group for a small price. Upon realizing Auntie is missing and fearing for his job, Kwon-Woo returns to the building complex to search for Auntie and gets arrested after a run-in with the law. Auntie stays the night at Ringo's before bailing Kwon-Woo out.

The trio starts an impromptu road trip to Busan to rejoin the tour, including gatecrashing a group of local *ajoommas*, (middle-aged Korean women) on a cross-country 'Thank You Mothers' Tour, where Koreans send their parents on tours across the country. *The ajoommas* quickly take Auntie under their wing as they make multiple stops along the way, much to Kwon-Woo's frustration.

Auntie learns that Kwon-Woo was served divorce papers and defiled his wife's lawyer's office the day she was left behind. When she finally reunites with the Chinese tour group in Busan, she receives news that Sam got the job in San Francisco and that Kwon-Woo has been fired. Auntie is underwhelmed as the tour finally arrives at the filming location she had been so looking forward to seeing: an idyllic village in the outskirts of Busan...

Jae Sung walks into the village compound and sees the back of a middle-aged woman tending to her garden. He calls out to her, and as she turns around, we see that it is Auntie as the character of Jae Sung's birth mother.

Months later, Kwon-Woo meets Ringo to pay the last of his debts for bailing him out. They received a text video from Auntie: she is on her way to a line-dancing competition in Singapore and if they win, the team will participate in the finals in Seoul and would love to catch up.

Auntie gets ready on stage and sees Sam in the crowd, cheering her on.

SINGAPORE – *Wonderful Life* by Park Jung Sik echoes through a public park as a group of twenty middle-aged women line dance in unison to the beat of the music. At the center of it all is AUNTIE, dancing in admirable coordination and enthusiasm. She is a Singaporean Chinese woman in her late 50s. It is a particularly humid January evening. The sky is bathed in dark orange, the stoned pavements are wet from the rain.

Auntie wipes the sweat off her forehead and takes a sip of water from her 'Bank of Singapore - Family Day 2009' commemorative water bottle as she rests by the benches. Her friends, all similarly aged women from the dance group surround her – advising Auntie on her upcoming trip to South Korea over Chinese New Year with her son, SAM.

"You *must* wear long johns."

"Remember to moisturize! It gets *very* cold."

"Your son is so filial – I should introduce my niece to him!"

On the way home with her friend and neighbor, AH TAN, Auntie reveals that she is canceling the trip; Sam is up for an important job interview and can't go on the trip after all. Ah Tan consoles Auntie with new episodic DVDs of a popular Korean drama series, *Secrets of the Stars*.

JAE SUNG (*Lee Min Ho*), looking devastatingly handsome, is in a non-descript restaurant looking at his phone. It is unclear what he is looking at, photos taken from afar of a woman. He swipes and looks at the address. The waitress comes up to him with the check. "Excuse me, do you know where this address is?" Jae Sung asks.

Auntie in her butterfly *baju kurung* (a colourful and lightweight nightie worn commonly at home by women in Southeast Asia) and wet tousled hair watches the scene play out on her TV as she massages her face with a jade roller. She hears Sam at the door. Sam sits in front of the fan with his top off, trying to cool down from the sweltering heat outside. Auntie asks him for the travel documents so she will cancel the trip at the tour agency, but Sam says he can do it. She goes through his desk. Exasperated, Sam hands her a folder.

"There's dinner in the kitchen," she says and leaves his room.

A standee of Lee Min Ho stares at Auntie as she waits for the employee of Horse Run Tours in a shopping mall. "Madam, unfortunately there are no tours in the next 3-4 weeks that I can transfer you to, and the deposit forfeited if both tickets are canceled is very expensive," he says.

He urges Auntie to go on her own. "You can make new friends! Besides, everything is taken care of. There is nothing to worry about. Nothing at all." Auntie considers.

Later, at Ah Tan's flat, she borrows a purple bomber jacket that fits her perfectly. "If your son gets the job, you can tell people he works in America," says Ah Tan.

It's the 49th day since the death of Auntie's husband. Sam and Auntie undergo a Buddhist ritual moving his tablet onto the prayer deck – the nun chants as they pray, making offerings, burning paper money and incense. Auntie prays aloud to her husband, asking him to bless his son for a successful job interview and to bless her on a safe trip to Korea.

Sam turns to her, confused. "I thought you canceled the trip, who are you going with?" Auntie tells him that she doesn't want to be alone in Singapore over Chinese New Year and was convinced to go on the trip on her own.

Auntie helps Sam finish packing as he prepares to leave for the airport. "It's just for two weeks, Ma. You don't have to send me off." Sam loads his luggage into the Uber. She tells Sam she hopes he gets the job and watches as the car drives away.

"*She's not my mother!*" Jae Sung angrily yells at the phone as he drives down the road. Sung-Gyo, on the other line tells him to reconsider coming back to work. The company can't function without their boss. "I'm going to find - "

The TV screen freezes. Auntie groans and gently hits the DVD player. She sees Lee Min Ho staring at her and looks up at the TV again.

The next morning, Auntie prepares for her trip. Sam has left for San Francisco and Auntie is alone at home. She has her breakfast in solitude and locks all the windows in the house before leaving for the airport. This will be the first time Auntie travels out of the country *by herself*.

Every step she takes she exercises caution.

INCHEON, KOREA – Auntie in line at the Incheon Airport customs. She hesitates, and unknowingly ticks ‘Yes’ to all the questions on her immigration form. A poker faced customs officer looks at her documents and then at Auntie.

Meanwhile, on a tour bus along the highway to the airport, KWON-WOO (32) is woken up from his nap by his ringing cellphone. He is pleasant looking, but unkempt with a 5 o’clock shadow and a dad bod, as though life has taken a toll in the last few months. He answers.

“Senior, where are you?”

On the other line is JOE (25), well put together and easy on the eye. He is waiting with a group of tourists from Mainland China at the arrival hall.

“I’m turning in. Has everyone arrived?”

“Yes, except for one guest.”

Auntie is in a cold office with a senior customs officer. He asks her a few questions, filling up her custom forms. Auntie is nervous and embarrassed. She tries to break the tension with a joke. The officer doesn’t seem amused.

The tour group grows impatient and Kwon-Woo gets Joe to walk them to the waiting tour bus while he waits for the last guest to arrive – Auntie. Auntie finally picks up her luggage and frantically searches for the tour. She sees a man holding up a sign of the tour company, playing Candy Crush on his phone. Auntie carefully approaches him. “Hi, Horse Run Tours?”

“You’re finally here! We can still catch up with the group!” Kwon-Woo quickly grabs Auntie’s bags and runs, leaving Auntie to follow frantically across the crowded airport. She catches her breath as they arrive at the tour bus. When she boards, Auntie is overwhelmed by the sheer kitsch of the interior and most of all – that the bus is full of Mainland Chinese tourists. “Wait, where are my fellow Singaporeans?” Auntie goes up to Joe.

“I think I boarded the wrong bus.”

He assures Auntie that she is indeed on the right tour. As Joe politely explains that her tour agency placed her with their partner tour agency to complete the numbers, an increasingly belligerent Kwon-Woo tells Auntie that she is holding up the tight tour schedule. The tour bus is finally on its way and stops at a Korean-Chinese restaurant for dinner. Auntie is sat next to the Changs, a middle-aged couple from Jiangsu.

Later, back in her room, Auntie sends Sam a voice message on Whatsapp, recounting her first day experience on the tour. “It’s much colder than I thought, and my tour is made up of entirely Mainland Chinese tourists. How did your interview go?” She then attempts to sleep, but is kept awake by the loud sex coming from the room next door.

The next morning at the hotel restaurant, Auntie is invited to sit with the Changs for breakfast. Asked why she’s traveling alone, Auntie explains that her son had planned to come for the trip together and a last minute job interview caused him to cancel. “Your husband didn’t want to travel?” Mrs. Chang asks.

“He died recently,” Auntie replies matter of factly. “Cancer of the throat. He’s been battling it for a few years.” “You must have taken care of him all this while,” says Mr. Chang. Auntie nods.

The tour's first stop of the day is one of the palaces in Seoul, Changdeokgong. Kwon-Woo cuts through the long lines to get tickets for his group and when he's stopped by another tour guide, he explains, "I'm not supposed to say this because I promised my customer but she is dying of cancer and I'm just trying to help her do this one thing." As he herds the group through the crowd of visitors, Auntie tags along with the Changs. The beautiful sights are no match for the cold that Auntie is unused to. She asks Kwon-Woo if she can go back to the tour bus. "You sure?" Auntie nods.

She walks around the parking lot, trying to find the right bus and finally sees the driver, MR. CHO, taking a nap. Auntie warms herself up in her seat and ties a supermarket plastic bag (a common habit of Singaporean aunties to dispose of their trash on the move) on the back of the seat in front of her and sends Sam another voice message, but it doesn't go through.

In the evening, the tour group celebrates Lunar New Year's Eve with an impromptu reunion dinner at a Korean barbeque restaurant. As Mr. Chang cajoles Kwon-Woo without much difficulty to join them with rounds of *soju*, or rice wine, Auntie sits quietly amongst the loud, boisterous crowd, eager to get back to her hotel room. Mrs. Chang offers her a drink and she declines politely. But as the group cheers her on to drink, she finally takes a shot, and then another.

On the tour bus, the tour sings along with Mr. Chang on the microphone. An increasingly inebriated Auntie takes her purple jacket off and laments to Mrs. Chang about not having her husband and son here, unused to her newfound freedom traveling abroad on her own. She is also getting increasingly pale and the conversation deviates into her observing the tour having a rowdy good time. Mr. Chang passes the microphone to her and everyone urges her to sing a song she knows. Auntie reluctantly takes the microphone and stands up in her seat, Mrs. Chang looking up at her and cheering her on. The tour quiets down, waiting for Auntie to start singing. She stares into space and take a deep breath...

Auntie suddenly vomits all over Mrs. Chang.

Back in her motel room, Auntie cleans her puke stained clothes and blow-dries it in the bathroom. She sleeps through the loud sex coming from the room next door.

Lunar New Year's morning: a very hung over Auntie is in her seat on the tour bus, avoiding eye contact with everyone after last night's embarrassment. The tour is now at a *jjimjilbang*, or a Korean day spa. Auntie sits in the hot tub, trying her best to appear normal in her nakedness amongst strangers. She covers herself with the small towel and observes older Korean women scrubbing their backs, sitting down on plastic stools. A middle-aged woman scrubs the back of an elderly Korean woman. It is a fascinating and human display of physical femininity in this room. She finds later Mrs. Chang and her friends at the co-ed section, sitting around and chatting loudly amongst themselves.

"Some of us were too shy to get naked, so we decided to come up here," explains Mrs. Chang. Auntie is offered a cup of fermented tea.

The tour, now all relaxed from the day spa, sets off to Busan.

As the tour exits Seoul, Kwon-Woo apologizes to the tour about an unplanned pit stop he needs to make. He tells Mr. Cho that he needs to pop over to attend to some quick business. The bus turns into a building in Gwangju.

As the tour waits, Mr. Chang and his friends decide to take a smoke break. Meanwhile, Auntie experiences discomfort in her stomach. *Was it that goddamn tea?* Not wanting to draw attention to herself, she quietly pops out of the bus without anyone noticing. She runs across to the building and asks a SECURITY GUARD where the nearest toilet is.

Meanwhile, Kwon-Woo dumps off a plastic bag of raw meat in front of an attorney's office. He quickly returns to the tour bus and instructs Mr. Cho to drive off.

Auntie goes back to the bay to find that the tour bus has left without her.

She panics and returns to the lobby, asking the security guard if he has seen any bus around. The guard, in his late 60s, says he doesn't speak any English. "The bus left without me!" "I'm sorry, Madam but I don't know what you're saying." "We are heading for Busan but they left without me!" "Busan" "Yes, Busan! Busan!" "Busan is really far away." Auntie stands in shock.

Auntie walks along the roads near the building, hoping to catch a glimpse of the tour bus. In a state of panic she has forgotten how cold it is. She sees a tour bus across the street near a public park and runs towards it. When she gets to the door she realizes it's not the right bus. Auntie walks around the park, disillusioned and on the verge of tears. She tries to call Sam but only hears a Korean voice message. Auntie then notices a group of *ajoommas*, or middle-aged Korean ladies, reminding her of her friends back in Singapore. Maybe they can help. As she approaches them, she stops. Auntie looks up and sees the sky has started to snow.

The helplessness engulfs her. Here she is, lost in Korea on her first vacation alone, seeing snow for the first time. Auntie looks to where the ladies were standing, they are not there anymore.

Kwon-Woo and the tour bus are at a rest stop along the highway. He stands in the corner of the parking lot, smoking quietly and still bothered by his encounter in the morning. When he returns to the bus and does a head count, the group is missing one. Auntie's supermarket plastic bag is still tied in front of Auntie's empty seat.

"Who's not back yet?"

Mrs. Chang looks through the stalls of the toilet. "I don't see her anywhere!" Kwon-Woo calls Joe for help to take over the tour while he returns to Seoul to look for Auntie. Kwon-Woo gets into a cab and begins arguing with the obnoxious elderly driver. He changes his tune when he realizes that he left his wallet on the tour bus.

Meanwhile, the security guard hands a shivering Auntie a cup of hot tea. They attempt to communicate with each other in their own languages and he offers to give her a ride back to the hotel in Seoul. During the journey, the snowfall proves to be too much for Auntie and they stop over at a restaurant in the neighbourhood.

HYE-YUNG, the owner of the restaurant, tries to speak to Auntie in her broken English but with limited success. She suggests letting the police deal with this but the security guard doesn't trust them. Meanwhile, Auntie is fixated on an episode of *Secrets of the Stars* that is playing on the television.

It's starting to get dark. Jae Sung stands at the corner of a crosswalk. He navigates the streets on his phone - currently at 2% of battery life. It dies. He looks around and sees no one for miles. He sees an ajoomma approaching in his direction on a bicycle.

Hye-Yung translates the scene for Auntie.

Later, Auntie waits at the building lobby. A colleague informs the security guard that there was a man fighting with a cab driver and punches were exchanged. Police were called in and the man is probably at the police station now.

The security guard takes Auntie to the police station and tries to bail Kwon-Woo out. However, without a proper ID he has to stay the night in jail while they try to call his wife to pay his bail. Kwon-Woo persuades Auntie to spend the night at the security guard's house.

The security guard readies his room for Auntie, by separating the tatami beds – one that belonged to his late wife. He hands her some clothes. "My wife's clothes. They are clean," Auntie accepts reluctantly.

Auntie lays on the tatami, staring at the ceiling. She leaves another voice message for Sam. "We are on our way to Busan. I got drunk last night! Can you believe it? It snowed today... So beautiful... How did your interview go?" She stops and plays her voice message back a couple more times.

The heater hums away. She is unable to sleep in this heat but even more so, with a stranger next to her. She turns and watches the security guard as he snores away.

Auntie observes the silhouette of him against the moonlight.

Suddenly, his hand moves down into his pants and Auntie quickly turns to her back. She hears him scratching and forces her eyes shut. It's been awhile since she slept next to a man.

The sound slows down and eventually stops. Auntie removes the blanket. She turns towards him and opens her eyes, watching him deep in slumber.

The next morning, Auntie walks through the empty courtyard and explores the residences in the neighbourhood. She walks into the neighbour's compound and touches the herb garden before getting chased out by an elderly woman.

The security guard has borrowed Hye-Yung's car and bails Kwon-Woo out, but insists that Kwon-Woo pay him back on time or risk paying 20% interest. He offers to drive the pair back to Busan for a small price. Thinking Auntie will not be able to pronounce his Korean name, he asks Kwon-Woo for suggestions on an English name. They settle on Ringo because The Beatles is the only English music the security guard knows.

The trio stops for lunch. Auntie learns that Ringo is a widower whose sons are living abroad, while Kwon-Woo still seems distant and desperate to get back with the tour in Busan. When the car breaks down, Kwon-Woo desperately tries to get it started and urges Auntie to push the car with him while Ringo drives it on neutral. Auntie can't stop in time and falls behind the car. She screams and hits Kwon-Woo in frustration.

"You smelly cunt! Are you trying to get me killed?"

While Ringo takes the car to the mechanic, Auntie and Kwon-Woo wait at the restaurant of a guesthouse, barely talking. A loud group of ajoommas at the tables near them ease the tension between them. Auntie sees the wallpaper on his phone, a photo of him and two young girls. Ringo returns with bad news: the car isn't going to be ready by the end of the day. Ringo guesses the group of ajoommas is with a tour group and learns that they are part of something called "Thank you Mothers Tour", where people treat their mothers to a tour around the country. "My son sent me and my wife on one many years ago. Never again."

SUN, the tour guide, surrounded by all the mothers of her tour, listens to Kwon-Woo's account of what transpired over the last 2 days. "We could go to Busan first if my ladies are agreeable." With that, Ringo bids Auntie and Kwon-Woo farewell, but not before warning Auntie to be careful of the ajoommas. "They will eat you up." The ajoommas bombard Auntie with questions about her life in Singapore and Sam, with Kwon-Woo tasked to translate.

Later, Kwon-Woo wakes up from his nap to find that the tour has made a stopover at a festive market near Daegu, still many hours away from Busan. Frustrated, he lies to Sun about Auntie dying from a chronic illness so that they can quickly get to Busan. "You need to get better at lying," Sun laughs. Auntie goes looking for Kwon-Woo, who is smoking in the corner. He tells Auntie that all he wants is to get back on the tour and make sure he's not in trouble. "I can't afford to get fired from this job."

The tour continues and the ajoommas start singing and dancing. Auntie learns that Kwon-Woo's wife served him divorce papers a few days ago and he had defiled her lawyer's office at the building complex the day he left Auntie behind. Suddenly, Auntie recognizes a familiar refrain of a song she knows: *Wonderful Life* by Park Jung Sik. Much to the delight of the ajoommas, Auntie shows off her moves while Kwon-Woo films using his phone.

It's a moment she can't articulate. As her smile wavers and her eyes well up, she wonders if this is the feeling of absolute freedom, a feeling of being alive.

The tour arrives at the hotel in Busan late in the evening. The ajoommas and Auntie stand in front of the tour bus, posing for a group photo before saying goodbye. Joe meets Kwon-Woo and Auntie at the hotel lobby. He bows and apologizes to Auntie. "On behalf of Horse Run Tours, we would like to apologize to you. This was a grave mistake." Auntie smiles. "Thank you, but I'm alright now." She turns to Kwon-Woo. "Could you Whatsapp me the video you took on the bus?" Auntie is in her room, showered and refreshed. She looks at the phone and tries to connect to the hotel's internet. She gets help from the hotel lobby and receives a barrage of voice messages from Sam. "Mom.. I got the job! So... Anyway, they are paying to move me over next month. I... Let's... I hope you're enjoying yourself." She repeats the message and then cuts it off. She sees Kwon-Woo smoking and watches the video he sent her. When she looks up at him again – he's gone.

The next morning, Auntie reunites with her tour. She learns that Kwon-Woo has been fired and Joe has taken over the tour. The tour's first stop of the day is the filming location of the hit drama series, *Secrets of the Stars*.

Auntie walks past the throngs of tourists, revealing faded posters of the show on the wall. She sees the standee of Lee Min Ho, and then the familiar willow tree from an episode of the show. She doesn't seem enthralled or excited. CAMERA TURNS.

It's Jae Sung. He sees the entrance leading to the compound beyond the willow tree. He knocks. "Hello, is anyone home?"

"Can I help you?"

He turns. It's Auntie, speaking in Korean. Jae Sung smiles.

"I'm home, mother."

Spring. Some months have passed.

Kwon-woo arrives at the building complex where Ringo works. Ringo berates him for being late – Kwon-Woo explains he had to drop his daughters off at their mother's. "Is she still leaving?" Ringo asks.

"I don't know." Kwon-Woo pauses for a moment. He lights a cigarette and sits on the same curb Auntie sat on when she was left behind. He pays Ringo the last of the installment he owes for getting bailed out – and extra for helping to clean the mess he made at the lawyer's office.

Their phones buzz at the same time. It's a video message from Auntie.

"Annyeonghaseyo!"

Auntie and her friends greet them from a private hire bus. "Is she in town?" Ringo asks. She tells them that they are on their way to a line-dancing competition and if they win, the finals would be held in Seoul.

Backstage at a local shopping mall, Auntie prepares with her line-dancing group, ready to perform. She gets on stage and looks at the crowd. She sees Sam amongst them taking a video on his phone. The song – *Wonderful Life* by Park Jung Sik, plays. She dances.

There is a confidence and energy in Auntie that we've not seen before.

END