

Listless Flight

Peter Kang

I picked her up at Union Square, in front of Circuit City. She hopped into the passenger seat of my black Honda Accord and fastened her seatbelt.

“Hi!” she said, with her usual half-grin and a slight tilt of her head. She wore a cream colored cashmere sweater and a long red coat. Her scarf was aqua.

“Hey, are you sure you don’t mind?” I asked. She nodded. She poked at the car radio and jumped around the different stations before settling for the one that promised “the best mix of the 80s, 90s, and today.” She gazed out the window as we passed by the stores on West Broadway. She had been shopping with a friend all day but agreed to accompany me for a short trip to New Jersey. I brought the car into the city to transport a new rug from Crate&Barrel to my dorm room uptown. I just had to bring the car back home.

“Thanks for keeping me company,” I said. She gave a quick half-smile.

As we sat in light Saturday evening traffic waiting to get into the outbound Holland Tunnel, I examined her profile – a slight overbite, a tiny black dot on her chin, a button nose, and a smooth dome-like forehead. Not a hint of makeup. She was pretty.

No, she was more than just pretty.

I am one of those people who like to make lists. I have a stack of yellow legal pads that sits on my bookshelf, most of them filled with daily To Do lists. Some lists are less practical. I once wrote a list of the things I thought I was, but that exercise lasted no more than five lines. You can only

label yourself so many things before you grow self-conscious and reconsider self-congratulatory words like “leader” and “artist.” Another time, I wrote a list of the things that I felt would constitute the ideal girl. It wasn’t long, and I still remember all the components:

smart
laid back
pretty
tall (but shorter than me)
thin
Korean (but Americanized)
loves to read
down to earth
non-religious

The list was unoriginal. And yet, it became a grocery list that I needed to check off every time I dated someone new, with each missing item making me wonder if I should move on to the next store. Jane, however, did not disappoint. I looked her way again as we cruised down the New Jersey Turnpike. The familiar green highway signs and the endless row of pine trees, now only silhouettes against the fast-darkening sky, reminded me of the return ride from past family trips to Lake George and Sandy Hook. She seemed to be dozing off, her head lightly pressed against the window.

“Are you tired?” I asked. She stirred.

“A little. I was up reading late,” she whispered. Jane also volunteered as a mentor on Saturday mornings at a public elementary school on the Lower East Side. “New York needs older brothers and sisters!” she had written in a weblog entry.

“What were you reading?” I asked.

“I was just rereading *The English Patient*,” she said. “You should read it. It’s really good, and it’s written by an Asian-American author.”

She sat upright. She redid the knot of her scarf.

“I’m getting a bit anxious,” she said.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a casual drop-in. They already had dinner, so we’ll just grab a bite and leave,” I assured her.

My parents and grandmother spent their Saturday evenings glued to the television watching the latest batch of Korean drama mini-series on video. Before I moved out to college, my mother would send me to the Korean video store every weekend to pick up the latest episodes of a popular series. I would sometimes sit and watch with them, but that required going through all ten, fifteen or even twenty tapes in order to get the entire story. My parents amused themselves whenever they asked me if I found the young female characters attractive. They even asked for specific physical traits that I found pleasing (“You like big eyes? Thick lips?”). After a while, they seemed to anticipate my physiological preferences and called me to the living room whenever they spotted a character who seemed to be my type.

I wondered what drama they were watching this time. The last time I was at home, they were watching one about a love triangle among Korean students at Harvard Law and Medical Schools. I found it embarrassing to watch whenever the Korean actors tried to speak English, but one of the female characters, very pretty, spoke fluently and made everything else bearable.

Jane spoke very fluently as well. That was one of the things I liked about her. Her speech was refined and natural. Very white, I once told her. She was born, of all places, in Oklahoma, and grew up in Michigan and Indiana. Her father was some sort of engineer who was required to move every few years, so she never really settled in one spot for too long. Compared to her, my speech was brusque. After immigrating to the United States, my family stayed put in New Jersey. We moved a few times, but it was no more than a few towns or a few counties over. I finished the ESL program in second grade, and I had reason to believe that my English sounded much like anyone else's speech. Jane pointed out that I spoke too fast, had some off-beat cadences, and sometimes sounded like an old Italian man with my tendency to repeat sentences. I assured her that when needed, I could turn up my own "whitespeak" and sound a lot like her. It wasn't anything special – just a conscious effort to slow down my speech and to enunciate every word carefully. I told her I reserved it for job interviews and classroom discussions.

We drove down the ramp and on to the Garden State Parkway. It took me a few years to figure out how all these highways in New Jersey were linked to each other and how you could take certain shortcuts to avoid paying an extra 35 cents for toll. Exit 131 off the parkway was my town Edison. I looked at Jane once more. She played with her fingers and looked out the window. I spotted an uncovered sliver of her pale skin between the scarf and her sweater. It was a part of her long neck. Everything was long about her - her fingers, her legs, her arms. Thankfully, she rarely wore heels and preferred the flat, comfortable shoes. Her favorite pair was

shiny red and shaped like a canoe. She teased me from time to time about my height, and I would make her stand with her back against mine just to prove that I still had an inch on her. What amazed me was that she had grown three inches while in college.

As we passed by the Patel Brothers Cash&Carry and the old Pizza Hut now converted into an Indian fast food joint (the red roof still intact), I explained to Jane that my town was known for its large Indian population. A few minutes down Oak Tree Road, we turned into a parking lot. A grayish signpost with red lettering in the front lawn read: Dr. Aneckstein OB-GYN. I had already explained to Jane that my family lived in what used to be the home and office of a gynecologist; hence, no garage, but a parking lot. Dr. Aneckstein, our landlord, had retired more than a decade ago, and rented out the residential space. It was supposed to be a temporary stay while my parents made enough money to buy our own house, but with their business ventures continually failing, we had already lived there for six years. I felt bad for my grandmother, who always talked about how exciting it would be to plant expensive flowers in a yard that our family actually owned.

Jane and I walked in and greeted my parents and grandmother. My grandmother had already scurried to the front door when she heard us coming into the parking lot. No more than five feet tall with a curly perm and an infectious smile, my grandmother was still a ball of energy at 74. My parents trailed behind with their smiling faces. I could already see them casting an observant eye on Jane. They whispered something to each other before coming closer.

Jane was shy with her Korean although she had been to Korea just the past summer to teach SATs to rich kids hoping to get into Ivy League schools. She said a feeble *ahn-young-ha-sae-yo* and made a slight bow with her head. My parents, outgoing and bubbly, gave her a warm welcome and asked if we were hungry.

My mother and grandmother quickly got busy taking out utensils, turning up the stove, and retrieving cold dishes from the refrigerator. Meanwhile, Jane and I fielded some questions from my father, who wasn't all that curious but just felt the need to ask the basics. He was a proud-looking man who still retained an athletic build. His hair had grayed in his thirties but he had masked the color with dye. Now his fifties, he no longer cared and let his hair turn snow-white. I saw him slightly raise an eyebrow when Jane told him that she had already graduated college and was working temporarily as a paralegal before going off to law school.

"You sure you want to hang out with a young guy like Paul? He's still in college, you know," my father said jokingly. Jane smiled politely.

"Well, we're only nine months apart," I said, a bit annoyed, "and I'll be working fulltime in a few months anyway."

Jane had dated younger guys before, so I figured that our minor age difference – in the unconventional older girl-younger guy pairing – was a non-issue. Before my father could poke around and make more uncomfortable comments, my mother and grandmother laid out the food and bade us to eat.

"I gave Paul a little bit more rice because he's a boy," my mother said to us with a smile. I was proud of my mother's

English speaking skills. She told me how, as a high school student in Korea, her teachers had praised her for her ability to pronounce English vocabulary with precision. My family left us in peace and went back to the living room to continue watching their Korean drama episodes.

“Your parents are so nice,” Jane said, “and your grandmother is so adorable.”

We began to eat. We picked away at our small bowls of dark rice, a mix of six or seven different rice and barley types that my mother proudly called her own Special Combo. There were four small dishes that adorned the center of the table – water cress, pepper leaves, sweetened root stems, and *kimchi*. A large trout, salted and fried, occupied the center as well. Next to the rice bowl, we each had a small bowl of bean-based Napa cabbage soup. I kept my eye on Jane and was relieved that she was making good progress on her meal.

I finished my rice and leaned back in my chair. Jane looked over and saw that I had not finished the soup.

“Are you just going to leave the soup like that?” she asked.

“Yeah, I don’t want anymore,” I told her.

“Won’t your parents care?”

“They used to, but not anymore. If I’m not hungry, I shouldn’t force myself to eat.”

“My mom would kill me if I didn’t finish my food,” she said. She shook her head and continued eating. I shrugged and waited for her to finish but eventually found myself taking the last few sips of my soup.

“There, I finished it.”

“Good boy.”

My mother came back to the kitchen as I cleared the table of the dishes. She cut oranges and apples and brought it to us.

“Dessert,” she said. She then asked Jane a few questions about her educational experience and received satisfactory answers – Cornell, labor relations (“Sort of like pre-law,” Jane explained), and a full ride to Indiana Law School (“You can save your parents lots of money,” my mother remarked). My mother left us once again.

“Want to see my room?” I asked.

“Mmm. Sure. Your parents won’t mind?” she asked.

“Nope. It’s not even my room anymore really. They’ve turned it into some greenhouse,” I told her. We passed by my parents and grandmother and walked upstairs.

“Your house is so clean,” Jane said, noticing the freshly vacuumed carpet. I told her that my mother was slightly obsessive compulsive and liked to give the house a thorough cleaning every two weeks. I mentioned my younger sister Molly and how her departure for Dartmouth – as a first-year – was a great blessing for my mother who could never stand Molly’s messiness. My father, on the messy side himself, defended his daughter, telling my mother, “It’s because she’s creative. Let her be.” My mother had always kept Molly’s door closed but now that she was gone, her room had been cleaned and the door left opened.

We entered my room, which did, in fact, resemble a greenhouse. A large potted tree, about five feet tall, stood near one corner of the room. My dark brown oak desk, once the productive center of my academic and extra-curricular endeavors now supported eight different pots of plants and

flowers. My grandmother was an obsessive gardener and she kept herself occupied during the winter by keeping plants indoors. Jane eyed the tiny jade plant in a yellow-brown miniature pot. I knew she thought it was cute, but it looked as if she was restraining herself from saying so. She was careful about making banal comments or being repetitive – oftentimes, if you missed what she had said the first time, you would never find what she had said. “Never mind,” she’d say.

I watched her snoop around my room and examine the remnants of my pre-college existence. She picked up the framed photos of me and my friends at our high school graduation where we wore our green gowns and squinted in the sunlight. “My two closest friends in high school were Chinese,” I told her. She sat down on the edge of the bed – my full-sized bed now covered with a white down comforter that I had never seen before. I sat down next to her and reached for her hand. She seemed not to notice. I leaned over and let my lips press against her cheek. She gave me a half-smile.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” she told me.

“I’ll take you down,” I said, and we both got up and walked downstairs. I showed her the way and joined my family in the living room. They saw me coming in alone and momentarily shifted their attention towards me.

“So, you like her?” my mother asked. I nodded.

“She’s pretty,” my grandmother said. *Yeppuh.*

My father didn’t say anything, but looked at me and smiled.

“She seems like a smart girl,” my mother said. “Does she read a lot?”

“She’s probably read more books than me,” I told her, “and we talk about literature a lot.”

My mother nodded in approval. My father seemed content. My grandmother checked again and asked if she was Korean even though she had heard my parents ask her some questions in Korean. She had already given up on the hope of my sister dating or even one day marrying a Korean boy, so all her hopes rested on me finding that sweet Korean girl. I assured her that Jane was fully Korean.

But I remembered Jane telling me that she had never considered herself Korean until recently. She grew up with all white friends. She told me about her three-year relationship with a white guy at Cornell and how she had never dated an Asian male before. She did not have many Asian friends either, and hung in predominantly white circles. But one day, after listening to some key lectures and finishing up a few books on race and ethnicity, she realized that she was Korean and that it was an inescapable part of her identity. She told me about her decision to attend the Korean American Student Conference at Yale during spring break of her senior year while her friends tanned on the beaches of the Caribbean. I was at Yale, too, with my posse of Korean Americans from Columbia. We didn’t know each other then, although we tried to figure out possible moments we could have passed by each other.

Jane came back and we stood silently. My parents and grandmother continued to watch television. I sensed that it was time to go back to New York. My father got his car key and went outside. My mother asked if I needed to take any *kimchi* back to the dorm. I told her I hadn’t finished the jar from last time. I hugged my mother and grandmother

goodbye, Jane also exchanged goodbyes with them, and we left. My father dropped us off at the train station. I shook hands with him and he slipped me a few twenty-dollar bills.

“For the tickets. And eat something later,” he told me.

We went to the ticket kiosk, punched in some numbers, and waited as the machine printed up our one-way passes. We walked up to the platform and sat down on the bench, waiting. There were only a few others on the platform at this hour. Most of them were Indians.

“What did you think?” I asked.

“I like your family,” she told me, “they’re so sweet and comfortable.”

“Yeah, they’re nice,” I said.

“They adore you,” she said. “They think you are the greatest.”

“Well, I guess they’re just proud of me, and it’s usually just my grandma.”

“That Korean older son thing – it sort of scares me,” she said. I wasn’t sure what she meant, but I smiled and nodded. “But I really like your family. It makes me...”

“What?”

“It makes me like you more.”

It was eleven o’clock when we arrived at Penn Station. She lived only a few blocks away, and I could have hopped on the 1 train back to school, but I insisted on walking her back to her apartment. It was early February, but luckily the air wasn’t nearly as cold as it had been in the past couple of weeks. We walked out and passed by Madison Square Garden, the Loews Movie Theater, and B&H. We turned up on 9th Ave. and walked uptown. She lived with her older

sister at a fairly new apartment building called Hudson Crossing. Her sister was five years older and an associate at a corporate law firm.

I remembered the first time I met Jane, through somewhat of a blind date my gay friend James had set up since he and I went to school together and he had met her in Korea over the summer where they tutored together. She came up to Columbia and we ate a small Italian restaurant a few blocks off campus. Afterwards, we walked around and she even came over to my dorm to hang out. I rode the 1 train down with her and walked her home because it was late. That was the first time I came to Hudson Crossing.

We crossed the street where the deli was at the corner, its flowers in white plastic bins refrigerated by the outdoor air. I always entertained the idea of just picking one up and handing it to her, but realized how foolish and corny I would look. We came to the revolving entrance door of the apartment building. This was usually where we said our goodbyes. She never asked me up to her place because she shared one room with her sister and felt it would be too weird. I didn't mind. I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. I saw her go inside before walking a few more blocks to the Times Square subway station. In only a month, I had walked this way more than ten times. It was like a routine for me – an anticipated solitary walk during which I would replay the events of the evening and wonder if all had gone well. I wondered what she meant by “that Korean older son thing.”

It's May now, and it's been three months since I spoke to her last. A few days after visiting my family, she told me it was probably not a good idea to continue seeing each other. I couldn't figure out why she decided to end things so suddenly and so soon, but I sent her a few emails saying I had a nice time with her while it had lasted. She never replied. I felt sorry for myself for several days, maybe even weeks. One day, I heard from James that she had started dating someone else – an older Chinese guy who worked at some investment bank.

I picked up a copy of *The English Patient* recently, remembering how she had referred to it on multiple occasions. I remember her talking about how sensual and poetic the prose sounded and how she preferred the sparse, subtle style of writing. She read a few of my short stories and once told me that my writing was “too masculine,” that I tried to say too much and employed a confrontational manner. I winced at her remarks and resolved to cut down my verbiage. I found the lines in the book that she had read to me once. I copied it down on a yellow legal pad:

We stood among them. I was showing her a city that was new to her.

Her hand touched me at the wrist.

*“If I gave you my life, you would drop it. Wouldn't you?”
I didn't say anything.*

One weekend in January, about three weeks after our first meeting, Jane called me up in the middle of the night. I was still in the library working on my English thesis. She had

been clubbing with her friends in the Meatpacking District. It was snowing lightly outside.

“Can I come up?” she asked. I asked if she had much to drink and where her friends were headed. She said only two cocktails, and they had been weak. Her friends had gone home and she now stood outside of the A,C,E subway station on 14th Street. I told her how to get to Columbia and told her I’d wait for her at the 116th Street stop.

We held hands as we walked through College Walk. We were the only ones outside and each step we took ruined the perfect white blanket that had formed in the past few hours. I noticed her makeup. It was my first time seeing her with lipstick on. It was a bright red, red like her favorite pair of shoes. But tonight, she was wearing black high heels. We walked across campus to my dormitory. She told me about the club scene and how so many men seemed to be over thirty years old. “Gross,” she said.

I let her borrow a pair of navy blue sweatpants and an orange t-shirt. I noticed that she didn’t wear a bra. “I have small boobs anyway. I sometimes go commando,” she said light-heartedly.

I turned off the lights and we both got under the covers. The bed was small and I found my right shoulder pressed against the wall. She didn’t take up much space. She was too thin. We tickled and poked each other and traded kisses, but it was late. We both sensed our fatigue and our movements soon ceased. She buried her head on my chest and let her wrist sit on top of my stomach. I stayed still while it looked as if she was falling asleep. I could make out the shape of her forehead through the moonlight spilling into my room. She stirred.

I saw her head turn up towards my face. Her wrist remained still.

“Paul, do you like me?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

I didn't say anything.