
THE WEST IN YOU

Carol Test

There is nothing linear about life here. You get up and do the same things you did the day before. You drink the same drinks in the same bars and sleep with the same people. Everything is round, the Codeine you swallow, even time. Except love, which is triangular, or a hexagon, sharp corners, prickly.

It's 2002 and these are your wild, expat years – seeds sown for some milestone reunion. You like a phrase, practice it: I was bumming around Seoul for a couple years; no, *when* I was bumming around Seoul . . .

You play Scrabble with a group of fellow foreign teachers. Tonight: Love and Other 4-Letter Words: high gods rise, gold fuck wine, edge over home. You each write home.

“Who wants to take me to see *Signs* this weekend?” you ask.

Tim frowns. “I heard that movie was terrible.”

“But if I see it, that's fifteen minutes of class used up. All my students will have seen it and we can talk about it Monday.”

You teach conceptual English. Who versus whom. However. Americans don't learn this until high school. If you ask an eight-year-old how his day went, he wouldn't say: good, *however*, he would say, “OK, *but* . . .”

“Or,” Suzanne says, “you'll go in and ask, ‘Anybody see *Signs*?’ and there will be this long pause and then a ‘Why?’ and then, ‘Oh, no reason.’”

Marcus agrees. “I try to get students to talk about what they did over the weekend. A movie? Dinner? Dancing? Did you watch any goddamn thing in particular on TV?”

Later that night, Tim undresses. His breath is warm on the front of your panties. You merge, eyes shut, mouths wide open.

There's nothing special about Tim. Athletic and preternaturally cheerful. He placed his hand on your neck the night you met, thumb lazy at the base of your skull, and the ease of this gesture overthrew you. You've had other lovers, a Japanese surfer/engineer, a post-grad, earnest from Berkeley. But they were high-investment, low-return. Tim's dark smile

and easy morals are not unlike your own, laid out, like polished knives, on a table.

Every Friday, your *hagwon* meets to preview home study CDs. You prefer audio soap-operas about unrequited love, but usually end up pimping Vocabulary Family. Today, medicine. The following are terms you might hear during you or your loved one's exam: *The growth will not spread to deeper tissues or other parts of the body* . . .

The new teacher is there, badly in need of washing his hair. The only other American. Your friends call him Forrest Gump.

“Do *not* leave Knox alone with Marcus. Or Tim,” Suzanne warned last weekend. “They'll eat him alive.”

“It's a rite of passage,” Marcus said. “If he can't get home after a night in Itawon, he should go back to New Mexico. Go back to Mississippi or wherever.”

“Memphis,” you told him. “*Myemphis*.”

The Director asks you to repeat the following words: inoculate: to give a weak form of a disease, usually by injection. Prognosis. Recovery.

Knox scribbles on post-its. You glance and see lyrics scratched out. All this time, he has been rhyming, looking for words to trip the tongue, while you played first with the tape and then the stapler. In eighth grade, you stapled your finger. To see if the stapler could puncture flesh with its fangs. Whenever you've seen one since, you've been tempted to repeat this test, just to be sure.

“Did you hear about our Suz?” Marcus asks after work. “First she does the futon futatzu with some guy in the alley, then here, this is her

midnight kiss.” He shows you a picture on his cell phone. “And then she takes some Brazilian up on the roof of Club Hollywood for a hand job.”

“I’m not sure that was all the same night,” Suzanne insists.

You say, “Hollywood has a roof? Like, *roof access*?”

On the subway, Suz says, “Tim’s an animal. He just puts it out there until he gets a hit. He picked someone up on the platform!”

“Not the train?” you ask.

“The *platform*.”

People are always falling in love on trains while you listen to headphones and try not to get motion sick. The world is a music video. You keep waiting for someone to pick you out of the crowd, although you tuck this deep under the covers at night and press it to your lips only occasionally—a joint, to take the edge off.

At a Hanam party, English teachers dress as their favorite literary characters. They argue: Who’s the Hemingway? Who’s Fitzgerald? Are you saying I have a small penis?

You lose their games due to lack of imagination. You wouldn’t blow Holden Caulfield. Or those boys from *A Separate Peace*.

Knox tags along and you allow this, a kind of professional courtesy. He has a scab on his lip where the *hagwon* made him remove a piercing. He wears a bracelet with lettered beads: “WWJD?”

Marcus slaps him on the shoulder. “What would Chekhov do, mate?”

“See, here’s the thing, here’s the thing,” Tim leans close, punctuating each statement with a gesture. Gesture and preface—that’s how you determine the level of intoxication. “When it comes to literature, there are imitators, innovators, and masters.”

“And masturbators,” you add.

“Is he a writer?” Knox asks.

“He plays for the Canterbury Rams.”

“At least she didn’t say it’s sort of like the New Zealand version of the NBA. Nice to meet ya, mate.”

In college, your professors liked to present moral dilemmas: if you were on your way to assassinate President Ford and saw a person dying on the side of the road, what would you do?

Of course, the correct answer was to ask, is the person on the side of the road Gerald Ford?

“You’re easy to be around,” Tim says, after.

He is ground zero of a person. Negative space. He tells you about his fiancée in Christchurch who sponsors a child in some third-world country for forty dollars a month.

PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS FALLING IN LOVE ON TRAINS WHILE YOU LISTEN TO HEADPHONES AND TRY NOT TO GET MOTION SICK. THE WORLD IS A MUSIC VIDEO.

“Maybe it’s the real deal,” you tell him as you re-fasten your bra.

“I don’t know. Those pictures always look photo-shopped to me.”

The director of your *hagwon* is matter of fact. She says, “You are nice, but your friend is nicer.” Knox is blonde. Closer to what it means to be American.

Between classes, Knox works on a novel. He sits on the edge of his chair, spine a study in ideal alignment.

“How do you do it, just get up and start?” you ask one day, while the two of you tread time in the office.

He shrugs. “No one told me it was supposed to be hard.”

He shows you his manuscript:

Upon my arrival in Seoul, I looked up a gentleman by the name of M. Medlin who also attended the University of the South a number of years before, and, on the basis of that shared history, sought to make his acquaintance.

In a city where common language proves basis enough for friendship among Westerners, our status as intimates was practically guaranteed.

You imagine some innocent abroad, the sodden expat he encounters, the linear narrative that follows.

“It’s a start,” you say.

You take Knox to the skating rink. He chooses blades and you old-fashioned skates, brown laces and orange wheels. Lights flash,

red, green, pink like a disco. The whole places smells of feet.

Crowds of teens whiz by. You drop to your butt and slide and he laughs; you pull each other up.

Press your skin against the slim white muscle of his arms. Slide your tongue along the inside

of his lower lip. You want to taste home or something like it, and Knox with the South in syllables; get this pang when he draws out the word *alone*.

In a taxi, he rests one hand on your back, damp beneath hair, a tentative gesture, like ballroom dancing.

“Do you like my novel?” he asks.

Take him to your small apartment. Make love in the kitchen and then the shower, beneath indoor rain.

“Funny how a secret makes something seem much more important than it is,” Tim says one day.

He buys a ticket at the Jamshil station. You shake out your umbrella.

“This isn’t *Out of Africa*; there’s no great love story.”

“We’re both terribly grown-up about it, aren’t we?”

“Please,” Suzanne says over lunch. “Tim is like exercise. You’re flexing a muscle.” She warms her hands on the hot stone bowl. “And Knox?”

“We kind of have a thing going.”

“Which means sex,” she says. “You two are good, I think. American. He’s got too much intensity for you, maybe.”

“I lack substance; I’m a wafer.”

“You know what I mean. Why don’t you date, like people in the real world?”

“He wants something from me. I sense it.”

Fall into Knox as summer edges into autumn. He brings you McDonald’s in the rain. You lie on cool sheets with a paper cup, familiar packaging, while he writes his novel.

“You don’t have a boyfriend back home or anything, right?” he asks one night.

“Right,” you answer. Don’t talk about Tim. Why awkwardize things?

Knox tries to break you of vices from carbs to caffeine. He won’t listen to your Gen X excuses. “Why do y’all feel the need to get fucked up

this is a moment to capture. Hold drinks to the camera. Smile in front of a blue-green lagoon.

Aggie’s mother and Tim’s are childhood friends.

“But we always say they’re more like sisters,” she tells you.

ing for some gravitational force to keep you from falling from orbit, or worse yet, floating away.

Tim rolls a joint. “I wouldn’t have guessed.”

Knox doesn’t respond.

“Amber waves of grain, baby.”

Knox says, “Where’s your fiancée?”

“FUNNY HOW A SECRET MAKES SOMETHING SEEM MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN IT IS,” TIM SAYS ONE DAY.

all the time? Winona Ryder and Ethan Hawke could be your grandparents.”

Know that in a year he, too, will be relieved of twelve-year-old dreams: terrariums and *Tim-Tim* comics and unabashed optimism. But for now he is gentle, and you hide from him your jagged corners. Congratulate yourself for not leaving fingerprints.

He touches your ribs very gently. “I think you’re an alright person.” he says. “I sense a soul. That’s why I stick around.”

Wonder if he can sense the restless, insatiable, the West in you.

Take your autumn holiday in Bali. Pile into taxis and *chik-chin* all the way to the airport. Marvel how the pictures never look like the drivers.

“Is that you?” Suz asks a cabbie. “Picture? You?”

“Nay...”

You lean to Tim. “Don’t say the ‘b’ word.” *Bally* means hurry.

“Why don’t we learn the word for slow down?” he asks.

Try to trick each other into saying it.

“Where are we going?”

“Indonesia.”

“What’s there anyway?”

“Drug boats.”

“No, I mean, islands...”

“Lombok...*Bali*. Wait, fuck you!”

At a beachside table in Bali, you dine on fruit and fresh fish. Palm frond fireworks frame October skies.

Tim’s fiancée, Aggie, balances her camera on a glass of water. She sets the timer and hurries to join the shot. How precisely she poses, as if

Aggie is pretty, her nails buffed clean. She doesn’t fidget the way you do. She sensed your discomfort at dinner and tried to soothe it.

You knew Tim was meeting her here. And all this time you had been worried about Knox, that they would cannibalize him, someone so undressed of irony.

“Will you come to the wedding?” she asks. “You’re all invited.”

She’s the sort of girl you might make fun of if she wasn’t the sort of girl you wished you could be.

You pull your underwear down and press against Knox, his briefs stretched beneath balls, and you on tiptoe in tennis shoes. Just pressing. The hotel bathroom is pale green, an after-dinner mint.

Knox says, “Maybe this is more than just a Korea thing.” He says, “I might be falling in love.”

This tremor of sincerity terrifies you.

Recall Tim once hooked up with a girl who wanted to wear his shirt. You’d never ask for anyone’s shirt. Realize now a truth about this virtue: the only way not to intrude on someone else’s space is to constrict your own.

“Condom?” Knox asks.

“Tim has them,” you say, without thinking.

His expression turns. “Gotcha.”

Do Jell-O shots at Sari. The club is thick with Aussies. The DJ spins *New Order*.

“How do you dance to this?” an older Australian asks.

Tell him, “You bounce.”

Everyone bounces.

Throw your arms in the air. Your bra strap slides off one shoulder. You are a satellite, look-

Drink yourself into oblivion. Sing. Loudly. “Every time I see you falling, I get down on my knees and pray—”

“OK.” Suz scrapes you from the club’s floor.

“Waiting for that fi-nal moment...why can’t we be ourselves the way we were yesterday?”

Suz apologizes to Tim, “She’s *smashed*.”

Aggie looks at you.

“You suck,” she says quietly.

It’s a rush of cold-water reality. You want some tongue to lick the remnants, pick you clean as the tide does a shell, a thousand mouths nibbling.

Aggie runs hands up and down the front of her body. She’s crying.

You aren’t even sure how she found out, who told her, or if she figured it out on her own.

You are *so sorry*. Try to tell her this. Try to formulate words. But they’ve gone, and she pushes her way to the entrance of the building.

Think of how she told you that in high school, she would sit behind Tim at his drum set, arms guessing what his hands might play. What memories could you conjure? This wasn’t real life. It wasn’t supposed to count.

HE WAS IMPRESSED BY YOUR EATING HABITS. “AMERICANS EAT A LOT. THEY EAT SO MUCH. THEY LIKE TO EAT.” HE INTRODUCED YOU TO COW TONGUE. YOU DIDN’T EAT A LOT OF THAT.

There is an explosion at the front of the club. A blast and then another. That Australian you were talking to—where did he go?

People jump on your feet; you are being *jumped* upon. You sense something sucking you down corridors. Push against it, scream.

Bodies stream into the street. The air blooms black. A girl is holding a torn sarong, her skin and breasts burned away.

Someone shouts, "Bomb; there are *bombs!*"

Marcus grabs you from behind.

"This brings it home," some American is saying with glossy lips.

Marcus cries, "We aren't Americans!"

Your Korean Air flight is silent and packed. You land at five a.m. in Inchon and hold class at eight thirty in frigid Seoul.

Four p.m. The sun sinks behind skyscrapers. Girls in aprons and tight jeans gather around some insane television program. No one notices two Westerners at the end of the bar.

You sit beside one another, eyes ahead.

"Remember the nineties," Tim says. "When history slept?" He doesn't follow with anything for a long while. "I'm just going to float. Thailand. Maybe Australia."

**YOU SEARCH THE LONG COOL
NECK OF YOUR BOTTLE, FEEL ITS
PROMISE WITH YOUR TONGUE.**

He says, "You could come with . . ."

You search the long cool neck of your bottle, feel its promise with your tongue.

It's been a month, and Aggie remains in a burn unit in Perth. Suzanne is suddenly engaged. When you questioned her fiancé about Western women and Korean men, he answered agreeably, "I like bitch."

He was impressed by your eating habits. "Americans eat a lot. They eat so much. They like to eat." He introduced you to cow tongue. You didn't eat a lot of that.

One night he pressed hot pepper paste against the roof of his mouth. "That's what I miss, when

I leave home," he said, for no reason. "I miss the food. I get cravings."

You told him, "I know what you mean."

You came to Korea in the aftermath of 9/11 and people shared sympathetic, adult nods. Students brought tokens of respect like apples and key chains and coffee with cream. One gave you a #10 envelope full of cocaine and you weren't certain what to do about it, so you hid it in the back of your desk drawer. Another gave you a CD of laughter. Dozens of people, dozens of laughs, preserved forever on MP3s.

You want to preserve something. Knox in the Hanam market. You tucked your head into his neck like a swan and his coat slipped off one shoulder, skin freckled brown from some Southern sun. *Love me*, he said. *I know you're worth it.*

Yesterday you saw him on the street, earphones on. He raised his chin, *wuz up*, but it was a greeting, not a question. Knox. He was your sacrifice, freed from whatever you craved, some beautiful distraction or the possible person you might have been.

The gray of late-day settles.

Tim motions toward the bar. "Last call for sin."

And you're tempted. To close your eyes, allow yourself once more to be carried away, spun by circular currents, until all that remains is some vague awareness of a numbness more painful than whatever you once hungered to escape.

Gently rest your bottle.

Outside, it's autumn. The smell of noodle stands steams up the street.

You head into the pace of evening.

There was a time music propelled you through this risen city. Each footfall forward, hair in eyes, wind in coat. The opposite of aimless. Now you indulge others in flexible truths. Sincerity, certainty, you shed them like skin, streamers of you, in this unwelcome fall. ❧

**A home.
Then a bed.
Then
a bedtime
story.**

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