

SAD EYES

We had a 50/50 chance. Our fates rested in the flip of a coin. Either she was, or she wasn't. Part of me thought it would be okay if she were. The other half prayed and pleaded she wasn't. Neither of us were ready...and yet...somehow, for a short period of time, we found a sort of frightening, fantastical humor in it all.

It was two years ago, the 29th. I remember a fresh bed of white snow blanketed the ground, amid a dark, black December. I had just stepped inside our warm, dimly lit apartment and already; dirty puddles of melted ice were forming around my shoes. An increasingly fierce snowstorm was expected to paralyze a relentlessly busy city. By nightfall, that's precisely what had happened.

Removing my soggy shoes at the door, I tossed my keys on the counter along with the pregnancy test I'd just shamefully picked up from the local drug store. The pharmacist was a kind and classical older woman; like a vinyl record among us compact discs. Simultaneously, while closing up shop, she, in broken English no less, riddled me with question after question, each one starting, ending or including the word *wife*.

"Your wife's menstrual cycle, when last? Your wife, she have nausea, pain in breasts, fatigue, umm, no symptoms?" "My wife?" I thought to myself.

What if she knew that Grace (a pseudonym I've chosen for her) in fact wasn't my wife, but instead my girlfriend...my lover...my love? Would I have received the same care and attention? After all, South Korea is statistically the most homogeneous nation in the world, with a society firmly planted in tradition. Their fabric of life is still one embroidered with antiquated images that all look exactly alike! Picturing myself, a black man, walking around town with my beautiful, native-born Grace at my side. The round contours of her belly announcing her pregnancy to all who passed by...Jesus! The thoughts make me quiver. As if the foul looks we receive just for holding hands weren't bad enough.

Sprawled across a warm wooden floor, I heard the sound of a door close behind me, but it was faint. That, plus my attention was consumed elsewhere. With a cold beer at my side and a computer streaming ESPN, I'd just learned that the Los Angeles Lakers, my beloved team, would become the first NBA franchise to broadcast all their games in Korean. "Another sign of the worldwide appeal of basketball," I thought to myself. But it wasn't just that. The reporter continued to expand on the details, just as cries of distress, laced with alarm and slurred pleadings suddenly overcame the room. I turned the volume up, but the screams that permeated from behind were paralyzing. Gut-wrenching. Wailing reminiscent of a mother in the street gasping for air, after having watched her dead child bleed out in her arms. I didn't realize what was happening. Certainly, I didn't believe Grace was capable of producing such harsh sounds. Not until I stood to my feet and turned, did I realize they were hers.

I frantically ran to the bathroom and pried at the knob, but it was locked. My fists pounded hard against the hollow wooden door, nearly breaking it. Her shrieks were earsplitting, I could only assume something horrible was happening, causing Grace severe pain. In my mind, I saw blood everywhere. I visualized her heartbeat growing

fainter with each beat. I shouted, “Open the door! What’s going on?! What’s happening in there?!” But all I received in return were ragged sobs mixed with inarticulate moans and coughing. Time slowed, agonizingly, as my palms developed a thick layer of sweat. My heart pounded, threatening to burst through my chest. With every minute that passed, the intensity increased. I felt helpless. Hopeless. Her continued cries proof that she was still alive, offered me meager solace.

Then her crying suddenly relented, and she spoke in a slow, drunken slur. “My life is over. It’s over. She’s gonna kill me.”

Initially I was unable to connect the dots, but my self-directed guilt flooded in as I looked back down the hall toward the kitchen. On the counter were my keys, in the exact same spot, undisturbed. Lying beside them was the plastic bag, now crumpled and empty. In that moment, it dawned on me. Grace had in fact taken the test, and the results brought our reality into sharp focus.

We had met two years prior in Hye-hwa, (*Hey-wa*), the theatrical district of Seoul. A quick Google search of Hye-hwa will display images of a vibrant neighborhood with a colorful nightlife and streets that are closed off to traffic. I remember there was a large university planted on the opposite side of the street from where all the shops and restaurants stood. Students—for the most part women, would trickle across after school or in between classes for a quick bite to eat or to engage in a little shopping. This area was a spot where friends and I would meet up, specifically for the chance of running into and “hooking up” with one of these coveted Korean women. In our minds, finding love was a grim potentiality.

A close friend named Josh accompanied me to Hye-hwa that night. It had been some time since we attended a cultural exchange party, events that were growing ferociously in popularity. A new path was unfolding within the peninsula, one spearheaded by a burgeoning curiosity fueled by the influx of foreign expatriates. Culturally bound by strict tradition, these events afforded Korean men and women alike, the opportunity to pursue their desires, if for one night only.

When we arrived it was crazy, far beyond the *bright neon light* chaos of Asia we had grown accustomed to. The venue was on the second floor of a bland, rectangular building, keeping in rhythm with Korean architecture. It was a clear, brisk night, and the tall glass windows lining the second story were covered in condensation. A telltale sign owing to the rising body temperatures inside and resulting entropy.

Josh and I looked fixedly at the large crowd already present, and the one trickling closer. Our trepidation lay not only in the steep 20,000-won entry fee, equal to 20 USD, but the sheer number of people. A mob this size could have made politicking with a female, let alone acquiring a drink, an exercise in futility...

Realizing my voice was falling on deaf ears, I no longer pounded my fists against the door. She would eventually come out. At least that’s what I told myself. So I waited.

I sat down on the floor and leaned back against the refrigerator; still able to hear her breaths become steady from the adjacent bathroom. My mind was in disarray. The quieter she became, the more nervous I grew. Eventually I would have to face her. And then darkness began peeling back as the door slowly drew open. Grace emerged, moving listlessly, as if she had already endured 9 hard months and delivered far more than just shocking news. Sad, swollen, red-rimmed eyes bled black streaks of her mascara, tracing harsh lines down her cheeks. Trance-like, she walked to the corner of the living room and collapsed to the floor. My eyes followed her but quickly turned back toward the bathroom, where the test rested on the edge of the sink. Together, time and I froze in that moment.

Damp, black stained tissues were scattered around the floor. The tile was warm in the spots where she had been. Memories of movie scenes where the camera angle was directed at a mirror in a bathroom came to mind. Tension heightened because we could observe the character while they (the actors) too, watched both lines on a pregnancy test slowly materialize.

In that moment I realized why she screamed. Both lines were definitively pink. I grabbed the packaging out of the garbage pail and looked at the example displayed on the back of the box. Pink lines meant positive, and the ones on the test strip in my hand seemed even more pronounced than the picture. I walked out of the bathroom and saw the woman I loved dearly with her knees against her chest and head sunken in between. Grace was only a few feet away from me physically, but emotionally, we were like two boats lost in different seas.

Josh returned with two ice-cold, refreshing beers. He passed one over to me, and we held our glasses up high. “To whatever the night brings,” he said, our customary toast. We believed it, too. We were waves within the ocean. However the night unfolded, we would flow with it.

That night in particular, time seemed to run like the under current beneath the surface of a river. Before we knew it, groups of girls began to leave, noticeably disappointed. Couples began to escape together, foreign to each other in so many ways, yet sharing a common desire at least for tonight. The event would come to an end in thirty minutes as Josh and I looked around with sneering disapproval, pointing at several unique pairs as if to ask “How did THAT happen?”

“Only in Korea, right?” I enviously added. “Anyway, let’s bounce when I get back.” “Where are you going?” Josh asked. “Gotta take a piss,” I replied and wandered off toward the bathroom.

Dodging my way through the crowd, I was pleasantly surprised to see that only a few people stood in line ahead of me. Fear of rupturing my bladder kept me from spitting any game with the ladies in line to the right of me. That and the fact that at this point in the evening they wanted nothing to do with guys in the bathroom line, drunkenly tripping over their corny come-ons.

While waiting for the seemingly short line to slowly progress toward my relief, my regret grew concurrently with my bladder. I mulled over about a million better uses for the money I had just spent. Twenty thousand won goes a long way in Korea. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner could be eaten on that kind of a daily budget. You could buy socks, underwear, t-shirts—and maybe even a hat!—all for less than 20,000 won. Heck, Josh and I could have combined forces and moseyed over to a bar downtown and drowned our sorrows in several cocktails. But no, instead we filled the pockets of the organizers of this event with our hard earned cash. And all we got out of it were some low quality hors d'oeuvres and something that tasted like it could have come out of a kitchen tap rather than the beer tap from which it was poured. Up to this point, the night was a total failure...until the unexpected unsteadily sauntered out from the bathroom like a lovely butterfly emerging from a deaden cocoon. She was a peculiar treasure above all people. A beauty far from drunk, yet when she walked, her kneecaps wobbled and touched occasionally. Her cheeks were rosy red, too. Instantly flush from the tiniest sip of alcohol. A condition many fair-skinned Korean women loathe. She walked right past me, like a cold breeze on a cold night, reminding me of the sharp nagging pain still emanating from my expanding bladder. I lowered my head, cupped my lower abdominals and painstakingly contracted my urethra. Don't ask me how, but I did. For good measure I then took a final glance over my shoulder and saw that she too, with her melancholic eyes, was looking back at me.

Grace exploded into another mournful cry. I ran over to the corner and knelt down before her. Raising her head was like pulling an anchor from the depths of the sea. "Leave me alone! Don't touch me!" Her pleas for space; gentle at first, turned nasty. I knew she didn't mean it, but I understood her pain. We had just received a major disturbance in the course of our lives.

"I can't go home. My parents are going to kill me if they find out. I can't have this baby. I can't." Her words were replete with terror.

For two years, Grace had managed to conceal our relationship from her parents. Her father was involved with the ministry at church. He was often away from the family pursuing a degree in theology. Grace's mother worked at a cancer center in town, playing the piano and sharing God's word with the terminally ill. Grace said the family's public image was worth its weight in gold, and they made that point very, very clear.

One day, I accompanied Grace to her church where she introduced me to her parents and their community. They were kind folk, offering a foreigner like me love and support. It was like gaining a whole new family.

Grace and I could have been great actors. Everyone thought she was just helping a friend find his way, in Korea, and with God. And she was. I wanted to better myself with God, but a spark was needed. That spark was Grace. At times I struggled, though. Sitting beside her during the service was like letting an itch go unscratched. I longed to touch her. Feel her. Kiss her. After the final hymn we would make hasty farewells and travel as quickly as we could by bus to my apartment. Once inside, without hesitation we would remove our clothes and make love, passionately for hours, only stopping when exhaustion finally set in.

By this time it was February. We desperately needed to get away, so we bought two train tickets and traveled down south to a part of Korea where Japanese cherry blossoms were blooming abundantly. The area was closed to everything but pedestrian traffic, while roadside vendors sold food and cold drinks. Couples marveled at the red, white and pink petals that elegantly blanketed the ground in place of snow.

Seven weeks had passed since receiving the news that no longer seemed so fateful. Up to this point, not a word was uttered of the growing fetus inside Grace's belly, per her request. But she wore the burden. The steady passage of time forced us both to.

As we neared the end of the sidewalk, Grace's expression changed. She looked up, glanced in my direction and asked, "How would you feel if we decided to keep it?"

Every male is wired differently. Some balk in the face of adversity, while others take the bull by the horns and ride. But we weren't ready. That was as clear as the sky above. Remember a part of me had prayed she wasn't. At times, I begged for a different outcome other than the one given. But, three home pregnancy tests and a blood test to boot, communicated in crystal clear language, that it was time I start preparing to be a father. So that's what I did. I figured Grace too, was already grooming herself to be a mother.

"I mean, it would be hard, and I'll be honest...I'm a little scared. But I think we can do it together," I said, thinking Grace would take solace in my response because it was a good answer. One I believed in as well as one I thought she needed to hear. However, in nontechnical use, Grace was using a form of reverse psychology. By this point, parental expectations had metastasized and killed off Grace's moral compass.

The slightly inebriated, rosy-cheeked woman who exited the bathroom and brushed shoulders against mine that one chilly night in Hyehwa no longer existed. The Grace I had once known was now buried under layers of stubborn expectation and the clock was ticking. She eventually conformed.

Movies most likely dramatize the woman's reaction when a developing human life form is vacuumed out from inside her belly. After all, it's a film and they're actors. They are highly skilled and compensated. We on the other hand, came out of the pockets handily to be acted upon and Grace, her cries were real and they lasted for months.

A 2005 study estimated that South Korea had about 340,000 abortions a year in a population of 50 million. It took Grace and her mother three weeks to locate a hospital willing to perform the thousand-dollar procedure. By this time, I was ousted from the whole situation and Grace was already approaching her second trimester. Technically, abortion is illegal in Korea. So is fornication. I say technically, because it's one of those quasi-laws that are commonly broken without repercussions.

Months after we first made love, Grace presented me with a question over dinner. A simple question posed by many women to the men they love.

It was Sunday, but Church had ended hours ago. Having worked ourselves to exhaustion earlier, we were now waking from a soft, warm nap. Her body was still entwined with mine. I kissed her on her forehead, then her nose. Grace covered her mouth, yawned, then tilted her head up and pressed her soft lips against mine. Those kisses used to send spasms through my body. Neither of us wanted to get up.

Outside, golden brown leaves fell randomly from trees. Autumn in South Korea is unlike any other place in the world. The array of colors, the sounds, the smells...everything exudes a fairytale peace.

We exited the elevator and walked out of the building. Kids were running around, chasing after one another. The afternoon sunshine and brisk air helped wake us from our drowsy state. Arriving at our favorite restaurant around the corner, we discovered it was open but unoccupied. Or maybe it was open just for us.

Our waitress was a young girl who told Grace in Korean that we looked good together. I smiled upon hearing her compliment us. No one would assume I spoke Korean, but I did. After we were seated, I ordered our usual favorite dish, garlic baked chicken, French fries, a soda and a beer. Waiting for our food to come, Grace was consumed once again by continuous yawns. Grace loved to sleep.

I was cramming food into my mouth. Our favorite meal lived up to its expectations from our past several dining experiences—hot and flavorful. Grace's head was lowered, her attention awarded to her meal. Long silky strands of brunette hair partly covered her face when she asked, "What was it?" She looked up, brushed her hair aside and glanced at me with her wistful eyes. "What was it about me that you liked so much?" I looked at Grace while chewing on a bite of chicken, as well as my answer. I finished with a swig of beer, wiped my mouth clean then told her that she already knew. "No, you never told me," she disputed.

I shook my head in a lovingly manner. "Yeah I did. Many times. Just admit it, you like hearing me say it," I replied. Grace smiled coyly, reached over the table and grabbed the beer.

"Can you tell me again?" she petitioned before tilting back her head and opening her throat.

"Your eyes," I said. "Like right now, we're here together happy, but they still look so sad and dreamy to me. I know it's weird but I kind of want to get lost in them."