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Course of Affection

Prisca Kim

They met at a friend's apartment, friend for him, stranger for her. It was a three-fourths Korean, one-fourth Taiwanese dwelling, so it was hard for her to tiptoe through the sea of Nikes, Converse and Uggs that surrounded the door when she walked in. She didn't know anyone so she looked especially uncomfortable when she accidentally stepped on a stranger's pair, and quickly donned an overly apologetic expression in case the owner happened to cast a glance her way and witness the incident. She was big on first impressions. The television was on, some pro sport the guys sprawled on the blue couch parallel to the screen were watching, and she realized, while removing her sneakers, that she would have to interrupt their view of the game by walking to the only seat left vacant. Quickly mapping out the most efficient path to the chair while removing her North Face jacket to buy more time, she quietly stepped past the screen, trying her best to casually arrange the walk during a time-out or better yet a commercial break. To both her relief and slight disappointment, there was no verbal acknowledgment greeting her, only a few scattered glances noticing the "new girl" that she picked up with her limited peripheral vision.

Having successfully maneuvered past the unfamiliar bodies, she found comfort in the hard, flat seat of the campus-owned wooden chair. She began to try to look as nonchalant as possible but figured she was as easy to point out as Obama on the latest U.S. Presidents posters. Before long, her buttocks began to numb, but she continued to sit, feet propped up, all ten toes clinging, curled around the bottom railing of the chair, her fingers interlocked, hands squeezed between her knees. And as she futilely attempted to merge into the casual, warm ambiance of the apartment, all she was able to notice was exclusive conversation, mottled with delicious spurts of laughter and friendly physical contact, and desperately wished she could also be one to comfortably display such acts of chummy intimacy.

Deciding to temporarily ignore her overwhelming awkwardness, she scanned the room, curious about the make-up of her company. As an experienced fly on the wall, she studied the faces of each individual, careful not to concentrate her gaze, observing manner, voice, interaction, taking special interest in the male specimen. And there he was, sitting right across from her. Startled, she quickly looked past him and pretended to be fixated on the cream-colored wall beyond. When her eyes deemed it safe to return their gaze to his face, she was able to learn his features. Tall and dark. But not handsome. Not objectively speaking. He stood at about 6'2", underweight, hair neither curly nor straight, but in little misbehaving tufts twisting this way and that, only a few shades darker than his complexion. His face was similar to that of a chestnut both in color and shape, one that gave her a subconscious boost of confidence as a member of the opposite sex—a countenance that could effectively serve as the epitome of modesty.

She was still considering his face when their eyes met from across the small table at which the two were seated; caught off-guard, she coyly smiled at him with a cautious shyness, one he immediately reciprocated. She saw his lips twitch, slightly parting, and gladly welcomed the approaching opportunity to finally talk to someone, and whittle away at the stiff aura she had made for herself.

He introduced himself as George Zane, repeating his first like James Bond, but with less effort and markedly reduced debonair. It was a pleasure to make her acquaintance and, might he ask, with a friendly chuckle, how had she found her way into this particular array of characters. He had a deep voice, reaching her in slow, resonant waves, and she found herself blinking more slowly than usual, as if time had actually decreased its tempo. By no means was it a romantic moment; it would never suffice as one of those schmaltzy “how-we-first-met” stories; nevertheless, it had its own endearing element, a sweetness to the instant, a flutter of the heart caused only by the knowledge of possibility.

The following weeks were comprised of casual meals together, study dates, movie nights, and after-dusk excursions—all platonic but exclusive to the two. In the car, (because there was never anything to do in their city after 8pm, nor was anything open), all you could hear was the quiet humming of the car and the occasional clearing of the throat, which would always be followed by the ever anticipated:

“What are you thinking about?”

It was a question, no doubt. They both knew. But the query-masked statement was purposeful. He would tell her after each prolonged moment of silence during their late-night excursions in his old bruised up '97 Honda. She looked forward to the question upon every meeting; she would savor each word, sitting beside him in the passenger's seat, breathing in deeply as if his voice had a scent, sometimes purposely remaining silent with the assured anticipation of the inquiry—because to her, the phrase expressed a yearning, a demonstration of his affection, a question which contained all he felt when he was with her. And while the two had never shared even a brief embrace, with every utterance of the expression, she could feel his arms around her, warming her body with his. A verbal hug, she liked to think. And she was content.