

THOMAS LEE

In Lumine Tuo

Beatrice Horn, the emeritus literature teacher at the Upper West Side private high school Higgins Prep, was preaching to the staff in the break room about a stunning Off-Broadway remake of a play called *Wit* that she had seen the week before in Alphabet City. John Kim, the physics teacher at the school, had never heard of the play, as he preferred two-for-one happy hours with the science faculty to New York's cultural offerings. John had once seen an inscrutable play about Pakistani vampires on a faculty-bonding outing led by Ms. Horn. After that painful experience, John hardly paid attention to Ms. Horn's ramblings in the break room. She was making a point of explaining to the barely listening room that in a curious move of race-blind, age-blind casting, the director had chosen a young Asian woman as the lead, instead of the middle-aged Caucasian called for by the script.

"The actress did the last nude scene so sublimely. She's going to be a star, this Asian girl," said Ms. Horn, who took pride in being a step ahead of published New York drama critics. "Susan Kim. Remember that name."

"Susan Kim? Nude?" John blurted. There were many Susan Kims in New York. He knew of four, other than his sister. Surely it couldn't be his sister who was appearing naked on stage. She could not have fallen that far.

That steamy September evening, he went home and Googled the play. After many searches under "Susan Kim" and several New York and

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acting-related terms, he came upon a site for a nonprofit theater. The lead actress, whose glamour shot was captioned on the website as “a star of student theater and cinema making her professional New York stage debut,” was indeed his little sister.



John and Susan agreed over email to have brunch that Sunday at a small organic diner near Murray Hill, halfway between John’s dusty apartment share off the FDR Drive in the Upper East Side and Susan’s closet-sized studio in Tompkins Square. They had been close in their childhood. Raised by a single mother in a little two-bedroom apartment in New Jersey near the George Washington Bridge, they had shared a room until John had left for college. They had confessed crushes on schoolmates and secret sins to each other before they fell asleep when they were children. However, after their mother had died three years earlier, they saw each other so rarely that every conversation seemed to begin with awkward re-acquaintance.

“I like your haircut,” John said when he saw her. Susan’s full black hair, which had flowed over her shoulders last time he saw her, was now cropped like a prep-school boy’s. She was lily white and fashionably thin as always, much like their mother in her younger days. She wore platforms that disguised her shortness, and a sundress that hugged her girlish body.

Susan played with her hair and smiled. “You like it? It’s kinda seventies Mia Farrow, only black.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

John noticed at least a few men’s eyes linger on his sister. During childhood, John’s friends had always teased him about his “hot sister” and wondered out loud how she could possibly be related to him. Since he was gangly and dark-skinned, John never saw much resemblance either.

Over coffee, John learned that Susan was dating a photographer and paying her bills by waiting tables at a sleek bistro in Soho. She didn’t mention the new development in her acting career.

When John’s omelet arrived, he said, “I hear you’re in a new play.”

Susan looked apprehensive. “Yes, who told you?” Her acting had always been a source of disappointment to their mother. In Korea, during the time in which their mother was raised, acting was for bad girls who didn’t study.

“No one told me. You’re famous now.”

“We had fourteen people in the audience opening night. Someone must have told you.”

“Never mind that. I heard what you’re doing. I don’t want you getting naked in front of all those people.”

Susan’s eyes widened. “What? Are you kidding me? Is that why you wanted to meet?”

“Yes. I couldn’t believe it when I heard it.”

“I’ve already done it. And I’m gonna keep doing it until the last show. Isn’t much you can do about it,” Susan said as she threw her fork into her Greek salad.

“This has to stop, Susan.”

“It’s my body, John. I can do what I want.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you? Don’t act like we’re all chummy, John. I haven’t even seen you in a year.” John was three years older than his sister. In most Korean families, that would have meant at least a bit of respect. But Susan was treating him with disdain, as if he were an inherited obligation.

“You should’ve moved in with me after mom died,” John said, remembering Susan’s stubborn choice to be independent of him despite his wishes. “I never should’ve let you go off to that place.”

Susan bristled. “State school. Say it, John. They’re not dirty words. We can’t all spend nine useless years in the Ivy League.”

John was not insulted, though Susan meant to hurt him. He had graduated from Columbia on a full scholarship when he was nineteen and entered a Ph.D. program in astrophysics at Yale. He had not completed the program, quitting after five frustrating years to become a

science teacher at Higgins. He loved his job, and found leaving university life as refreshing as rising from bed after a long illness.

“I can’t believe what’s happened to you,” John said.

“I don’t expect you to understand, John.”

“You’re naked. Aren’t you embarrassed?” He raised his voice and several customers glanced over at him disapprovingly.

Susan stood up, “I’m not sitting here and letting you lecture me. If you brought me here to stop me, forget it. I don’t need the free lunch.”



That night, John drank a syrupy rosé with his girlfriend Marie, a math instructor at Higgins, on the rooftop of the low-rise brick apartment building where he shared a fourth-floor apartment. John had been attracted to Marie’s doe-like brown eyes and sprightly body on the first day he started at Higgins, but he couldn’t find the courage to ask her out until months later.

“It’s not that big a deal,” Marie said. The humidity had sagged her curly brown hair. “You’re her brother, not her father.”

John didn’t remember his father. When he was thirteen, John had learned that his father was not a successful lawyer tragically hit by a truck a month before Susan was born, but a deadbeat gambler who had run back to Korea when money got tight. As a single mother concerned about family appearances, his mother had drilled into John’s head that he must be a respectable man, a man no one could look down on.

“It’s not so much that she’s naked,” John said.

“What then?”

“Our mother.”

“What does she have to do with this?”

“Susan should at least respect her memory. She wouldn’t do this if she had an ounce of respect left for her.”

“I’m sorry, John. But she’s gone. Susan can’t live in her shadow forever. I’m so sorry to say it, but I think you’re overreacting.”

It crossed John's mind that Marie, who was a Jewish girl from Queens, would understand his point of view better if she had grown up in a Korean family. For Koreans nudity in public was beyond taboo. It was a direct insult to your parents.

Frustrated, he looked up into the dark purple of the starless Manhattan night sky. He still probably knew more about the science of the universe than all but a few dozen people in the world. He had studied black holes while at Yale, spending endless hours examining the ways starlight could bend, warp, and collapse near black holes, where the gravity was so strong that not even light particles could escape.

As brilliant as his early career had been, when it had been time for him to come up with his own work instead of reiterating Einstein and Hawking, he had come up empty. He was like a jazz musician who had mastered every written piece, but couldn't improvise. At twenty-five, after learning that his mother had no chance of recovery from cancer, he left Yale behind with no intention of returning, without even a note to his professors or fellow students.

Now, when he saw stars, he couldn't help but think of his past disappointments. He was glad to be in New York City, where he could not see anything at night but the moon.



During her last days, John's mother had been bedridden in her tiny room, which looked out into a busy highway and smelled like a hospital. When he first saw her after coming back home from school, she had raised her white covers over her neck, hiding her ravaged limbs, which shook with weakness and desperation. She had covered her baldness with a scarf, even though only John and Susan were around to see. Her concern about her appearance had broken John's heart. He knew she wanted her children to always remember her as pretty, the way she had been before cancer blighted her vibrant features.

He did not tell his mother that he had quit his program, only saying that school could wait and he wanted to be with her. She always glowed when she talked about her physicist son, as she had been a science teacher in Korea before becoming a seamstress when she immigrated.

"You're getting close to your Ph.D.?" she asked. At this point, she barely existed physically, just a skeleton covered with essential flesh.

"Very close. I just need to put the last touches on my dissertation."

“The laws of science are like God’s fingerprints, aren’t they? Everything is in perfect order.” John didn’t believe in God, but he nodded. He wanted his mother’s last days to be in total comfort. As a child, John had attended a small Korean Presbyterian church next to a strip mall off the Jersey Turnpike every Sunday with his family. John and Susan used to daydream for an hour in a windowless classroom while a bespectacled Korean spinster lectured to them in thickly accented English. This weekly ritual, because it was so hated and obligatory, had created a bond of resentment between the two children towards their devout mother.

“I’m close, John. Close to seeing God.” His mom smiled.

“Susan told me.”

“The church had a collection. And there is some money in the bank, it’s not much...”

John interrupted, “Don’t worry about us. We’ll be ok. I’ll make sure of it. Susan can live with me. I can get a job to provide for us.”

“I know you will do your best.”

“Yes. I will.”

“And will you make me two promises?”

“Of course.”

“First, always believe in God. Nothing is more powerful than God’s light. It shines over us all.”

“Yes. I will believe in God,” John said, though he doubted he could keep that promise.

“Second, always protect your sister.”

“Always.”

At his mother’s request, he sent his sister in when he came out of the bedroom. Susan had bounced in and out of college and acting schools after turning eighteen, supporting herself by waitressing, but had spent most of the last few months at home taking care of their mother.

“Please don’t fight,” John thought to himself as he sat alone in the kitchen, waiting for his sister to come out of their mother’s room. After Susan had turned fourteen, she and their mother ended most conversations shouting or in tears. He hoped his sister would just listen and acquiesce for once in her life.

Just a few minutes after she entered, Susan emerged, weeping.

John embraced her and asked, “Did she make you promise anything?”

“Yes. Two things,” she said, crying.

“Believe in God?”

“Yes. And be more like you.”



Three years later, John thought of his mother every time he passed by one of the Gothic stone churches interspersed throughout Manhattan. “Always believe in God,” she had said. He couldn’t fulfill that promise, as he was unable to see or feel any evidence of the divine in his life. Also, like just about everyone else he knew in New York, his day-to-day existence was so consumed with his career and social obligations that he did not have any desire to add the weight of religion to his life. But after his mother died, when he looked at crosses and steeples, he could hear her from somewhere in his memory rebuking him sharply, disappointed by his lack of faith. Pre-dawn on some Sunday mornings, he would be jolted out of his lumpy futon by his mother’s voice waking him for church. Though he still did not believe in God, he came to believe in ghosts.

John wondered why his sister did not hear their mother too. Surely, if their mother lived in Susan’s memory at all, his sister could not shame herself in public so brazenly.



John hoped the play would be a box-office disaster, and that the handful of drama aficionados who saw it would quickly forget Susan Kim. However, there was a shimmering review in the *Village Voice* a week after he met her for brunch. Ms. Horn rattled on in the break room about the show getting the audience it deserved and lasting for months on end. John worried that perhaps one or two Koreans would go see it, and that Susan’s nudity would become a topic of hot gossip

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in the community he grew up in. John didn't think he should care since there were no Koreans other than his sister in his life anymore, but the thought of the crass things old Korean women would say about his sister bothered him.

John went down to his sister's little dilapidated apartment complex a few days after the *Village Voice* review. When he announced himself in the intercom at the front door, Susan said she'd come down but refused to buzz him in.

"What?" she said, cracking the heavy black front door open just enough to lean out.

"What about mom?"

"Mom?"

"Would you do this if she were still alive?"

"What the hell, John?"

"Would you still do this?"

"No. No, I wouldn't!" she said.

"Because she'd be so ashamed of you," John yelled. Susan's eyes teared up. "You have no fucking clue what you're talking about. Go fuck yourself, John."

Susan slammed the door shut before John could react.



John was lying in bed with Marie that night. The air was so sultry that their bare bodies stuck to the sheets. Marie's naked, milky skin clung to his, and though John normally would have preferred to lie alone in such heat, he hugged her back.

"I told my mom about us," Marie said, rolling her delicate frame to face him.

"Really?" Since they had only been dating for four months, he was a little surprised.

"What did she say?"

“I told her you were a scientist studying black holes before you came to Higgins.”

“Did that sound good to her?”

“Yeah. She asked if you were Jewish. When I said you were Korean, she said, ‘Makes sense. They’re good at science.’” Marie laughed.

“She should meet my sister. I don’t think she ever passed a science class.”

“My mom’s just old-fashioned. She’s waiting for that Jewish investment banker she can brag to her friends about.”

“This city has a few of those, I hear. Why don’t you please your mother?”

“Maybe someday. For now, I’d rather have one who can tell me what it’s like to look through a telescope into a black hole.” Marie gazed at John with a reassuring smile. “What’s that like, to look into one?”

John shook his head. “You can’t really look into a black hole. There’s no light to let you see. All the light bends into the center.”

“Light bends?”

“Gravity, when it’s strong like in a black hole, will bend it. If you look through a telescope at a black hole, all you’re seeing is a dark blanket. You can’t see the craziness that goes on inside.”

“Kinda like you?” Marie said.

John paused, a bit surprised at her bluntness. He held Marie a little tighter. “I can’t stop thinking about Susan. For my mom’s sake, I should stop her, but I can’t.”

“What was the last play you saw, John?”

“Something about Pakistani vampires. Before that, I don’t even remember. My sister in *Our Town* when she was in high school.”

“Why don’t you try watching this one?”

“Are you crazy? I don’t want to see my sister naked.” Having shared a room with Susan over the years, he had caught glimpses of his sister’s body. He had noticed when she had started to develop, and though he

had usually left the room when she changed, his occasional curious glances had let him know what she looked like under her clothes. He shivered when he thought of looking at her with a full gaze in a public place.

The play's run continued for weeks. Despite John's wishes, there was no freak fire or water main break to close down the theater. After week six, he accepted the inevitability of becoming known as the brother of the naked Korean spectacle. By week nine, his anger abated somewhat and curiosity started to affect him.

On week twelve, he remembered his final promise to his mother. "Always protect your sister." Though they had not been close since their mother passed away, John had always believed that Susan would find him if she needed a brother. Now, after having a door slammed in his face, he did not know if his sister even considered him family any more. If he were no longer a part of Susan's life at all, he knew his mother's ghost would haunt him mercilessly about his second broken promise.

That week, John finally asked Marie to accompany him to see *Wit* on Friday. He emailed his sister two days before to let her know he would be coming, but received no response.

When he came to pick Marie up for the show, John wore a jacket and tie, which made her chuckle. "Not very East Village," she said. She was wearing a throw-on pink sweater and jeans.

The theater was significantly smaller than the three-hundred-seat auditorium at Higgins. The whole place smelled like a musty closet. John's seat in the back of the theater didn't fold down all the way, so he had to sit at an uncomfortable angle, with his knees up near his stomach. As curtain time approached, every seat filled, so he couldn't move. Marie offered to change seats, but John refused.

In the beginning of the play, his sister walked out alone onto a stage furnished only with a twin bed. Her hair was shaved off and she was dressed in a flimsy hospital gown. John realized that the new haircut he had noticed in the diner was a wig. She looked downward and adjusted the hem of the short hospital gown self-consciously before she spoke, protecting herself against immodest exposure. Instantly, John recognized that Susan was mimicking their mother, who had always felt uncomfortably exposed in the hospital as she was prodded by white strangers.

Not long into the first act, John understood that the play was about a cancer patient, but his attention was less on the spoken words and more on the bodily motions of his sister. Susan perfectly imitated their mother's wild open-armed greetings, her covered giggles, her frenetic walking-style, and anxious hand-wringing.' As cancer consumed her body, Susan fastidiously tried to maintain her dignity, though she struggled with every gesture. John was riveted by his sister's movements. To John, she seemed to be performing a tragic dance in honor of their mother's courage. At several points during the play, John realized that he must have become visibly emotional, because Marie would stroke his shoulder in an effort to comfort him.

Over an hour later, as his sister lay trembling in bed and took what seemed to be last desperate breaths, John remembered the day their mother had died. On that cold day, seated at the worn kitchen table of their apartment, Susan had sobbed with her face down in her hands. After days of holding in his tears, John had collapsed to his knees and clutched his sister's legs as he wept in heaving gasps into her lap. It was the last time he had cried and the last time he had held his sister in an honest embrace.

He remembered how Susan had caressed his back gently. "She's still alive somewhere," she had said. "I know she's still alive somewhere."

For the last act of the play, the stage went dark as Susan was in bed. A lone spotlight came down on the wood floor next to where Susan lay motionless. After a few moments of silence, she rose from her deathbed and disrobed in the shadows, where the audience could barely discern her body. When she walked into the spotlight and raised her arms in a final transcendent pose, John wasn't ashamed. As his eyes blurred with tears and his sister's porcelain skin merged into the white hot beam, her body didn't seem mortal at all, but part of a divine light that shone infinitely upward through the entirety of space, unaffected by gravity.

