

Say Something Funny for the Busan Lights

1

The man was of indeterminate race with hunched shoulders and a peculiar walk. He kept his legs much straighter than was normal, the heels of his shoes barely avoiding the hardwood as he strode up after they called his name. Something kind of feminine about it, but not the rest of him, as far as Beth could tell, while she sipped a vodka cranberry from her vantage point near the shelves in the back of the bar. She had alert gray eyes which at times assessed the body language and behavior of the people around her, while at others reflected some inward thought, some deep neurosis she would keep only to herself.

“I told my imaginary ex-girlfriend I was going to leave her for someone more abstract. She said, ‘Who?’ and I said, ‘Your sister.’ She said, ‘I don’t have a sister,’ and I said, ‘Exactly.’”

That one bombed hard. He had a deep voice and spoke with an odd formality, like he was reading definitions from a dictionary or narrating an instructional video on how to repair a copier. He broke character and gave the crowd an apologetic grin. Beth wished he’d stayed in that weird mode, kept the tension going. She kind of enjoyed the vibe.

“I used to work at a law firm that represented people who’d been hurt by asbestos. For a while my job was to highlight the word cancer over, and over, and over. Sometimes tumor. Sometimes malignant. My favorite pastime after work was to drink a fifth of Jim Beam and stare at my wall for six hours.”

She guessed these bits must have looked good on paper but something felt off about them when he said them out loud. She got the sense that he had no capacity for spontaneity or improvisation; the slightest distraction in the room would destroy his whole flow.

So anyway, I watch porn sometimes. There is a mystical, magical quality to it that occurred to me recently. We go through our lives and some of us feel empty. . .and unfulfilled. We go to the grocery store and buy chicken drumsticks and are filled with this listless boredom . . .longing for something. . .but we don't know what. But here's what porn does. Once in a while. . .while you're surfing down your little porn hole. . .you come across something. . .you haven't seen before. Some kinky fetish, some image that makes you stop and go 'This is what I should be jerking off to! My whole life there's been a hole in my heart where French maids giving blowjobs with their hands handcuffed behind their backs should be.'"

He forgot himself in that last one and the crowd laughed in appreciation. He smiled as he traded places with the host. "Zach Ansel everybody!"

Beth could feel Zach's relief from where she sat.

The bar was an expat pub that fronted the East Sea, as well as the Diamond Bridge, whose cables were equipped with thousands of LED lights which rendered moving graphics for the beachgoers on the sand. On a given night you might see two massive hands playing ping pong from either end, or a synchronized light show set to some classical music. Fireworks bought at nearby convenience stores popped in small bursts. The patrons inside the bar watched their golden payloads shimmer and disappear.

Zach was sitting alone at the bar and staring hard at nothing in particular. Beth walked to the opposite side and waited to order a drink, where a Brit in his thirties was talking to the

bartender, a slender black woman with an alluring accent who seemed detached from her surroundings.

“Where you from?”

“Gabon.”

The man struggled to think of a follow-up, maintaining eye contact with her as a strained look spread across his face.

“Ah, Gabon,” he decided.

The bartender walked away.

Beth caught Zach glancing at her from across the bar. She spoke with a friend, a drummer for one of the local bands who was starring in a production of a play written by one of the Cohen brothers that next week, before wandering over into his general vicinity, not entirely sure she wanted to talk to him, or him to her, but leaving the option available if either of them felt so inclined.

She took out her phone and messaged a friend to see if she was at a bar at the other end of the beach.

“Are you doing that thing where you’re pretending to be on your phone so you don’t look all awkward?” said Zach.

“No, I’m messaging someone.”

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“Sure, what are you having?”

“I don’t drink actually. This is a ginger ale.”

“Isn’t that weird? To buy someone a drink when you’re just drinking soda?”

“My intuition told me to do it.”

“Did your intuition tell you to do those jokes?”

“What about that last thing?”

“That one was okay. But I was scared for you there.”

“I’ve had good sets all the way through before.”

“About what?”

“I guess weird sex stuff.”

“Shocking. Tell me.”

“I have this one about how I don’t like it when women sit on my face because it makes them feel too confident.”

“Jesus,” she said. She took out her debit card and signaled the bartender. “Hey, can I get a vodka cranberry and a ginger ale?”

As they waited for their drinks Zach gave her a once over he thought was subtle. Beth wondered if a world existed where she would sleep with him. What was he? Filipino? Chilean? Saudi? Malaysian? He had large brown eyes that kind of had a Rasputin thing going on, minus the creepiness.

“So how does the face sitting bit go?”

“It goes something like,” he took a moment to get into his weird persona, “I want to talk about something I’m conflicted about. And that’s *women...sitting...on my face.*”

“Go on.”

“A woman actually asked me for that for the first time recently. It was fine.”

Beth laughed as the Gabonese bartender brought their drinks. Was he cute? He was a bit older than her.

“I was into it I think. But I just feel like it made her too confident. I kept expecting her to bring it up in regular conversation. Like ‘Oh, you wanna go out for ice cream? By the way I *sat on your face*. Hey, you wanna go to the beach later? Maybe I’ll *sit on your face*? Oh, you’re thinking about buying a gym membership. That’s really cool it reminds me of the time I *sat on your face*.”

“Is that it?”

“No, the closer goes, ‘I think what I’m trying to say here is. . .I kind of liked it. That’s what this is. I’m working my way through this. Like if I met some woman and she was like, ‘Yeah, we can spend time together, but the only thing we’re gonna do is I’m gonna *sit on your face*, it would not be a deal breaker.’”

“That was somewhat funny.”

“It was funny and you know it.”

“Let’s not get carried away.” Beth took a sip of her drink. She was starting to feel buzzed. “Wait, so do you really have issues with women being on top of you?”

“Not really. Maybe that bit came from a place of male insecurity. Honestly though, no woman has ever sat on my face before.”

“That’s false advertising!”

“I just thought that would be some funny shit to say.”

3

It was Christmas Eve and the sky was “Unhealthy” according to the app Beth used to monitor the air quality on her phone. Historically wind patterns carried clouds of yellow dust from the deserts of Kazakhstan and Mongolia through China and onto the Korean peninsula, and

these days it contained much more than particles of sand: arsenic, lead, mercury, pesticides, asbestos, and whatever else was kicked up by industrial development and so on. It made some people anxious but after living here for a while you either started wearing one of those surgical masks or just took it in stride. In spite of the bright magenta warning that glowed on her screen when she checked the AQI earlier that day, Beth was running, in the cold, on the pavement, her lungs burning in a way that didn't feel quite right, because, well, she felt like running.

When she returned to her apartment she took out her earbuds and swiped “30 minutes of exercise” to “Complete” on the productivity app on her phone. There were forty small tasks she assigned herself every day, but she rarely finished more than twelve of them. The pin notifications glared at her from the bottom of her screen like open sores waiting to be bandaged. Meditate, drink eight glasses of water, read for twenty minutes, put in night guard, make bed, take meds, clean for twenty minutes, etc. She was manic and this app was important to her, especially now that she wasn't in the pit, that depressive inertia where she mainlined anything with refined sugar, drank latté after latté to try and correct some chemical deficiency in her brain, masturbated herself into a stupor and lay in the fetal position on her bed, all while having compulsive thoughts of suicide. Her falling off the roof of a twelve-story building, how satisfying that would be.

The guy. He seemed fun. She hoped he was reasonably well-adjusted. Not that she cared, necessarily, but she'd just been on a streak of dating men with some kind of trauma in their past, since forever. It'd be nice to know she could cultivate an attraction with a man who wasn't also on some kind of mental health medication, who didn't get a new tattoo every week, who didn't have three year stretches in their early twenties that she knew never to ask about. But the thing

was, she liked them, and they seemed to like her. They were on the same wavelength, a vibration that was separated from the mainstream.

She wanted to see him on New Year's with her friends. One of her coteachers had told her a boat left Haeundae Beach early morning the day of so that the passengers could see the sun come up over the water. She was normally indifferent to holidays. On Christmas she was slated to grab dinner with a friend where they would inevitably talk about guys and Korea and the pros and cons of their extended adolescence. The two of them taught English overseas while everyone back home got married and signed mortgages and climbed up ladders. They on other hand slept with strangers and spent their days in a melancholic state of wanting, unsatisfied with their current lives, afraid of returning to the lives they left.

She wanted him. What did he think of her? She wanted to know what he was like.

4

She was supposed to Skype with her Mom three weeks ago but she forgot. She was *such a piece of shit*. And they needed money, they always needed money, but her Mom always refused her offers unless it was an emergency.

What to say to her? Everything's okay. I don't have a boyfriend. I still have a job. I don't know when I'm coming home. You're right, the North Korea stuff is scary. No actually, nobody seems that worried. I guess everyone's too busy? I feel fine. I'm not sick. I've been eating a lot. No, I'm not tired of Korean food. Do I want to talk to Dad? No, it's okay. Let him rest. Love you.

Her Dad. Her dementia Dad. Her Dad who was a problem before the dementia. She remembered being a little girl and shelling peas in the living room with her mother, the sound of the garage door opening as her father rolled up in his Oldsmobile, god, the dread.

She examined a painting she'd been working on. It was a picture of an outstretched hand, the fingers long and thin, a woman's hand. Behind it a circle cut into vertical yellow stripes, a sun placed in the middle of a powder blue sky. She was obsessed with hands. She didn't know why.

Her father had once been very rich. He lost it all. The details were murky. She'd gleaned hints of it over her lifetime; a bad investment here, an ill-advised run for city council there, and boom, a millionaire gone to dust.

What to say to her therapist on Wednesday? Sometimes she forced herself to come up with things so she didn't waste the time. Maybe she would ask her how she could still be angry at a man who was slowly forgetting who he was.

She ate an apple with peanut butter then got out her smock. She put on some Wu-Tang Clan, brewed a pot of coffee, and painted. She would be a zombie tomorrow but that was okay. She wanted caffeine. She wanted to work. She looked at the clock and it was 6:30. Then it was 9:50. Then it was 11:00. She went to her laptop and opened up Skype, saw her Mom's green dot, her pixelated portrait from what must have been ten years ago. She called her. No answer.

Beth felt relieved. She walked to the bathroom to brush her teeth, but halfway there her laptop started ringing. She sat at her desk, hovered her mouse over the button that would allow her to see her mother's face, and clicked.

“Hi chica.”

Her mother looked good, considering, but there was no mistaking that taking care Beth's father was wearing her down. Her voice sounded sandpapery and the lines on the sides of her mouth cut deeper than Beth remembered.

"Hi Mom. What time is it there?"

"It's around eight. But I've been up since four."

"You don't sleep."

"I know. Sucks. How was Christmas? Is everything okay at your school? "

"I just spent time with friends. School's good. We had a talent show. I didn't really have to do anything. How's Dad?"

She drew in her breath and Beth could tell she was dealing with a lot of shit.

"He hurt his foot. I had to take him to the hospital. They did a lot of tests."

"How's his mental state?"

Her Mom's tone brightened. "It really depends on the day. You remember the delirium?"
A couple months back Beth's mother had told her that her father had been crying her name, as if she were in the next room and not on the other side of the planet.

"Yes, I remember."

"That's treatable. So the nights haven't been as hectic."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine!"

"Really?"

"I mean, no! But what can you do?"

She'd been dreading having this conversation but decided to take it there.

"Mom, when it gets to be too much, what's going to happen? Do you need me to come home? Do you need money?"

"We're fine with money for now. You don't need to come home." The second part didn't sound sincere.

"Do you think that maybe we should put Dad in one of those places? If there's anything you want me to do, just tell me."

"We already have a plan. I talked to someone and when it gets to be too much they will take him. But he won't last long there. You know your father. He hates people. . ." She trailed off. "Do you want to talk to him?"

Beth had that hollow feeling. "Sure." Her mother took the tablet to the bedroom where her father lay. She positioned it so Beth could see him sprawled out in his boxers. There was that old army tattoo on his bicep, that blue scroll with the cursive. She'd never once asked him what it said. He'd stopped dying his hair. It had taken dementia.

"Hi Dad."

"Hi Beth." His voice was even scratchier now. "How's Korea?"

"It's good."

"Everything's good over there?"

"Yup. Everything's good."

"Love you."

She always hated this part because she didn't really mean it. "Love you." Her Mom turned the tablet around. "Oh, I'm gonna make a pie today!"

"What kind of pie?"

"Pecan pie."

"That sounds delicious Mom."

Her mother laughed. "That used to be your favorite. What happened?"

"I still like it." Beth felt like a thirty pound weight had been chained to her insides and was dragging her down into oblivion. "I love you, okay?"

"Love you too."

"I have to get up early for work."

"I know. Go to sleep."

Beth clicked the X and went out to buy a pack of cigarettes. Her mother had grown up poor and was rich for a minute but now she was going to die poor, tending to a man in a state of gradual mental decline. She loved him, still somehow saw the man she fell for when she'd been a movie usher in Joliet, Illinois. Her father was from Florida and had been in town on business. About a year into their marriage her mother had realized her giant mistake, but then she got pregnant with Bethany. Cut to helping a senile old man put on his pants every morning, wiping the spittle off his chin. But a part of Beth wondered if he deserved such special treatment. Once, she must have been about four, she remembered her Mom not being around, and her getting some pee on the floor, and her Dad yelling at her to *lick it up*. To lick the pee off the floor. She had been about to do it when her father laughed. She thought about this more often than she would have liked.

Sometimes being out here messed with people. They left behind jobs, relationships, families, cities, and wanted to see something else. Maybe they were looking for love, or to bed lots of Korean women, or men, or to save money, or to change. But for some, they never found their clique, they didn't bother to integrate with Korean culture, and they got lonely and developed this thousand-yard stare. They reeked of solitude and forgot how to act. They went to

expat bars and drank too much and frightened people. And sometimes Beth looked in their eyes and felt a strange kinship.

Her phone vibrated. It was Zach, that guy from the open mic she'd been talking to. It was in response to her last message: a picture of a boat above a link to an event page. The page was all in Korean, but it wasn't hard to gather it was a New Year's cruise to see the sunrise.

"I'm into it :)"

5

She had accidentally passed out in her clothes from the bar. She drank some water from the tap, then checked her makeup and ran a comb through her hair. Outside the cold offended her. She walked up a block to where it would be easier to hail a cab, then passed one of those old ladies you saw sometimes around Korea, the ones who pick up cardboard and pile it into giant heaps on these carts. They pulled them through sidewalks with bent spines and grim faces, and once in a while their towers collapsed while everyone around them kept going. It was a cold New Year's Day and this woman was looking for Cass Beer cartons, Beth thought. She got in a cab and told the driver to take her to Haeundae Beach.

Beth arrived at the dock to find Zach standing off to the side with his hands in his pockets, a gray beanie tucked over his shaggy black hair. Everyone else stood in line and took pictures and held each other close. He went in for a hug and she wasn't ready. She lightly touched the sides of his torso, startled, and Zach pulled back confused.

"Sorry, it's just you surprised me."

"Relax," he said. He pulled two paper bags out of his coat pocket and handed her one.

"What's this?"

“Some rice cake and a hand warmer. They came with the package.”

They pulled up their tickets on their phones and showed them to a smiling lady in a vest, then boarded their “New Year’s Day Sunshine Cruise,” where they were the only foreigners. They sat at a table in a kind of banquet room while they waited for the captain to steer the boat into the ocean. Two women wearing beige uniforms entered the room holding about twenty balloons each. They started going to each table and passing them out.

“What the hell?” said Beth.

“I don’t know what’s going on either.”

One of the women arrived at their table and handed them each a balloon. She took two pens out of her fanny pack and set them on the white tablecloth. Beth was always taken by the beauty of Korean women. Soft skin, dark eyes, red lipstick. She had a fuller figure than most of the women she’d seen here. Beth gave Zach credit for keeping his eyes off her.

“What’s this for?” said Beth.

“Wish balloon,” said the woman. She pointed at the cards tied to the bottom of the strings.

“Like you write your wish on it?” said Zach.

“*Ne*,” she said, nodding.

Zach picked up his pen and put some thought into it.

“What are you writing?” said Beth.

“My wish.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t tell you. That’s not how wishes work.”

“Are you serious? Just tell me what it is.”

“I think you need to focus on your own wish.”

Beth looked down at her card. She didn't know what to write and left hers blank. They tied their balloons to the brass rail by the table as the boat took off into the sea.

“Are you gonna move back home?”

“That's the plan. I'm going back to L.A. when my contract is up in February.”

She was scared for him. It was going to be a different world out there. It's one thing to perform in front of your friends a couple times a month, but to go back to the States, into that sea of hopefuls, with the people that had been doing it every night for years. The odds. She'd read somewhere that it was better to have no talent than to be gifted with a little, because if you had a taste for what it was, you would never be able to shake the maddening sense that you could be the thing you hoped. She'd been there. She had majored in political science with vague plans to go into academia but soon realized she didn't have the rock star intellect it required. Now she played heads up seven up with Korean children and enjoyed it usually. But who knew? Maybe he had it? You grinded it out, and a few people were right, there were always a few, but the rest just watched the years fly by.

“What about you?” said Zach.

“What about me what?”

“How long are you gonna be out here?”

She thought of the family she didn't talk to for weeks at a time. Her parents that lived off her father's Social Security.

“I should probably go back. My dad has dementia.”

“Fuck. What's that like?”

“It's shitty. He can't remember why I don't like him.”

“That’s funny.”

The other passengers started making their way to the deck. Beth and Zach untied their balloons and walked up to where they could feel the air. The water below them glowed opal. A man in a suit crooned some old Korean song into a mic while seagulls flew overhead.

“Can you take a picture of me? My parents should know I’m alive,” said Beth.

Zach took a picture of her set against the sun. The singer shouted something jubilant into the mic after which everyone let go of their balloons. Beth watched them become little dots on the horizon and thought of her father. She wished she could feel something like love for him. There were times when he’d come through. She remembered crashing her car into a storm drain in high school and him being right there with no judgment, all forgiveness. But memories like that were few. It was mostly just crazy yelling about money, the lack of it, him taking out the pain of lost millions on her and her mother, both of them jumpy around the house, not sure what would set him off next. His roar erupting in the middle of the night, bellowing at the top of his lungs while Beth stared at the stucco ceiling above her bed, connecting the specks into her personal constellations.

“What are you thinking about?” said Zach.

“Just that I’m tired as shit.” She was into the way he was looking at her.

“Too tired to do something after this?”

“Why don’t you come over?”

They took the subway back to her tiny apartment. On the walk from the station all the shops were lit up by the sunshine. She punched the code to her building and they walked up the stairs to her studio.

“I’m leaving soon,” said Zach.

“I know.”

“It feels weird.”

“Is there anything you want to do before you leave?”

“Just spend time with the people I might not see ever again.”

He put his hands on her waist and kissed her. They took off their jackets and made out on the bed. As they undressed each other she said, “I’m gonna sit on your face *bitch*.” She spent a lot of time laughing at her joke.

“Criminy,” said Zach.

She told him there were condoms in the drawer underneath her closet and they started having sex with an intensity that surprised her. It reminded her of a time with her ex-boyfriend on the night before she was scheduled for a biopsy to see if she had lymphoma. That brush with mortality had brought out something in them both, and it was like that now for some reason, like they were on the cusp of something that could change everything and there were a few different ways it could go. When they finished Zach fell asleep and snored beside her. Beth lay awake thinking. She walked to the kitchen to make herself some tea, where out the window she saw that hunched woman dragging her cart full of cardboard. Beth got the urge to do something strange. She got dressed and walked outside.

She went to a coffee shop and ordered a hot cocoa, then made her way down the street and around the corner to where she’d seen that old woman from her kitchen window. The woman had stopped at a convenience store and was looking underneath the tables for things she could salvage. Beth stood a few feet away and waited for her to look up.

“*Annyeonghaseyo*,” said Beth. She said it again and the woman looked at her with a cautious smile on her face.

Beth bowed. The woman waited, curious, and Beth handed her the hot cocoa. The woman held it in her hand, felt the heft of it. She thanked her in her hoarse voice and Beth walked back to her apartment.

She suddenly couldn't stop thinking about Chicago. The apartment buildings on the North Side colored eggshell and steel blue, the wind billowing down the Lakefront Path where the joggers treated every warm day like a lottery ticket about to expire. She thought about Millennium Park, that twenty-five acres of tax funded symmetry and glitz, and the Crain Communications Building with its diamond-slanted luster, its elegance a stark contrast to the peaks looking indestructible all around it. How she could touch the sidewalk on Michigan Avenue and feel something beating through the concrete. The place that was home to the family that wondered about her every day.

She had felt that heartbeat here too, in Korea. Those blurry soju nights when she first arrived, the kindness and generosity of the people who lived here. And it existed in the other expats she'd met: the punk rocker with tatted legs whose thrashing was famous in the shows around Johannesburg, the girl who smuggled a hallucinogenic candy to a concert in her underwear and was forced to lick it off the fabric in the bathroom when it melted, the Brit who made music on his synthesizer before eating chocolate bars for breakfast, the marine biologist who read passive aggressive messages from her mother as a kind of performance art around the city, the podcaster from Maine who plagiarized the lyrics to “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails in a poem he read to a girl in junior high, the seminary dropout who was addicted to sensory deprivation

tanks and wrote reams and reams of fiction he would never show to anyone. And of course she felt that pulse in the Diamond Bridge that lit up Gwangali Beach like an Atari.

But it was time to go home.