

Growing Together, Me Old, Her Up

I'm entering Starbucks in SoHo, looking through a long line for a Chinese woman with whom I've had three short phone conversations that I've punctuated with lots of "uh-huhs," the safest thing to say to someone whose English I mostly don't get. The irony is that this, my worst-English-speaking Asian has the most English of names, Melanie, which she uses, not in English-speaking venues like Meihua's Nyack, but in New York's Chinatown where she lives on Hester, just off Mott Street, Manhattan's Yangtze River. My attraction to her, following Meihua, may just confirm that I've got a case of the disease that my daughters recently diagnosed: "yellow fever."

The long line I'm perusing turns out to be for the bathroom, Starbucks now apparently the world's public toilet. On the much shorter coffee line, I see an Asian woman in jeans and a T-shirt. Her height is about equal to mine, which is consistent with her profile, and she looks forty, fifteen years younger than I am. Unusual for Asian women, she's very nicely endowed.

"Melanie?"

"Jet?"

“Nice to meet you,” I say, shaking her hand. “What would you like?”

“Kofee mik,” she says, dashing off to hover over two seats where one occupant is checking her makeup, a prelude perhaps to leaving, Melanie’s vigilance obviously having been honed wrestling with a billion people for a handful of chairs.

When I arrive with the coffee, Melanie is looking through *The New York Times*.

“What’s in the news?” I ask.

“I dool lo.”

“Excuse me?”

“Jus look at wha to buy.”

“Oh, you’re looking at the advertisements?”

“Ye.”

“Okay,” I say, determining to slow and simplify my speech, marveling at her angelically round, sweet face and her broad, constantly flashing smile. We chatter with minimal comprehension, neither much concerned with the very evident language gap.

“So you have two children?” I ask, limiting myself to simple, common questions while grasping for phonetic footing.

“Ye. Boy and gill. You?”

I provide my specifications: my children, my unhappy marriage, and the long relationship with Meihua that I’m recently out of, the details of which, especially that Meihua also is Asian, I carefully withhold. I don’t know what she’s understanding, and don’t much care; her simple personality and beauty are putting the lie to the mantra, one often chanted with increasing vigor as marriages lose theirs, that communication is the foundation of a good relationship.

Heading together down Spring Street, crossing Lafayette, then down Mulberry for a few blocks, I’m following Melanie, who seems to be taking us towards Hester Street, where she lives. As we turn onto Hester, her eyes start darting like she’s watching for snipers. With a sudden goodbye, she vanishes through an old tenement doorway because, I assume, she doesn’t want to be seen with me in her tight-knit, inquisitive Chinese neighborhood.

A dinner date and a couple of telephone conversations later and I’m not understanding her any better, but my interest is steadily increasing. I’m imagining a relationship akin to my Amagansett summer, except it’s

an infinite succession of those one-night stands, all with the same sweet, beautiful young Asian woman.

But some part of me, perhaps my conscience, or where I store and learn from experiences, is saying that someone great to look at and easy to be with just can't be my soul mate. That's because *soul mating* has a strong mental component, like tolerating one another's sarcasm, taking turns irritatingly analyzing each other, deep discussions of art, movies, friends' personalities, food and the merits of one- versus two-ply toilet paper, conflicting politics and values discussed ad nauseam until capitulation or cathartic mind-melding, and, of course, punning, none of which Melanie and I will *ever* do unless, of course, I become fluent in her Sichuan dialect of Mandarin.

But why can't I call it *soul mating* when my soul mates with Melanie's on that regular basis that, if sustained over a long term, would be the envy of all those *soul mates* who've learned the hard way that lifelong, mutually enabled orgasms aren't in their cards? Why is a relationship supposed to have more than easy attraction? Liking being together? Warmth and affection? I'm intellectually and emotionally self-sufficient. I'm capable of amusing myself and leading a full life inside my

own head. I just need someone to do it around. Someone I'll grow with over the years, me old, her up, which is where Melanie comes in. This language barrier might just be the shock therapy I need. Submerging with Melanie in her grassroots Chinese community, I'll be amongst people with whom I can barely communicate, people I can't do my protective, caregiving shtick with for the simple reason that they won't understand what I'm doing and therefore won't give me the shame-relieving responses I'm doing it for.