

elita

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MEE-JU RO

MY FIRST JOB WAS AT ELITA.CA. THE PARENT COMPANY, COMMUNICATIONS Incorporated, published the annual ranked list of Canada's top employers. Every year, it was printed in *The Globe and Mail* and the logo became a recognized brand of approval: a medal made of sinusoidal waves, arranged around a maple leaf. Even with the rise of the world wide web, Communications Incorporated continued to publish offline. But with a side-eye to rising unemployment rates, it started a new divisional branch: an online job search engine. I was hired straight out of University as an Indexer. The company paid to have their job ad circulated exclusively within the University of Toronto's careers page. The day of my interview, a hot summer day, I put on a pair of beige sling backs (Nine West but could pass as a Stuart Weitzman) and walked down Hazelton Avenue. When contacted for an interview, the administrative assistant gave me the address and I was immediately impressed. Hazelton was one of the oldest, richest streets of Yorkville, one of the oldest, richest neighbourhoods in Toronto. When I finally found the right unit number, I checked the address three times. It was a three-storey residential home. It turns out that the CEO of Communications Incorporated purchased a residential home specifically on Hazelton because of the fancy address. I climbed a pair of rickety, hardwood stairs to the interview room. I got the job.

The following week, I walked into the third-floor office. It was a crowded room of computers that were exactly one model out of date and I remember how my skin broke out in goosebumps, what Koreans call "chicken skin." I walked into a room full of girls who looked exactly like me. Mark, the CEO, had been away in the Philippines at the time of my interview.

Not long after, I was told that we were all between the ages of 23-28. We all had English Literature degrees from the University of Toronto. Girls with last names like Cheng, Choi, Kim, Song, Ng, Leeladhar.

When Mark returned from the Philippines, he announced his engagement to a tall, willowy Filipina who spoke beautiful French.



You can't fake good shoes. Good shoes take you to good places. That's how you got anywhere in life. Like magic, if you put on shoes fit for the good life, it would inevitably take you there. That's what my grandmother used to tell me. Once, when she repeated this made-up proverbial phrase about shoes, I took pains to translate into Korean the story of *The Red Shoes*. A Danish girl named Karen is gifted a pair of red shoes and she dances to her death. I wasn't fond of my grandmother. After I finished the story, she said red was a cheap colour. As a consequence, I missed the moral of the story. Or maybe that was the moral of the story. I'm not sure anymore. At what point do the red shoes dance to your desire and at what point do they dance you to death?

Other times, she'd say, you can't fake a good coat. In various myths or fairy tales, coats either protect you or kill you or both. She's right, you can't fake a good coat. What you do is save up every penny, buy the best coat you can afford in black, charcoal, or camel and you keep it clean for fifty years or more. This way, the coat isn't fake but it isn't exactly real either. It's the same with shoes. You buy a good pair and every evening when you come back to your rental apartment, you take them off and clean them with a toothbrush and a micro-fiber cloth. The micro-fiber cloth was my improvised improvement to my grandmother's own compulsive shoe cleaning. There were two things she did every day: pray and clean her shoes. To her, they may have been the same thing.

When I was six, I went to my first sleepover. As soon as I entered the foyer, I took off my shoes and

headed to the kitchen where I moistened a paper towel and gently brushed it across the toe and the sides. My friends were already downstairs comparing pajamas, so it was only Stephanie's mother that saw. I never cleaned my shoes in public again. It became a private rite.

During the anti-Asian hate crimes that grated across the city in 2020, my grandmother advised me to buy a very expensive peacoat.



Immigrants constantly translate traditions, reinvent them. I stopped hoarding luxury coats, I stopped cleaning my shoes (no, that's a lie) but I started collecting something else, something my Korean grandmother had never even thought to collect: words. Not just any words. White words.

There are differing degrees of real. You can be entirely fluent in English but like a vintage Louis Vuitton bag you get from your white grandmother, there are generational white words. The kind of white words you can't embody because they refuse to roll off the tongue. You need to have heard it float around the dining table, you needed a dining table, you needed a dining room. Mostly architectural words, or the names of seasonal flowers: foyer, gilding, rhododendron, freesia, apse, bay windows, trim, wainscoting, mantle, not peony (any immigrant knows the peony), hydrangea, false indigo, pasque, forsythia. It's no coincidence that these words describe homes and gardens, homes with gardens. This was the language of the American dream, the words of roots and foundations, ornamentation and seasonal joys. My grandmother said, you know you are living a good life by two things. If you notice the change in seasons and if you eat fruit in season. I compulsively looked up the words for architectural features. Very handy at cocktail parties. I

couldn't afford a Givenchy dress, so instead I dressed up my English with words of ornamentation. I memorized the time of flowers: snow drops come out first, the early spring flowers like forsythia which gives way to the apple blossoms, the hellebores (ironically nicknamed the Christmas flower), then the tulips and daffodils, allium and bleeding hearts, then come the parade of lilacs, irises tell you that you are now on the cusp of summer, and the peony bulbs start to ripen. Between what my grandmother told me and how I chose to interpret it, there is a bizarre tension between style and stylization.



One day, Mark brought around a long-time family friend and investor. I couldn't see them but I could hear the two of them making their way up two flights of creaky, narrow stairs. From behind, I could hear the silence as he looked into the office room and he exclaimed, "So, this is your little harem."

On our lunch break, I had to run to Pusateri's to buy a birthday cake. Mark made a point of buying a Pusateri's birthday cake anytime it was someone's birthday in the office. Pusateri's cake and a platter of Freshii wraps. Most of the girls would have been annoyed to be sent on an errand during their lunch break but I gladly volunteered (besides, Mark made sure you got your full lunch break afterward—he was a lawyer). It was my first time inside Pusateri's. I'd never been. If you volunteered to get the cake, it meant you could choose the flavor and design. I picked the Phipps Polka Dot Cake and the Dufflet Vanilla Layer Cake. They were both festive, decorated either with huge polka dots or a tastefully minimalist arrangement of buttercream flowers in yellow, pink, and orange. I'd never had buttercream. It was disgusting; even after swallowing, the cream lingered like an oily

film around the back of your tongue and throat. The eight-inch cakes were forty-five dollars. Each.



It was only after I had been around for a while that I found out why Mark only hired young Asian women with English degrees. Apparently, we were constitutionally neat, detail-oriented, efficient. But we wrote beautiful English. The perfect, narrow demographic for *elita.ca*. The best of both worlds. The *elita* girls. What he never mentioned except when he got a bit drunk was that he also believed that Asian women were more compliant or grateful, I forget the word he used at the time. The point was we never asked for a raise or a promotion. Hired into *elita.ca* with the enticing prospect for working on the publication side, we were never transferred to the division responsible for the Top 100 Employer competition, a year-long selection process followed by the Top 100 publication that would announce the winners. Judging and assigning value: that was a different skillset.

An indexer is someone who cleans up after a computer program. The IT department consisted of a lone, South Asian programmer who had just graduated from the University of Toronto. The girls teased him because he spent most of his time fixing his hair and when you tried to speak to him, he looked past you to his own reflection in the window behind you. The third floor was all windows. That was the one perk of working in a fixed-up Hazelton residential home. All those architectural words I'd memorized, I could finally see how they came together in a home. Original walnut hard wood floors, French windows, simple molding, ivory walls. But I digress. The IT guy, when he wasn't checking his pompadour, toiled at perfecting the code for a program designed to "scrape" employer website career pages. Some coded mystery went around visit-

ing all the employer websites database, collected the job postings, and made them available to a potential user on *elita.ca*. But the program wasn't perfect. It failed to register expiry dates, forgot to take down jobs that had been filled, or something would get comically scrambled in translation: *&^%\$?. This is where the indexer comes in: we go in and manually enter the jobs the code missed, take down jobs that are expired, and hit the delete key until everything at least appears like it's written in English.

I developed a strange habit. I would go downstairs to the kitchen that doubled as an employee lounge at around roughly four fifteen. Four fifteen is well past the afternoon coffee rush when most of the employees go downstairs for a break and chat a bit to whittle away at time. Four fifteen is too late, too close to clock out, so no one goes there at that time. Mark misinterpreted my habit as industriousness. The kitchenette was a small basement corner with a coffee table that seats only one person, probably to discourage too much lounging—which is stupid because indexers sit all day. Standing around together and chatting over a cup of coffee while looking out the window onto the quiet, grand neighbourhood is a welcome respite.

But, no, I went downstairs at four fifteen. I pressed the small lit up button on the streamlined design of the most expensive Nespresso machine on the market at the time and I watched the milky, rich, dark coffee drip into the little, double-walled glass cup. In the time it takes to add another shot, I pocketed all the pretty Nespresso pods in all the different colours. Like a handful of Christmas. And I was the Grinch. For good measure, I added packets of organic sugar. I did this every day. I don't even own a Nespresso machine.

To my surprise, I was promoted quickly. Assistant editor of *elita*. I had new responsibilities. It was my job to take note of patterns of error. The code would consistently fail in certain ways, unable to read par-

ticular fonts or formats. It was my job to discover and record these patterns of error, knock on the glass door to get the attention of our one-man IT department, let him know, and he would fix it. If I was very good at what I did, I would make myself obsolete. That was what I was paid an extra five dollars an hour to do. I also posted advertised jobs from clients who paid more to have sponsored jobs show up at the top of the search results. I had to talk to clients on the phone, reply to emails, and make sure that they were happy. Back then the phone call to email ratio was still fifty-fifty. According to Mark, I had a white voice. Which was puzzling, because all of the *elita* girls were second-generation English majors—all of us spoke white, or at least could code-switch adequately, leave behind our Scarborough lingo. I was from Scarborough too. But I was born with an over-developed larynx—you know, the Adam's apple. I had one. Because of that or not, I had a deeper voice than most of the other girls. I was just as nervous, just as eager to please. If my physiology had allowed for it, I would have squeaked in a high pitch soft-speak too. My deep voice but feminine lilt was confusing and it made client's unsure of how to treat me, how angry they could be, what they were or were not feeling entitled too. The confusion allowed me to do my job.



I had been inducted into a small group of young Asian Canadian women. You would assume that if you put together a group of women, the same age, the same degree, in the same position, we would naturally hate each other. To our surprise, we became close. We taught each other where all the sales were. For example, the Club Monaco a few blocks away would have a sale every three months or so. You never buy an oversized, “boyfriend” cardigan from the women's section.

When Club Monaco came out with a new sweater in the men's section, they sold the same one a few seasons later in the women's for double the price. The only way you can tell is the buttons, they're on the other side. For all their market slogans of "unisex" or "gender neutral" styles, the straight buttons give it all away.

It was a miracle we didn't hate each other. People think that revolution starts with dissent. To stand at the starting line of dissent meant that you had to laboriously undo the systems designed, constructed, architecturally arranged, to keep us away from each other, to stymie comradery, to keep us in compulsive competition with each other. By the time you arrive at the beginning of dissent, you are fucking exhausted. The fact that we didn't stab each other in the back (or, not often and then always with remorse) was a miracle. So, the fact that we got along with each other may not seem like much to you—but to me, it felt like a miracle.



During my elite years, Plato's Bookstore hadn't closed their doors yet. One by one, all over the city, privately owned bookstores were going out of business. Plato's Bookstore was going under because of the dramatic increase in property taxes that year. The owner owned the building but the book selling business was not profitable enough and he was looking for a tenant. Last year, I went into one of the many Indigo locations—the big, shiny one on Yonge Street. They had a newly renovated home interiors section that sold throws, pillows, and photo frames, with a big sign that read *a room of one's own*. V. Woolf might have flinched in her grave. But Plato's bookstore was like something out of a novel: its evergreen storefront had "Plato's Bookstore" written in big, bold gold letters. Behind the register was a slight, middle-aged man with square rimmed glasses who spoke in complete

sentences. Like I said, it was like something out of a novel—a white person's novel. And if I were the hero of a white person's novel, the man would make small talk full of mysterious double-entendres and the back room might transport me into a different world full of magic, wonder, or if this were a King novel, horrors. But all those things are the same thing on a continuum. It was that kind of bookstore. So, maybe it should have come as no surprise to me what happened next.

Browsing the ceiling-length shelves stocked full of older edition classics, I picked out Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. I took the two volumes to the register. The man behind the glasses looked at me over his glasses perched on the bridge of his nose.

"These are for you?"

"Yes, these are for me."

And then he gingerly packed my purchase in a brown paper bag and gave a barely detectable shake of his head and a quiet sigh.

"These are good books. Our young people don't read these days. If they did, I wouldn't be closing the store."

A backhanded compliment if there ever was one. I was a cultural interloper. I had purchased that which did not, rightfully, belong to me. And I wish I could tell you that I was angry. That I had a ready sharp, witty retort. Instead, I learned something.

Not all things you learn are good things. Sometimes you learn something that is bad. The things you do to survive and the things that make you a whole person are too often at odds. I learned something important to my psychic survival at Plato's bookstore. After that day, I developed an odd and enduring habit of carrying around books by very specific authors. A different book for different places. When I'm boarding an international flight, I always bring a Stephen King

novel. It makes certain interactions easier because it flags my membership in the culture. Several years later, I improved my tactic. I collected tote bags and took them everywhere: *The New Yorker* (of course), *Trader Joe's*, *Toronto Public Library*, *London Book Review*, etc. It made some things easier. If I wear my expensive, beige coat and don a public library tote, I'm less of a spy in the country I was born in. My grandmother clutched her Dior bag her whole life hoping it would somehow rub off on her. Every generation makes improvements to the self-hating rites of survival we acquire. I don't carry Dior bags; I carry library totes. If I carry the former, the assumption is that it is a Chinese knock-off, but it's hard to fake the soft cultural benefits a library tote bag can give me.

That day, I learned something that I carried around (maybe literally) all the time. And it's something I wish I had never learned.



I'll tell you a story of shame. Real shame. There are different types of shame. The kind that you live out every day, like calloused skin, and then the kind that sticks out, like a thin, translucent hangnail.

Every day was a relationship to shame. It was like a cresting edge and you saw the world across its sharp edge, like that was your horizon. Ashamed for being too poor. Ashamed for being surrounded by people who spoke too loudly in public. But it didn't feel unique to me, it was my entire community, so at least I didn't feel alone. But the shame wed to loneliness is a special brand.

In the final year of high school, a couple years after OAC was transitioned out of Canadian high schools, I applied to local universities with the exception of one, shiny possibility: Oxford. To me, Oxford wasn't about going to university. It meant opening a wardrobe and

finding yourself transported to a world where you might be the main character in a novel set in a civilized world, full of noble people and lions that wouldn't eat you. I never expected to hear back from them. From our tiny apartment, on our browning ivory computer that once had MS DOS as its operating program, I mailed out an application to Oxford University. No one in our community knew how to do it, how to fill it out, so I did the best I could.

They called me for an interview that would be held "locally"—which meant New York City. I'm not sure why my parents shelled out their savings to attend an interview for a school we all knew we could not afford. My mom, red-faced, exploded with the truth a week after we received the invitation, *we don't have the money. You can't go. You have to go to a Canadian university. You have to get OSAP.* My father yelled at her, told her to be quiet, and turned to me with conviction in his eyes, *if you get in, you can go. Money, that's not your problem. Grandpa will sell his house in Seoul. We'll make it work. So, don't worry—you can go wherever you want.*

That trip to New York City from Toronto meant that my mother had to run the convenience store by herself from the crack of dawn to late at night for the next three days. My father and I bought two greyhound tickets to NYC. It would take twelve hours. One way. We rode the bus all night long and under the surprisingly cozy reading light, I read Keats' *Endymion*. I'd never read Keats but I read on an online forum that Oxford U interviewers ask you to read a poem on the spot, ask you to analyze it, ask you to identify the poet, ask you to take a guess at its publication date (or at the very least periodize it). The first line, "a thing of beauty is a joy forever," felt out of place but all the more enticing, enchanting for having read it on that dirty bus. *Wasn't it a line from Mary Poppins?* As I struggled to keep my eyes open during that long, bumpy ride, *Endymion* traveled into the underworld

to rescue Cynthia. I still can't remember if he did meet an Indian girl or if I made that up in between dreaming and waking.

I watched my father stretch his arms out and extend his back as he laid flat a brown, plaid jacket we'd just purchased on sale from American Eagle. It was wrapped in a garbage bag with the ends neatly tied and the top (or, technically the bottom) had been cut out so that the hanger hook could jut out. Kind of like when you get your dry cleaning back except we used a garbage bag—and Koreans knew all about dry cleaning. All this to make sure my jacket, ironed meticulously by my mother, would remain pristine and unwrinkled. It took up the entire overhead section across from us, and my father eyed the shelf so that no one would put their luggage on top.

As soon as we got off the bus, we made our way to Oxford University Press: I brushed my teeth, washed my face, and changed into my freshly pressed jacket in their bathroom. I learned only later on that my dad cried in the lobby as he watched me go into the bathroom, ashamed he could not afford plane tickets. *Maybe if you'd had sleep, a hot breakfast, a nice shower.*

But thankfully, I didn't feel the fatigue or anger or injustice that he projected on me. My youth invigorated me and the opportunity made me heady.

I waited for my name to be called and I stepped into a cozy room full of books and a kind middle-aged British woman greeted me. She had peppery short to medium length hair. As expected, I was asked to read a poem. She asked me what I thought. I rattled off a grocery list of poetic terms: sibilance, iambic pentameter, metaphor, slant rhyme, enjambment, and various figures of speech. And she looked at me like she almost felt bad for me. Kindly, almost a whisper, she told me that I had nothing to be nervous about and that she would like to hear my real thoughts about the poem. This response scared me more than anything,

so I just repeated those technical terms in a different order. And she said, "But the poem, it's about death. It's about a man who is struggling with the question of mortality."

Slowly, it dawned on me. I had missed the meaning of the poem entirely. Missed the poem entirely.

I had not resented my parents when they could not buy me a plane ticket; I had not resented them on the greyhound bus; I had not resented them when I knew they could not afford to send me to Oxford. But I resented them now. Something about our lives made it hard for people like me to read a poem and to understand its basic premise. People like me would miss important things like beauty and mortality. And that made me angry. I'm not sure I've ever stopped being angry about that. So it makes sense that I collected all those words: flowers, architectural features, ornamental adjectives. I never wanted to miss beauty again because then, everyone would know I was poor.

I was so shaken from this realization and the first real, tinny taste of resentment toward my poor parents that when she asked me if I could name the poet, I told her resolutely that I didn't know. Even though I thought I might. She gave me several opportunities. But I told her I could not and if it was okay with her, I would like to go home now.

It was Keats.



But that's not all there is to the story.

The parts I left out for a pared effect include the fact that this was the first and only father-daughter trip. That once I did finally fall asleep, I splayed out across two seats because my father let me put my legs up on his lap after I snapped at him about how uncomfortable the seats were. He never once lost his temper that trip. And I'm pretty sure he suffered from depres-

sion or anger management issues, we just didn't know the name for what we assumed was his personality. You know K-pop and K-drama but have you ever heard of K-rage? We don't talk about it but ask any Korean and they'll laugh but not because it's that funny. If you were my white therapist, you would tell me he was abusive. If you were any one of my Korean friends growing up, you would say he was just a Korean dad. After the interview, we bought hot dogs at a street stand using American quarters my parents had saved up over the years running their convenience store. When we paid in quarters from a Ziploc bag full of more change, the vendor laughed and gave us two free cokes.

I don't remember the ride back home. Only that I loved it. I loved riding beside my father and the fact that he never asked me how the interview went. Maybe he knew, from my face. We were out several hundred dollars and an unquantifiable number of American quarters. I never got accepted to Oxford. But I learned that poetry is beautiful. I also learned that it takes a certain kind of attention that life doesn't always afford.

But maybe what I really learned is that there is a different kind of poetry to life—one that cannot be accounted for in figures of speech, the mythic journeys of giant men, or even words at all. Instead, we find it in seeing a face, extended arms under a shelf just out of reach, a freshly pressed jacket, a Ziploc full of quarters, everything adds up like a magic arithmetic and becomes a long, long bus ride to New York City. And at the intersection of shame and dinghy buses, poetry is the very thing that feels out of place or out of joint. But even that is a function of poetry.



It's true. Everything is true. Except for the parts I changed because the truth sounded too fake—not

cheap, just fake. It happened. All of it. But the difference with immigrants is we hoard it; keep it clean for decades. Come home, at the end of the day, and like a pair of shoes you can't really afford, take it off, and with wetted cloth, gently wipe it down. So that it lasts. For years and years and years. Habits are easily adapted for new ends.

It's true, everything is true. But this is not an autobiography. It could be the story of any and every millennial that quit their first job out of college and went to grad school. But it's like that line from Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, how do you separate out what is unique to your childhood, unique to your generation, unique to the fact that you are Asian, or Korean, or the fact that you were poor, or that you didn't like your grandmother? *Woman Warrior* was written as fiction and then somewhere down the publication line, it became a *semi-autobiographical memoir*.



The assistant editor before me quit because she got accepted into a PhD program at Cambridge. I quit because I got accepted into a PhD program at Cornell. The assistant editor after me quit because she got accepted to do her MA at the University of Toronto. All of us became professors in English literature or communications. Wearing our cardigans with the buttons on the wrong side. Scattered around elite institutions in English programs, programs in the throes of their own identity crisis. And in the confusion, we would do our jobs. Wearing clean shoes. A generation trained to recognize indexicality, systemic patterns of error, and inappropriate translation.



Fairy tales hold important life lessons, though not always what you expect. For example, red or no, we know where the shoe pinches. Those tales tell you something about the relationship between craft and craftiness and that survival and death are not opposite things. Every fairy tale, in one way or another, teaches you how to turn a trap into a trick. But in real life, it's hard to really, really learn these lessons and even harder to apply them. Exactly at what point between desire and damage, does it start to pinch?

This is the trap: in what language can you describe a pinched language? No matter how fast or how slowly I write, I can't outrun or trick my way out of a language that doesn't know how to step out of those fancy, dancing shoes.

Somewhere along the line, the things that you picked up to protect yourself become a part of you. The bad things you learn, they become who you are and how you talk. And most of the time the bad things you learn, they helped you survive. They become the surface upon which you learn to read a different language of luminescent bright stuff. We learn good stuff and

we learn bad stuff, but it would be a mistake to think that we learn them separately.



My first trip to Ithaca, a city on a hill, I got caught in a downpour of rain and I had no umbrella. As I was leaving Olin library, I turned back, breezed through the turnstile, and headed to the circulation desk where a tired student was thumbing his phone.

"Excuse me, I forgot my umbrella here earlier, could I check the lost and found?"

"Sure, what colour is it?"

"It's black."

He came back with eleven different black umbrellas. Though I'd never seen any of them before in my life, I picked out the most expensive looking one. You don't look at the actual umbrella, you check the handle – that's how you pick out the nicest one.

"This is it, thank you."

I stepped out into the rain with my stolen umbrella and it kept me relatively dry. The next time I rode a bus, I left it on the seat.