

A Friend's Inheritance

War with Pigeons

by Tae Kim

aStoryTelling, Inc.

Tenafly (NJ), 2010

ISBN# 978-0-9844359-3-7

Review by Bill Drucker

“If you are reading this letter it could only mean that I’m dead and I suspect the circumstances of my death were less than natural.” For Peter, a Korean American business lawyer and executor of best friend Simon’s estate, the intriguing letter turns the legal process into a deeply felt, and at times disturbing personal experience. Despite their close friendship, Peter begins to learn only after his friend’s death that there was a darker side to Simon that he successfully hid from all his friends and family.

During their time in New York together as young professionals, Peter had never been in Simon’s luxury apartment. Suddenly, he was there as executor. Peter finds a chest with Simon’s effects, including a revealing diary. Simon, a handsome, Ivy League-educated, well-heeled Korean American child of immigrants, begins to reveal his life to Peter through this small, black notebook. As he reads Simon’s often-anguished words, Peter realizes he holds similar suppressed feelings about his past. While Peter was an orphan from the start, his life has many surprising parallels to the apparently successful Simon, particularly the sense of loss and separation that carried into the adulthood of the two friends.

Through the device of the notebook, and the personal intertwining of the lives of two friends, the author begins a narrative that reveals a layered, hidden agenda and a story of how the sacrifices and choices of one individual play out in a cultural context.

The truly fascinating part of this book is Tae Kim’s insider view of the elite group of young adult Koreans who are sent or who move with parents to the U.S. They are neither 1.5 nor second generation Korean Americans, but something with a new label. Koreans often refer to Korean Americans who visit or live temporarily in Korea as kyopos, and the author also has these Koreans-in-America referring to themselves as kyopos. This group could be characterized as an example of the kyopo idea in reverse ---- Korean nationals who are living temporarily or permanently in the U.S., without any idea of adapting to American culture except when convenient.

Protected from culture shock by their money and connections between one another within a powerful subculture, these nouveau-kyopos inhabit an exclusive world of wealthy business professionals. They frequent the discreetly-located room salons, eat at expensive cafes and restaurants, date models and stewardesses. The last time any author tackled this elite group was Charles Kim in *SubKoreans* (2004), but his was the view of an acerbic outsider.

This new elite, unlike the older kyopo or dongpo, do not come for economic reasons or for political refuge. Rather, they are living abroad to study or to escape some personal disgrace. For rich families, saving face is very important. For example, even the most influential families often cannot get their children into the three top Korean universities ---- Seoul National, Yonsei or Koryo, but they may be able to enroll them in less competitive Ivy League institutes in America or other prestigious schools in Europe. The author explains that pretext of studying abroad is better than the humility of attending second-rate Korean schools. Hence, everyone has a hidden agenda, or at least an agenda they can avoid while in the U.S.

Kim employs a clever stylistic device to overcome cultural and language barriers. For the implied Korean dialogue, long passages of English text are italicized. Real Korean phrases are also added throughout the book: Simon-shi, Peter-shi, annyonghaseyo. I'll have the nakji bokkum. The combination of translated italicized writing and Konglish-influenced phrases works well in the story.

Simon reveals that he feels like an outsider in the company of fellow Korean American friends. Invited to join his friends at a restaurant, Simon would deliberately order the cheaper food, and drink just water. He was self-conscious growing up. If Peter was an orphan because of the loss of his parents, Simon was an orphan because of the absence of his parents. His mother and father worked killer hours and were seldom home. Too tired to pay much attention to their son, they gave him money instead. His father, angry because he cannot adjust to America, eventually abandons Simon and his mother. Simon experiences many unfortunate episodes of separation, misunderstanding and awkward reconciliation with his mother, even when the father is around.

Simon and Peter frequented the room salons, and met with other elite Korean Americans. One of their contemporaries is Jason, from a powerful Korean family in control of a business conglomerate (chaebol). The power, prestige, and wealth Jason enjoys does not translate into greater pedigree or poise. Jason resembles a westernized version of North Korean leader Jong-il Kim, with a slight build, wild hair, and thick glasses. Jason and his friend Jude, both related to famous business families, cannot compare to the princely Simon. Handsome and athletic, Simon was a big man on campus. When he entered a room salon, the women would gravitate toward him. Jason and Jude had to demand

attention.

Life takes on substance and form for Simon when he falls in love with Catherine. However, Catherine's father will have nothing to do with a prospective son-in-law from a broken home. Simon's Harvard education and financial success hardly matters to Catherine's father in terms of his eligibility. The father arrogantly offers an envelope with bribe money to try to get Simon to walk away. Peter was initially unaware of Simon and Catherine's relationship, and finds out much later. Simon, it seems, kept all of his personal pain very quiet. For Peter, it brings to mind Peter's own experience with Grace, someone he truly loved but couldn't keep. She perished in a plane crash with other passengers.

Absorbed in Simon's diary and involved in executing the estate, Peter meets Catherine and Simon's mother, confronts the greedy church elder who expects a share of the estate and encounters many of their former Korean American colleagues at the room salons and cafes. Peter has specific instructions to give Helen, a room salon girl, a key to a safety deposit box. Helen, Soo Yun in another life, always liked Simon, and even had affection for Peter. The loss of family wealth left her stranded. She worked the room salon and put up with humiliations from the likes of Jason. Recognizing she deserved better, Simon wanted for her to get away with money and a passport.

It is a Korean tradition to measure a man's wealth by the symbolic keys he holds, usually four ---- to his house, his car, his office and his bank account. Simon's estate was attached to six such keys: the apartment, the Porsche 911, his mother's condo in Edgewater, a beach cottage in Rumson, a boat and the safety deposit box containing deeds and few insurance policies. The seventh key was given to Helen.

The persistent church elder tries and fails to finesse Peter for a piece of Simon's estate. He shows up again with threats about Catherine. Peter tells the elder to meet him on the boat where they can privately discuss the matter. Peter tells the elder to take everything that Simon provided to him in the estate, and just go away. The boat starts to sputter and catch fire. Peter tells the elder to jump and swim to shore, but the man screams that he cannot swim, even after Peter assures him he will help him get to shore. He is frozen in panic on the burning boat. Peter wakes up in the hospital bed to see Helen's face.

He is grateful to be alive. Helen breaks down and confesses. The elder was such an evil man that she had rigged the boat engine to malfunction, but never meant for Peter to be in harm's way. Before she could express how she feels about him, he shifts to lawyer mode, alarmed that she may be criminally involved. Peter tells Helen to leave before the police come to question him.

Peter finds Catherine to try to learn the truth about Simon's untimely death. In fact, Simon made the ultimate sacrifice to protect Catherine. He also acted in protection of his long-suffering, always forgiving mother, and even Helen. It was also Simon's legacy that his trusted friend Peter should not lose out in life. Simon's mother loves him like a son, and he has new-found feelings for Catherine.

War with Pigeons is a beautifully-written novel. Tae Kim's talents show in his narrative ability and effortless storytelling. The novel smoothly shifts from Peter executing his friend's estate, to Simon telling the story that Peter reads in the diary. Tae Kim creates descriptive, sensual imagery over something as simple as an Asian pear. The author shows his writing at its most impressive when he drills down to the emotions of suppressed angst, loneliness and longings, particularly of the two male characters Peter and Simon.

As with many Korean American writers, Kim enjoys the wealth of his bi-cultural knowledge and heritage, cleverly revealing the clash and dance of cultures throughout the story. War with Pigeons is a fresh look at the Korean American experience; it is also a convincing exploration of the relationship of two friends, and the universal need for love and acceptance.