



SUE, IF YOU
MUST



BY JIM FUSILLI

Up the steps of the mid-19th century Old Patent Office Building and through the G Street entrance toward the Smithsonian museums. In a navy jacket and slacks, white cotton blouse, black block-heel pumps, she marched directly into the courtyard, crossing through mid-day sunlight and a network of shadows cast by the glass canopy. Then she stopped abruptly, stood sentry-still, and searched for the man who had summoned her. A minute later, she shifted her tote and looked at her watch.

Populated by weary tourists, students refining their replicas with crayons and pencils, the odd writer or two staring intently at a laptop screen, the courtyard was library quiet. Straight ahead, the National Portrait Gallery to the left, the Smithsonian American Art Museum to the right. She hadn't visited either museum in years. Portraits in the gallery were seared in her memory from countless elementary school field trips: noble George Washington, steel-eyed Benjamin Franklin, glaring Frederic Douglas; Sojourner Truth unbowed. Her introduction to America came via its most relentless achievers. When colleagues arrived now from Africa or the Middle East, she suggested the museums as part of their itinerary.

As she waited, she wandered toward a display of orchids, but gave them no mind. Fit and formidable, black hair trimmed to just above the collar, her round face fixed in a wary expression, she exuded impatience. She would give the man five minutes more.

"Excuse me." A woman's voice.

She turned.

"Kim?"

"Kim Soo-jin," she replied. "Sue, if you must."

The woman smiled. "You don't remember me, do you?"

Kim didn't reply.

"Marianne McCann. From Visitation."

High School. Teachers thought Kim was her first name, Soo-jin her surname. Once established incorrectly, it remained so. It took her a while to learn to speak up.

"I was a sophomore when you were a senior."

McCann wore a belted forest-green dress, sleeves to the elbows, skirt below the knees, open-toed flats. She had wavy red hair and a splattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Hoop earrings, a wedding ring and a Band-Aid across a gash. To Kim, McCann seemed unnaturally effervescent.

"Are you meeting someone?"

Another nod by Kim.

"I mean, you seem so...professional. But you were always serious." McCann tried on a purposeful expression, clenching her fists.

No response.

"Do you work around here? You're a lawyer, right?"

Kim Soo-jin was of purpose. Small talk was never an interest.

McCann dipped into her handbag and withdrew a flat notecard, cream and bordered in silver, watermarked with the initials JH.

Kim had the same card in her tote. She could see the message to McCann, written in fountain-pen ink, was identical to the one she had received.

Said McCann, "John Haviland wants to meet both of us?"

"I couldn't say," Kim replied.

McCann shrugged. "Didn't you go to your senior prom with John Haviland?"

Kim ignored the question. Instead, she asked, "Do you do business with Wendell-Karras?"

"My husband and I run a florist," McCann replied. "In Bethesda. Woodmont Triangle. By the Trader Joe's."

Kim lifted her tote's strap onto her shoulder. "You'll excuse me..."

"Wait. You're leaving?" McCann trotted to keep up. "What if he comes? What should I say?"

McCann followed her as far as the gift shop, then watched as Kim exited to G Street.

Kim called the K Street headquarters of Wendell-Karras as soon as she returned to her office. Haviland was unavailable, she was told. She left her name and affiliation, though he surely knew she was a vice president at CCF International. He returned the call in under an hour.

No, he hadn't asked her to meet. Curious. Marianne McCann? From Visitation? No, I don't remember her...

"Tell me about what you're doing at CCF," he said, moving on.

She replied, "Cooperation. Communication. Facilitation."

"Odd that we've never run into each other." Wendell-Karras lobbied on behalf of Big Oil; Haviland represented companies based in West Africa. CCF worked directly with aid organizations in Algeria, Angola, Gabon and Nigeria. "It's been twenty years. Maybe we should explore the commonalities..."

Kim was ready to snap at him – did you or did you not summon me? – but she shifted to business mode. Yes, commonalities...

"Lunch, Kim?"

"Soo-jin. Sue, if you must."

"If we can't do business, we can catch up."

If we can't do business, there's no need to meet.

"Next week? I'll suggest," he said.

Haviland chose a clubby steakhouse on Capitol Hill popular with lobbyists and Congressional senior staffers. He was already seated when she arrived; tucked in a corner under a framed photo of the Capitol under construction, he was typing a

message on one of two phones set on the white-linen tablecloth, a green bottle of fizzy water at his elbow. He wore a gray suit with red pinstripes and a red tie, a not-too-subtle signal of what party he preferred. As she approached, she noticed he hadn't much changed – still the bright blond boy, seemingly earnest, up to the task. Twenty years older, yes, but appearing younger than his late 30s.

She was just about at the table when he looked up. Turning over his phones to hide the screens, he maneuvered into the aisle, put his hand on her arm and kissed her cheek.

“Sue. My goodness. Would you look at you?”

She had checked her hair in the vestibule mirror – wind swept but then easily repaired.

He pulled out her chair. “Where to begin? How are you?”

She placed a napkin on the thigh of her cocoa slacks.

“How's your Mom?”

“Dead.”

Haviland recoiled. “I'm sorry.”

“Why are we here, John?”

He snuck a look at one of his phones, then placed them in his jacket pocket. “I'm guessing ‘old times’ won't play...”

They went together to her prom and his. They got along fine back then: two teens with ambition. He admitted to dating a few girls, but he was heading north to Yale and couldn't be tied down. Though she was staying close to home at Georgetown, she felt the same way. That was about all they had in common. Classmates had introduced them, eager for them to join in their end-of-school fun, this enigmatic Korean girl and the Gonzaga High debate champ – what a hoot. There was no spark, but they went along with it. They never dated again and hadn't spoken since Graduation Day.

She slid the notecard toward him.

Lifting it, he said, “I don't know what that is. It's not my handwriting. I don't use that kind of stationery.”

“Who then?”

“I honestly don't know.”

“Have you heard from anyone else?” she asked.

“Only you.” Then he said, “Why? Are there more?”

Besides McCann? She didn't know, she told him.

“Sue, I have no idea what this is,” he said, flapping the card.

The waiter listed the day's specials as he filled her water glass. She ordered the lobster salad, Haviland tuna done medium. A Virginia Viognier for him. Just water for her.

“Can I take this?” he continued, still holding the card.

“Yes.” She had made a photocopy.

They sat in silence.

“No wedding ring, Sue? Never or not now?”

She sighed.

“Elizabeth and I have two boys.”

“John. Wendell-Karras. Commonalities.”

He looked at the beauty mark on her neck and wondered if there was any heat beneath the cold steel. “You work with USAID. Am I right?”

The United States Agency for International Development. “Obviously.”

“On your Nigeria projects, do you interface with the teams from Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell...?”

“Not Shell.” But she knew he had done his research.

“Who works the Hill for you?”

“USAID, John,” she said flatly.

“Oh please. You’re limit yourself to strategy and implementation? That’s not the Kim Soo-jin I know. Oh. Wait.” He pointed at her. “Look. She grins. Not quite a smile, but...”

The waiter returned with an *amuse bouche*: little crab cakes dotted with orange roe.

“Let’s see who we both know and where it can lead,” he said as he lifted his salad fork. “Agreed?”

“For CCF. Not for me.”

“Still rowing your boat your own way, eh?” he mused.

Next afternoon, Haviland sent an email. Long/short of it: He’d learned a Louisiana congressman had a deep-pockets constituent whose son is majoring in Petroleum Engineering. If she could bring the kid in and intern him next to Chevron Nigeria Ltd., CCF might shake loose some additional funding for USAID. The congressman was on the House Energy and Commerce committee.

Kim pondered. Then she wrote back: Send me his CV.

“Make the introduction, Sue. Then step out. You’ve done your job.”

She thought: It’s not my job to do favors for Wendell-Karras. Or Louisiana congressmen. She wrote: “I’ll be glad to pass along his CV to the appropriate department here at CCF.”

Haviland proposed they argue it out in person. Breakfast at a restaurant in the Park Hyatt. She knew it. Thirty-dollar omelets.

Once again, he was waiting when she arrived, steam rising from a carafe of coffee, convivial business chatter all around, every table filled. As soon as she sat, her back to the room, he handed her a manila envelope. “Good morning,” he said.

A waitress filled her cup as Kim scanned the CV.

“Meets your standards?”

She placed the envelope in her tote. Two tables to her right sat the House minority leader in conversation with an on-air reporter from the “PBS NewsHour.”

“This is nice,” said Haviland, offering her a leather-bound menu.

No way I can expense this, she was thinking. And no way will I let him pick up the check.

Haviland reached to touch her hand. Then he heard an ear-piercing shout. The entire restaurant turned with a snap to see its source.

Is that her, John? Is it?"

Haviland glared in horror.

"Your latest, John?"

"Betty," Haviland said as he stood. "Betty, please."

"Your latest *and* your first, John?" Elizabeth Haviland shouted, stabbing the air with her phone.

"Betty, it's not—"

"You swore, you bastard. You swore."

Craning her neck, Kim looked at the woman – blonde, a pale-blue button sweater, jeans, running shoes. A Mom. And livid.

She fired her phone at her husband. It bounced off his chest and landed near Kim's bread plate.

As Haviland steered her across the restaurant, Kim retrieved the phone. On the screen was a photo of Kim and Haviland taken last week outside the Capitol Hill restaurant as Haviland gave her a peck on her cheek.

Kim swiped left. Another photo. Haviland watching her as she walked away.

Then a photo of a notecard, cream bordered in silver, with a message: "John, what a lovely way to spend an afternoon. Do it again (and again) soon? Love, Kim."

A note she had never written on stationery she did not own in a hand that wasn't hers signed with her surname.

She swiped again. The prom photo taken 20 years ago.

Kim put down the phone, picked up her tote, and, humiliated, exited toward the hotel.

Two weeks later, as summer's humidity overtook Washington as if in vengeance, Kim Soo-jin left her air-conditioned office, ordered a pineapple smoothie, and found a bench on the mall – the White House to the right, Washington Monument to the left, tourists swarming like ants to a sugar cube. She had been on the phone since 6 a.m. – mid-morning in Lagos – and needed to clear her head.

Wearing tortoiseshell sunglasses, Kim stretched out her legs and liberated her heels from her flats. The thick, icy drink provided instant refreshment. A heavysset man breezed by on a scooter, much to the amusement of a group of elementary school kids who failed to appreciate his mettle. She felt uplifted. With her Nigerian clients on their way home, she would have the afternoon to herself – memos, emails to answer and a surprisingly readable report on human-rights practices in Yemen to be addressed in solitude. Now, as she sipped through a paper straw, her phone rang. An unfamiliar number. She ignored it.

But then it rang again. Same number.

Then, as a helicopter passed overhead toward the White House, the phone rang a third time.

"This is Soo-jin," she said, as she answered it.

"Kim. It's Helen Clymer."

Helen Clymer?

"From Visitation. Helen. We were in a ton of classes together, Kim."

She sighed.

"I spoke to John Haviland. I got one of those cards. Like an idiot, I stood in the courtyard for an hour."

"I see."

"You 'see'? Don't you want to know who sent them?"

Kim sipped her drink.

"I do," Clymer said. "And I'm going to find out. Are you in?"

"No."

"You're in," Clymer continued. "You have no choice."

"Actually, I do."

"Look up, Kim. Straight ahead."

Slaloming past the tourists, a woman with a phone to her ear charged forward, pushing toddler twins in a double stroller. One child slept, the other chewed on her own toes. The woman wore a blousy blue Oxford over a black tankini and gray cargo jeans. A floral diaper bag swung on her shoulder.

"Yeah. Me," Clymer said. "You've got maybe ten seconds to run."

Switching off her phone, Kim sipped her drink until she slurped.

Clymer sat next to her.

"Phoebe and Rachel," she said. "Yeah, I know. It was Larry's turn to name them. The worst, right? Though I suppose he could've insisted on Joey and Chandler."

Kim lifted her sunglasses. "What are you talking about?"

"'Friends'? The TV show? Don't tell me you didn't watch... No, you probably didn't. God, you were such a stick in the mud, Kim."

"Soo-jin. Sue, if you must."

"You probably were a grown up in kindergarten."

"Helen—"

"I spoke to Marianne McCann. She thinks you're sending the notecards."

Kim laughed.

"You wanted to get back together with John and you cooked up this scheme."

"I did, did I?"

"Doubtful," said Clymer. "She didn't make much sense, truth told."

"Yet here you are."

"I'm supposed to get Julia Roberts' autograph for her. Can you believe it? I don't know Julia Roberts."

Kim frowned.

Clymer reached down and nudged her daughter's foot from her mouth, replacing it with a pacifier she dug out of a deep pocket. The other little girl purred contentedly.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"None."

"I'm Harte Clymer. The writer? Not much of an alias – my mother's maiden name – but it worked. I wrote 'Caroline and the Beautiful Season.'"

"I see..."

"You never heard of it. I'm not offended. It sold about twelve copies. Until the Hallmark Channel. Then it's everywhere – supermarkets, airports, bowling alleys – but you needed a telescope to find my name when they reprinted it. Myself, even I thought Julia Roberts wrote it."

She wrote a book. A film followed. With Julia Roberts.

"That was nine years ago. I wrote it while I was pregnant with Peggy. Finished it with a newborn at home. Baby powder all over my keyboard, laptop on the changing table. My neighbor's brother is a literary agent. He sold it for a pittance, but who cares? It was a lark. A whim. By the time Hallmark optioned it, I was pregnant with Alicia."

"John Haviland," said Kim as she stood. Her plastic cup empty, she looked for a trash can. "I don't care."

"I do. He was always a creep. Didn't you notice?"

"Not then, no."

"I can't believe I gave it up him. McCann did too. When she was 15."

"Are you—"

"You did too, right?"

"My virginity? I certainly did not."

"Whoa. No need to shout. It was ritual on prom night. So I thought..."

"Helen," said Kim. "I'm leaving."

"I'll walk with you."

"Please don't."

"I bet you don't know he backstabbed my Larry. The Zimmerman Scholarship from the National Press Club. He talked Larry out of applying, then stole the essay he'd written. Like the Havilands needed the money – which my Larry did. I went to the museum to rip John a new one, Kim. Sue. It was going to be glorious."

Glorious. Maybe. But he's hardly worth it. Why are people obsessed with high school? Four years. If you live to be 80, it's five percent of your life.

"I'm still going to do it. I'll script it, memorize it and lay him out. It's down to when and where. Any advice?"

"Avoid his wife," Kim said, departing.

The next contact came from Niko Ikeda, who Kim did remember from Visitation. Niko said she'd waited for Haviland, but then showed the good sense to luxuriate in the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

"We are underrepresented, Soo-jin."

"Tell me," said Kim, changing the subject. She was at home and perched on her stationary bike, earbuds in place. "Did you sleep with John?"

"I did," Ikeda confessed. "You too, right?"

Good lord, she thought. What's wrong with people? I knew I was gay when I was 10. No one at Visitation saw it?

"Soo-jin, do you think he's trying to reconnect with his old conquests?"

Conquests. How quaint.

The following morning, Saturday, Kim took the Metro to Bethesda, walked past the Trader Joe's and entered Paper Source. She presented the photocopy of the notecard. The stationery store's clerk examined it and said Yes, we created the cards.

"For whom?" So directly stated was her request, her gaze locked on his, that he immediately responded.

She walked next to Bountiful Bouquets, a florist shop a block from the Chevy Chase Country Club.

"I need to speak to you," she said to Marianne McCann who, in her gray smock and plastic barrette, was trimming lisianthus and vanilla roses.

McCann could not conceal her alarm. "Meet me at Starbucks."

Kim was seated outside, a wash of sunlight on her face and Prussian blue jacket. She removed her dark glasses as McCann arrived, pulling her seat in behind her.

"No coffee for you, Kim?"

"Soo-jin. Sue, if you must."

"You seem upset."

"Hardly. You're saying I engineered this scheme. Marianne, in Washington, every accusation is a confession."

"No, I really did think it was you."

Kim said. "Stop, please. The charade. Why bother?"

McCann tilted her head and frowned.

McCann thought to protest, then sagged. "He's got everything."

"No, he does not."

"And someone has to pay," McCann said, raising her voice, knocking on the table.

"For what?"

"You don't understand. You can't. You've got everything too."

"I did nothing to you, Marianne."

"He promised he would take me to the prom. Then he dumped me when you came along."

"If so, it was twenty years ago..."

McCann said, “It didn’t turn out as it should’ve. I’m not married to John, a Big Oil lobbyist who went to Yale, who owns a house in Barnaby Woods, a summer home on Cape May, a beautiful wife—”

“Who you hurt.”

“He should be humiliated too.”

“And you used us.”

“I knew he wouldn’t remember me. You, Helen Clymer – a celebrity – Niko, an ambassador who dresses like a model... I knew he would meet with one of you. At least one. So, yes, I let his wife know. She should know.”

“Are you satisfied now?”

“Is my husband coming back? No. Can I keep Bountiful going? Not while Trader Joe’s is selling flowers at a loss. And where are my beautiful children, Kim?”

“This is a dangerous game. Helen’s husband works at the *Post*. In the restaurant was a PBS reporter. How would a story about how you tried to break up John’s marriage over a teenage grievance help you? You’ve given Harte Clymer material. Do you want to be the subject of a Hallmark movie?”

“I want the life John owes me. He made promises.”

“Kids, Marianne. We were kids.”

“I believed him.”

Kim stood. “He’s not worth it. Find another solution.”

She walked away, a confident stride, her head held high, ignoring the daggers aimed at her back.