

In My War Novel

by Matthew Salesses

My wife used to say I would never be a writer. She said nobody adopted amounted to much. She didn't use those words—she said it in Korean—but I knew what she meant. Not that I know Korean, but I could guess. I know my wife. If I saw her now she would say, “Do you still eat with a knife and fork?” and I would make her eat these pages.

These are the things I know about my wife: I know she was born December 12, 1952. I know she took 16 hours of labor, a fat baby with lots of hair. I know she went to school in Korea for a while, and then transferred to Canada because her parents were getting a divorce. I know she owned a car before she could drive it, and had to sell it once she could drive it because by then her family needed the money. I know she had money and then didn't have money, and I know she thought I had money but I didn't. I know she married me in 1978, and left me 12 years later. I know we're not divorced. I don't know where she's been the last year, with my adopted last name. I know she's 39 and looks 29 and that's how she's getting guys—that's how she got me, by looking innocent, when she was in Canada and so was I. I know she would say she's 41 if she were counting in Korean, 25 in American. I know she keeps my last name as her last name so people won't know she's an immigrant until she speaks.

If you asked my wife about me she couldn't tell you much. She doesn't know my real birthday—but then neither do I; my birthday was a guess by an orphanage. She doesn't know that in the last year my hair has grayed around the edges. She doesn't know I think of her when I eat cereal, do laundry. She knows I've always wanted to write a war novel. She doesn't know I'm writing this. I guess she doesn't know my surname means we're still attached.

If I wrote a war novel my wife would be killed off before our relationship figured out our differences. Like her being really

Asian and me being just so-so Asian. I know enough to want my readers to love me.

In my war novel I would be the doomed hero's best friend and advisor. I wouldn't be the narrator because the narrator would die. At the end of my war novel the death would be ambiguous, and I would always say in interviews that it was up to the reader, but in all of my unstarted novels the narrator dies.

My war would be one of the world wars, because those were the biggest and, I hear, the best. At least people are always talking about them. In my interviews, I would say the scar on my nose, from hitting myself with a block, was from a heroic stabbing; and the dots on my knuckles, from breaking a mirror, were from a battle against someone not myself. My closest experience to the military was the time my adopted father said he would send me back to Korea. Real Koreans have to serve two years.

When my wife left me she said, "You trying to run me to my death? You think I got a coffin to catch?" I didn't know she knew the word "coffin." She would say this in my war novel, but I would change the word "coffin" to "deathbox" or something else, to make it more believable.

The hell with those famous wars. I would write about the Korean War. I would write about the Korean War to show that I was Korean and also to rub it in people's faces. Nobody knows anything about the Korean War except Koreans.

In the time before my wife left me she said I was 100% American. In fact I was 100% Korean, but then my mother didn't want me anymore, so she left me at the orphanage. When I was 3 I was sent to America. So what does that make me?

I never knew my birth parents. As for my adopted parents my adopted father died when I was 10 and my adopted mother died two years ago, when I was 36. My wife and I used to talk about them like they were characters in a story. Sometimes I dreamed they were fighting over me, my adopted mother and my wife, and on top of that that they were fighting in the past tense.

My wife used to tell me stories of her childhood that her mother had told her. My wife said before the Korean War the Koreans liked everybody. After the war the soldiers became assholes and it was impossible to like Americans.

When my wife was a child the soldiers used to give her candy because she was so cute. One time the soldiers kidnapped her and brought her back to their base because she was so cute, and her mother had to go to the base to pick her up.

I've seen my wife's baby pictures. I have to admit she was adorable, and I have to admit that doesn't make it right to kidnap her.

That doesn't mean I still love her. I'm just saying, kidnapping isn't anything someone should do. I wouldn't keep my wife locked up in the cellar with my war novel, and not feed her so she would have to kill rats for food. I wouldn't even think about it.

In my war novel soldiers wouldn't have time to abduct anyone. The war would go on forever, and war is busy. The soldiers would be busy dying. In my war novel the hero would die from something simple, like bad chicken or gas.

As I wrote my war novel I would see it as a person, full of lies and contradictions. My war novel would say, "I will make you famous. You will never be forgotten. People will never believe any wife could leave you. You will be known twice over, as you and as me, and as a Korean and an American, not half of both."

After I wrote my war novel I would believe whatever it told me. If it lied to me we would fight to the death.

My wife would find it on the bookshelf in a grocery store, and she would scream, or faint, when she saw our still-shared last name on the spine. The aisle boys would have to clean up her mess. Then she would be embarrassed and feel foreign. When she read my war novel she wouldn't understand it and would have to call her boyfriend about words. Some of them he wouldn't understand either.

In my war novel the narrator would die from lack of sex. He would die as a child, before he could have sex at all. He would hit himself in the nose with a block because the other children said his

nose was too big for a gook, and forced him to agree. The cartilage would shoot up into his brain.

My wife was an only child. That meant her family was embarrassed because she wasn't a boy. I don't know if I was an only child or not. I was a boy but it didn't count for much. In America I was an only child because my adopted father said he would never adopt again because of me, and my adopted mother said she would never adopt again because of him.

My wife didn't like kids and didn't want a baby. Actually she didn't want an American baby. My wife just plain hated Americans, and she didn't want one inside her.

My wife just plain hated a lot of things. She just plain hated looking at my penis. She just plain hated getting old. She just plain hated wearing a wedding ring; she was always leaving it where I would find it, like a little gold-rimmed hole to another dimension on the table, a little gold-rimmed hole to another dimension in the medicine cabinet, a little gold-rimmed hole to another dimension at the bottom of a trash bag, a little gold-rimmed hole to another dimension pinned to the wall with a note that said she was leaving.

Once when I was awake and she was asleep she tried to strangle me. She swore it was because of a bad dream. We were in love then, so everything was true.

My wife believed we didn't get along because she was an A blood type and I was a B. She said lots of Americans are B types, and she could tell by looking at them.

In my war novel everyone would know their blood types. This would have come in handy that time I broke the mirror in school, after I said the only other Asian kid was more of a gook than me.

In my war novel the hero would survive: airplanes being shot down on bombing raids à la Catch 22, rescue missions à la The Naked and the Dead, machine guns over the trenches à la All Quiet on the Western Front, and the perils of deserting à la A Farewell to Arms. In the final chapter the hero would jump on a mine to save his

superior officer, but it would be a dud. Then his helmet would roll off, and he would be shot in the head.

In my war novel nothing would happen as it was supposed to happen but everything would happen when it was supposed to happen. My adopted mother called this, "you can't trick fate." My adopted father called this God.

I was going to say there would be no women in my war novel. In my war novel, my wife would be eaten by a snake.

My wife was very loveable: that's what makes her so hateable. She is impossible to forget. I remember Sunday mornings I used to listen to her snap at her cereal like a venus fly trap, that beautifully hungry flower, before her hour drive to the nearest Korean church. I knew she rolled over onto my side of the bed the other mornings. I would notice her before I left for work and calculate how much of her had shifted: her thighs or her face, for the warmth or the smell? She said my cologne made her want to "jump on bones."

I remember the first time I brought my wife to meet my adopted mother. Later my wife said my adopted mother was a racist. I told her my adopted mother called my adoption day my "Anniversary." Each year she gave me Korean candy that tasted like salt, not believing when I said I didn't like it. My adopted parents used to bring me to meetings of adoptees as if we could all learn about our lost culture just by proxy. We would sit around reading, *We Adopted You*, *Benjamin Koo*, and trying not to spill anything yellow on ourselves, learning to use chopsticks.

I wonder what my parents would say if they saw what happened last October, how an American soldier raped a Korean woman in Seoul and killed her by inserting things: a coke bottle up her uterus, an umbrella up her anus. He dusted her body with laundry detergent, because she was unclean. This caused a lot of riots after he only got 15 years. It wasn't in the American news. In the American news Bill Clinton played the saxophone and the Canadians won the World Series. I just found out about this today and started writing.

In my war novel I would use the phrase "like chickens with their heads chopped off" a total of 36 times. I would use the word "love" 35 times or less. In comparison I would use the word "the" 4,512 times. "The" has been used 78 times here already.

My wife liked to tell me the idioms she learned. She learned the idioms: "rain on my parade" and "cry me a river." She said "kick you in the balls" was an idiom.

When she was a child my wife thought the American dream meant getting to America. She didn't know it was a dream Americans had; she thought the dream was for non-Americans. When she got to Canada they told her the dream was just about getting out of the place you were in, and then she had it all over again, but for real. When I took her to America, she couldn't tell at first that it was America. What she really had was the Korean dream, which was about getting back to Korea and rubbing America in people's faces. In America she gave up on the Korean dream. She had to take the American dream of America.

In my war novel the hero would be captured by the North Koreans. He would escape in an enemy uniform, and on his way back, an American would shoot him.

My war novel would have a lot of blood. Blood is a must in war movies these days, so why not in my war novel? People bleed. When my wife hit me with a lamp it cut my shoulder and I bled for two hours.

Maybe it was less than that. I bet if you bleed for two hours you die.

In my war novel the hero would impregnate the love of his life just before he got shot. I guess it would be a North Korean girl. That's the way life goes on. That would be right before the war ended.

What would happen to his baby, you ask? After the war the country was poor and parents were leaving kids out on every street, drowning them in the dirtiest rivers where no one would notice the bodies. I don't know this, but this is what I imagine. I imagine a very dark world in which a person, or two people, could give up a smaller

version of herself. I guess war sucks enough without having a kid around—especially if your husband fought for the other side, especially if your family died in battle, especially if your lover wouldn't support you or ran away or simply wanted a fuck, especially if you were raped or disfigured or cast out of your community or on the run from the law or told you have only another week to live. Then you would have to get rid of that kid, and at least you didn't drown him.

In my war novel everyone would believe in family. My war novel would remind me of how my wife used to call my arm her arm pillow and say if I ever left her she would cut it off and keep it. My war novel would remind me of how I took my wife to Hawaii on our honeymoon and she laughed about “getting lei'd.” She screamed she was getting lei'd loud enough for everyone to hear, and when I slapped her ass and said she was a bad girl she screamed, “Slap me some more you fucking love-muffin,” so I did. That was when she liked it rough. Then later she liked it soft. Then at the end she liked it drunk, or not at all.

When I took her back there to rekindle our marriage she stayed out late at night by the ocean looking over the water to where she was convinced she could see Korea.

Once I overheard my adopted parents arguing about me and then a lot of pushing sounds—and I guess that was sex, as if they were trying to erase the thought of me.

In my war novel there would be a lot of hard sex going around. Also alcohol and worse. Anything to keep the soldiers' minds off the war.

My wife employed this strategy for years. She was very good at it but in the end not good enough.

In my war novel there would be lots of women. None of them would be attacked by Americans. None of them would be raped. They would have many children, legitimate and illegitimate.

In my war novel there would be a great final battle, but it would decide nothing for the war. For the characters it would make them decide whether war could make them live forever.

For a while after our honeymoon my wife never looked at other men. She wore angel-white underwear even on the weekends. She warmed my clothes in the new electric dryer before she woke me for work—she said warm clothes would have the heat of her body, and when I left the house it was like I was wearing her. She let me teach her how to turn me on: come up behind me and nibble my earlobe. I told her I liked a good sneak attack.

My wife used to be like wax paper the mornings after she'd been drunk. Smooth and slightly see-through.

My wife used to say the end was never the end.

In my war novel the world would be revealed as the shitty place it is, and that would be okay because everybody knows a war novel is supposed to say the world is shitty.

My wife used to say the world was shitty, and then for a while she said the world was not shitty, but that was during the time when she was deciding to leave me.

Not the day after she left but a week after, or maybe a month, I stood on our bed and held my neck between my hands until I passed out, and when I woke up I said, "I can't believe you did that to me again," but she was gone. Only her scent was there. Then I realized her scent was there and I choked myself again.

In my war novel her character and my character wouldn't know each other so well. The war would go on in the background. I wouldn't write about the war. In my war novel the hero would be shot in the head, through his brain, sure, but who says this is death? Who says? Once the body is begun it can't be stopped so easily. A dead man's cells go on living and dying, and who says his consciousness is not in his cells, who says there's no consciousness in cells? His fingernails grow; his hair grows. The cells know that they are alive, don't they?

