

Separation Anxiety by Emanuel Derman

I boarded the early morning airplane from Beijing to Hong Kong. A few moments later, there sat down in the seat beside me a tall elegantly suited fiftyish man, cellphone pressed tight to his ear.

“Are you at work already?” he said urgently into the phone in Northern-European accented English. “I wanted to hear your voice one more time before I leave. I’m barely gone and I’m missing you already.” There was a long pause. “What about you?” he asked. There was a silence. He hung up, settled into his seat, put his books and magazines in the seat pocket, left the cellphone naked on the armrest between us.

During the ten minutes before the cabin doors closed, he several times redialed a number that didn’t appear to answer. Each time after four rings I could hear softly a few bars of minor-key Chinese-sounding meditative music, a bit like a Philip Glass sonata, and then a woman’s voice speaking Mandarin. After the fourth or fifth call he left one voicemail message: “I’m waiting for takeoff. I miss you. Email me.” Then, as the airline attendant walked up the aisle commanding us to turn off all cellular devices, I saw him send one quick text message.

We settled back in our seats, and then he turned to me, a little agitated.

“You may think I’m peculiar, Sir,” he said, “To keep trying to reach someone who doesn’t want to have a long conversation with me right now.”

I shook my head.

“Can I help?” I asked. “You look a bit upset. I’m sorry.”

“I know my problems aren’t your business,” he said, “But I need to talk. She’s thirty- three. She grew up in the Hutong area of Beijing. I’ve known her for six years. I met her when I came there for a short while to represent a North German company and she was a bank teller. We grew more than friendly, and I thought we could make a life together. I came here regularly on business for a week at a time, and spent all the time I had with her. She visited me in Europe. Once we travelled around China together. I lent her money, she went to university, got promoted, got a real job in banking, earned good money, borrowed more. She, how shall I say, she got used to the independent life.

“She doesn’t have it easy - old parents she supports and helps, works the long days of finance business people. But she has her own apartment, and she likes the life of independence. When I first met her, I thought I would settle down with her, like a Graham Greene character from the Fifties, if you know what I mean. But she likes her freedom and the right to buy whatever she wants. When I’m here in Beijing we spend our time together, she likes to visit me in Germany, but that’s enough for her ... I wanted more.”

"I'm sorry," I said. "But what can you do? Maybe you need patience. Sometimes people change."

"No," he said, leaning over to talk softly to me. "I never learn my lesson. All my life I've suffered from what they call separation anxiety. I'm the kind of person who hates to be first to hang up the phone. I like conversations to end like the smile of a Cheshire cat, Sir, fading away imperceptibly with no one actually committing the terminal click. I dislike separation, and separation from her is the worst thing for me. I've grown accustomed to her."

His English was formal but excellent.

"You never know what will happen next," I said to him. "It's one of the saving graces of life."

"No, not in this case," he said. "She hates my neediness. And she hates me to apologize for it. Every need of mine requires an apology, and every apology is the next offense. I call her too much, text her too often. She insists she loves me. But it's not my kind of love. I think of Tolstoy, who wrote: *'Where there is no love, one cannot be obliged to love in spite of herself.'*"

"You've got to be rational," I said. "Maybe you need to go about love as though it were a business of yours. Figure out where you stand, what you want, how to get it." I didn't believe this myself, but it seemed to be the right advice for him.

"I can't do that," he said. "I live on impulse. Not my business life, but my life of the heart ... You know what? I will have to begin to hate her, that's the only solution. She has good qualities, but I have to forget her goodness to get free."

"What you should do," I said, "is recognize reality, which cannot be evaded. It's better to know the truth, to operate from what exists, not from what might be."

He took a very deep breath and looked surprised.

"My God! I just realized something," he said suddenly. "She has a life with me and she has a life in addition to me. But I have no life without her."

"If that's the case, at least for now, you must accept it and act accordingly," I said. "You have to find additional life too. Better in the long run."

He shook his head from side to side, as though to clear it.

"I read a book called *The Black Cloud*, once," he said slowly. "Science fiction, about a giant cloud in outer space that moves towards the sun and then settles around it, preventing light from reaching earth. I don't like science fiction, but this was good stuff, Sir. Eventually, people on earth realize the cloud is a vastly intelligent distributed life form, come here for an energy top-up. It can understand people easily, can decipher their radio communications. They ask it to leave, to spare them what would be a cold end to life on earth. The cloud leaves, but before it does, they ask it to tell them the truth about the universe. It requests one human volunteer to be connected to it via an electronic link directly to the volunteer's brain."

“The truth about the universe, whatever is told to him, is too much for the volunteer. A few hours into the communication he squirms restlessly, becomes increasingly agitated, develops a brain fever and dies. Dies, you could say, of cognitive dissonance. He cannot integrate the facts about a reality that is so different from what he assumed.

“I’m like that. What I was involved in is not what I thought it was. It may be too much for me. My brain wants to split in two separate parts, a part that lives by the old assumptions, a part that lives with my new understanding of my Hutong friend.”

“But unfortunately, the two halves of my brain are at war. I’m old-world Europe”, he said to me. “I can’t accept this new world. I just want to sleep right now.”

He fell silent. As we landed in Hong Kong he switched on his phone and began calling again.

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A Word about me:

I’m currently a professor at Columbia University, head of their financial engineering program. Ever since I left Cape Town at age 21, I’ve lived mostly in Manhattan. In addition to a finance textbook, I’ve written *Models. Behaving. Badly*, a meditation on the failure of quantitative modeling in the social sciences, and *My Life As A Quant*, a memoir on moving from physics to finance. Last year I serialized another memoir, slightly fictionalized, about growing up in an immigrant Jewish family in Cape Town, available at <https://emanuelderman.substack.com>.

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