

aloft

C H A N G - R A E L E E

R I V E R H E A D B O O K S

a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

New York

2004

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



Riverhead Books
a member of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc.
375 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10014

Copyright © 2004 by Chang-rae Lee

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, may not
be reproduced in any form without permission.
Published simultaneously in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lee, Chang-rae.
Aloft / Chang-rae Lee.
p. cm.

ISBN 1-57322-263-1

1. Middle class men—Fiction. 2. Suburban life—Fiction.
I. Title.

PS3562.E3347A79 2004 2003058630
813'.54—dc22

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This book is printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Book design by Amanda Dewey

acknowledgments

I would like to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the Hunter College Research Foundation, for support during the writing of this book.

I also wish to thank Frank and Richard Branca for the helpful aeronautical consults, Richard Purington and Ann Dickinson for the quiet, cool writing cottage, and my colleagues in the Council of Humanities at Princeton for their friendship and inspiration.

I am indebted, as ever, to Cindy Spiegel and Amanda Urban.

And to my sweethearts, Annika and Eva, for being just as they are.

one

FROM UP HERE, a half mile above the Earth, everything looks perfect to me.

I am in my nifty little Skyhawk, banking her back into the sun, having nearly completed my usual fair-weather loop. Below is the eastern end of Long Island, and I'm flying just now over that part of the land where the two gnarly forks shoot out into the Atlantic. The town directly ahead, which is nothing special when you're on foot, looks pretty magnificent now, the late-summer sun casting upon the macadam of the streets a soft, ebonized sheen, its orangey light reflecting back at me, matching my direction and speed in the windows and bumpers of the parked cars and swimming pools of the simple, square houses set snugly in rows. There is a mysterious, runelike cipher to the newer, larger homes wagoning in their cul-de-sac hoops, and then, too, in the flat roofs of the shopping mall buildings, with their shiny metal circuitry of HVAC housings and tubes.

From up here, all the trees seem ideally formed and arranged, as if fretted over by a persnickety florist god, even the ones (no

doubt volunteers) clumped along the fencing of the big scrap metal lot, their spindly, leggy uprush not just a pleasing garnish to the variegated piles of old hubcaps and washing machines, but then, for a stock guy like me, mere heartbeats shy of *sixty* (hard to even say that), the life signs of a positively priapic yearning. Just to the south, on the baseball diamond—our people's pattern supreme—the local Little League game is entering the late innings, the baby-blue-shirted players positioned straightaway and shallow, in the bleachers their parents only appearing to sit church-quiet and still, the sole perceivable movement a bounding golden-haired dog tracking down a Frisbee in deep, deep centerfield.

Go, boy, go.

And as I point my ship—*Donnie* is her name—to track alongside the broad arterial lanes of Route 495, the great and awful Long Island Expressway, and see the already-accrued jams of the Sunday Hamptons traffic inching back to the city, the grinding columns of which, from my seat, appear to constitute an orderly long march, I feel as if I'm going at a heady light speed, certainly moving too fast in relation to the rest, an imparity that should by any account invigorate but somehow unsettles all the same, and I veer a couple of degrees northwest to head over the remaining patchworks of farmland and scrubby forest and then soon enough the immense, uninterrupted stretch of older, densely built townships like mine, where beneath the obscuring canopy men like me are going about the last details of their weekend business, sweeping their front walks and dragging trash cans to the street and washing their cars just as they have since boyhood and youth, soaping from top to bottom and brushing the wheels of sooty brake dust, one spoke at a time.

And I know, too, from up here, that I can't see the messy rest, none of the pedestrian, sea-level flotsam that surely blemishes our good scene, the casually tossed super-size Slurpies and grubby

confetti of a million cigarette butts, the ever-creeping sidewalk mosses and weeds; I can't see the tumbling faded newspaper circular page, or the dead, gassy possum beached at the foot of the curb, the why of its tight, yellow-toothed grin.

All of which, for the moment, is more than okay with me.

Is that okay?

Okay.

I bought this plane not for work or travel or the pure wondrous thrill of flight, which can and has, indeed, been scarily, transcendently life-affirming and so on, but for the no doubt seriously unexamined reason of my just having to get out of the house.

That's certainly what my longtime (and recently ex-) girlfriend, Rita Reyes, was thinking about several years ago, when she gave me a flying lesson out at Islip for my birthday. Really, of course, she meant it as a diversionary excursion, just a hands-on plane ride, never intending it to lead to anything else.

At the time she was deeply worried about me, as I was a year into having early-retired from the family landscaping business and was by all indications mired in a black hole of a rut, basically moping around the house and snacking too much. On weekdays, after Rita left for her job as a home-care nurse (she now works the ER), I'd do my usual skim of the paper in front of the TV and then maybe watch a ladies' morning talk show and soon enough I'd feel this sharp nudge of ennui and I'd head to the nearby Walt Whitman Mall (the poet was born in a modest house right across the street, which is now something they call an "interpretive center" and is open for tours) for what I would always hope was the easeful company of like-minded people but would end up instead, depending on the selling season, to be frantic clawing hordes or else a ghost town of seniors sitting by the islands of potted ficus, depressing and diminishing instances both.

When Rita came back home, the breakfast dishes would still be

clogging the table, and I'd be on the back patio nursing a third bottle of light beer or else napping in the den after leafing through my tattered *Baedeker's Italy* for the umpteenth time. She'd try to be helpful and patient but it was hard, as that's what she'd done all day long. More often than not we'd end up in a shouting match because she'd toss aside my guidebook a bit too casually and I'd say something loose and mean about her mother, and she'd retreat to the bedroom while I went to the car and revved the engine inside for a long minute before clicking open the garage door. I'd find myself at a run-down Chinese place on Jericho, chasing a too-sweet Mai Tai with wonton soup for dinner and then phoning Rita, to see if she wanted her usual pupu platter appetizer and shrimp with black beans, which she would, and which I'd bring back and duly serve to her, as the saying goes, with love and squalor.

All this began occurring too regularly and finally Rita told me I had better get into something to take up my time, even if it was totally useless and shallow. Immediately I thought maybe it was finally time I strapped myself into a convertible sports car or fast boat, some honeyed, wet-look motor that the neighbors would gape at and maybe snicker and whisper *micropenis* about and then pine after, too, but I wanted something else, not quite knowing what exactly until the moment I opened the gift certificate from Rita for Flaherty's Top Gun Flight School.

I must say I was nervous that day, even downright afraid, which was strange because I've flown in hundreds of planes, some of them single-engine like this one and certainly not as kept-up. I could hardly finish my breakfast toast and coffee. I kept trying and failing to pee, all the while thinking how it was that a person should die exactly on his birthday, how maudlin and rare, and so also a bit pathetic if it actually did happen, especially if you weren't someone famous, all of which Rita caught on to, fake eu-

logizing me all morning with hushed phrasings of “And he was *exactly* fifty-six. . . .”

But I could tell she was worried, too, for she wouldn’t kiss me or even look me in the eye when I was leaving for the airfield, hardly glancing up from her cooking magazine as she murmured a casual, if all swallowed-up, goodbye. Sweet moment, potentially, as it should have been, with me supposed to drop my car keys back into the loose-change bowl and saunter over to Rita in my new aviator shades and cup her silky butterscotch breast through the opening of her robe and assure us both of the righteous tenure of our (then nearly twenty) years of devotion and love; but what did I do but mutter goodbye back and mention that I’d be home in time for lunch and could that osso buco she’d made two nights ago be heated up with extra orzo, or maybe even some couscous with snips of fresh mint? Rita, of course, responded with her usual “No problem,” which anyone else even half-listening would think was a dirge of pure defeat and trouble but was long my favorite tune.

So I drove off with my sights set high again, for there’s little else more inspiring to me than the promise of a hot savory meal prepared by a good woman. But the second I entered the private plane entrance at MacArthur Field and saw the spindly wing struts and narrow fuselages of the parked Pipers and Cessnas, my heart caved a little and I thought of my grown children, Theresa and Jack, and immediately speed-dialed them on my cell phone. I was ready to say to each the very same thing, that I was deeply proud of their accomplishments and their character and that I wished I could relive again those brief years of their infancy and childhood, and then add, too, that I would never burden them in my decline and that they should always call Rita on her birthday and holidays.

But then Theresa’s English Department voice-mail picked up, not her voice but the ubiquitous female voice of Central Messag-

ing, and all I could manage was to say I hadn't heard from her in a while and wondered if anything was wrong. Next I got Jack's voice-mail, this time Jack's voice, but he sounded so businesslike and remote that I left a message for him in the voice of Mr. T, all gruff and belligerent, threatening to open a big can of whoop-ass on him if he didn't lighten up.

This, too, didn't come out quite right, and as I was still early for the flying lesson, I called my father, who would certainly be in.

He answered, "Who the hell is this?"

"It's me, Pop. How you doing?"

"Oh. You. How do you think I'm doing?"

"Just fine, I'm betting."

"That's what you want to think. Anyway, come down and spring me out of here. I'm packed and ready to go."

"All right, Pop. The nurses treating you well?"

"They treat me like dog shit. But that's what I'm paying for. What I worked for all my stinking life, so I can wear a gown and eat airline food every meal and have a male nurse with tattooed palms wipe my ass."

"You don't need anybody to do that for you."

"You haven't been around lately, Jerome. You don't know. You don't know that this is the place where they make the world's boredom and isolation. This is where they purify it. It's monstrous. And what they're doing to Nonna over in the ladies' wing, I can't even mention."

Nonna was his wife, and my mother, and at that point she had been in the brass urn for five years. Pop is by most measures fine in the head, though it seemed around that period that anything having to do with mortality and time often got scrambled in the relevant lobes, a development that diminished only somewhat my feelings of filial betrayal and guilt for placing him via power of attorney into the Ivy Acres Life Care Center, where for \$5500 per

month he will live out the rest of his days in complete security and comfort and without a worldly care, which we know is simple solution and problem all in one, which we can do nothing about, which we do all to forget.

“I’m taking a flying lesson today, Pop.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Have any words for me?”

“I never got to fly a plane,” he growled, and not in response to me. “I never rode in a hot-air balloon. I never made love to two women at once.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“Aah, don’t bother. I don’t need any more examples of my sorry ass. Just do me one favor.”

“You name it, Pop.”

“If you’re going down, try to make it over here. Top corner of the building, looking right over the parking lot. Aim at the old bag waving in the window.”

“Forget it.”

“You are not my son.”

“Yeah, Pop. I’ll see you.”

“Whatever.”

One of our usual goodbyes, from the thin catalogue of father-son biddings, thinner still for the time of life and circumstance and then, of course, for the players involved, who have never transgressed the terms of engagement, who have never even ridden the line. I then walked into the hangar office with a light-on-my-feet feeling, not like a giddiness or anxiety but an unnerving sense of being dangerously unmoored, as though I were some astronaut creeping out into the grand maw of space, eternities roiling in the background, with too much slack in my measly little line. And it occurred to me that in this new millennial life of instant and ubiquitous connection, you don’t in fact communicate so

much as leave messages for one another, these odd improvisational performances, often sorry bits and samplings of ourselves that can't help but seem out of context. And then when you do finally reach someone, everyone's so out of practice or too hopeful or else embittered that you wonder if it would be better not to attempt contact at all.

And yet I forgot all that when I finally got up off the deck, into the *Up here*. I won't go into the first blush of feelings and sensations but summarize to say only that my first thought when the instructor let me take the controls was that I wished he'd strapped a chute on himself, so he could jump the hell out. Nothing in the least was wrong with him—he was a nice, if alarmingly young, kid from an extended family of pilots, the Flahertys. But feeling the motor's buzz in my butt and legs, the shuddery lift of the wingtips in my hands, and gazing down just this middle distance on the world, this fetching, ever-mitigating length, I kept thinking that here was the little room, the little vessel, I was looking for, my private box seat in the world and completely outside of it, too.

After we landed and taxied toward the hangar I peppered the kid pilot for his opinion on what sort of plane I should buy and where I might find one. Through his big amber sunglasses (same as mine) he nodded to a three-seat Cessna with green stripes parked on the tarmac and told me it was for sale by a guy who had suffered a stroke on his last flight, though he had obviously weathered it and somehow brought himself in. It was an older plane, the kid said into his squawky microphone, in his clipped, mini-Chuck Yeager voice, but a reliable one and in good shape. It had been on the market for a while and I could probably get it at a good price. It wasn't the sort of plane I'd want if I was thinking about zipping back and forth across the country, but for shorter, leisure junkets it'd be ideal, which seemed just fine to me. Inside the hangar office the secretary gave me the guy's number, and it turned out he

lived in the town next to mine, so on the drive back home I called and introduced myself to his friendly wife and we decided why shouldn't I come over right then and talk about it with her husband Hal?

Their house was an attractive cedar-shingled colonial, built in the 1960s like a lot of houses in this part of Long Island, including mine, when the area was still mostly potato fields and duck farms and unsullied stretches of low-slung trees and good scrubby nothingness. Now the land is filled with established developments and newer ones from the '80s, and with the last boom having catapulted everyone over the ramparts there's still earthmoving equipment to be seen on either side of the Expressway (eight lanes wide now), clearing the remaining natural tracts for the instant office parks and upscale condos and assisted living centers, and then the McMansions where young families like my son Jack's live, with their vaulted great rooms and multimedia rooms and wine and cigar *caves*. I should say I'm not against any of these things, per se, because it seems to me only right that people should play and work as they please in this so-called democratic life, and even as I'm damn proud of my son Jack's wholly climate-controlled existence (despite the fact that we don't really talk much anymore), there is another part of me that naturally wonders how this rush of prosperity is ruining him and Eunice and the kids and then everybody else who has money enough not to have to really think so deeply about money but does all the time anyway, wherever they are.

A national demography of which, I suppose, I've been an integral part, though in the past few years—since getting this plane, in fact—I've realized I have more than plenty, if plenty means I can ride out the next twenty or so years of my life expectancy not having to eat dried soup noodles if I don't want to or call one of Jack's employees instead of a real plumber or always remember to

press my driver's license against the ticket window for the senior citizen rate at the multiplex. And though I've never had enough real surplus or the balls to invest in the stock market (an unexpiable sin in recent years, though now I'm a certified financial genius for socking away everything I have in Treasuries), unless I'm struck down by some ruinous long-term disability, I'll be okay. Oh you poor-mouthing owner of a private plane, you might be thinking, and rightly, for the Cessna did cost nearly as much as a big Mercedes, and isn't cheap to maintain. But in my defense, I still live in the same modest starter house I bought just before Jack was born, and never wore clothes I didn't buy at Alexander's and Ward's (now at Costco and Target—my longtime patronage clearly no help to the former defunct), or dined if I could help it in any restaurant, no matter how good, with menu prices spelled out in greeting card script. And if this plane is indeed my life's folly, well, at least I found one before it's too late, when the only juiced feeling of the day will be yet another heartbreakingly tragic History Channel biography on a nineteenth-century explorer or the *ring-ring* of some not-quite-as-old coot at the door delivering my day's foil-wrapped meal-on-wheels.

When I got to the stricken pilot's house his friendly wife, Shari, greeted me and then suddenly gave me a quick hug in the foyer, and so I hugged her back, as if I were an old war buddy of his and she and I had had our flirtations through the years, transgressions which I would not have minded, given her sturdy nice shape and pretty mouth. She showed me into the big, dark faux-walnut-paneled den, where a man in a baseball cap and crisp button-down shirt was sitting in an uncomfortable-looking wooden armchair with a plaid blanket spread over his legs. The place was freezing, as though they had the air set to 62 degrees. The cable was on but he was faced more toward the sliding glass door than the TV set, looking out on the covered deck, where they had propped a trio of

silky-looking cardinals on the rim of an ornate plastic birdbath. The birds were amazingly realistic in detail, with shiny yellow beaks and black-masked faces, except perhaps that they were way too big, but I'd never been that close to such birds and I figured most things in the natural world were bigger than you thought, brighter and more vibrant and more real than real. As we approached, it was clear that he was dozing, and for a long almost parental second we stood over him, Shari pulling up the blanket that was half slipping off.

"Hal, honey," she said. "Mr. Battle is here. About the plane."

"Uh-hum," he said, clearing his throat. He extended his hand and we shook.

"Well, I'll let you two boys talk," Shari said, excusing herself to fix us some iced tea.

Hal said, "Sit right down there, young fella," pointing to the leather couch with his one good arm.

Hal wasn't that much older than I was, if he was older at all, but I guess his condition gave him the right to address me so, which didn't bother me. He spoke out of the same good side of his mouth, with a whistley, spitty sound that was boyish and youthful. He asked what I did for a living and I told him it used to be landscaping, and he told me he was a private driver, or was until his stroke, the kind who drove around executives and VIPs in regular black sedans. He was a nice-looking fellow, with a neatly clipped salt-and-pepper mustache and beard. And I should probably not so parenthetically mention right now that Hal was black. This surprised me, first because Shari wasn't, being instead your typical Long Island white lady in tomato-red shorts and a stenciled designer T-shirt, and then because there aren't many minorities in this area, period, and even fewer who are hobbyist pilots, a fact since borne out in my three years of hanging out at scrubby airfields. Of course, my exceedingly literate, overeducated daughter

Theresa (Stanford Ph.D.) would say as she has in the past that I have to mention all this because like most people in this country I'm hopelessly obsessed with race and difference and can't help but *privilege* the *normative* and *fetishize* what's not. And while I'm never fully certain of her terminology, I'd like to think that if I am indeed guilty of such things it's mostly because sometimes I worry for her and Jack, who, I should mention, too, aren't wholly normative of race themselves, being "mixed" from my first and only marriage to a woman named Daisy Han.

"What's your name again?"

"Jerry. Jerry Battle."

"So, Jerry Battle, you want to buy a plane."

"I believe so," I said. "There's nothing like the freedom of flight."

"You bet. But listen, friend. Let me be up front with you. A lot of guys have been by here who weren't really sure. Now, I'd love to chat but you won't be insulting me if you decided right now this wasn't right for you."

"I think it is."

"You sure?" he said, staring me straight in the eye. I nodded, though in fact I was starting to wonder.

"Because sometimes guys realize at the last second they don't want to buy a *used* plane. You know what I'm talking about, Jerry?"

He was looking at me queerly, and then suddenly I thought I did know what he was talking about. I remembered a client with a mansion in Old Westbury, beautiful place except they'd had a lot of diseased trees, and we'd come in and replaced all of them and did a lot of patio and pool work and redid the formal gardens. After that the place was mint. But the husband took a new job in California and they put it on the market, for whatever millions. They had lots of lookers, but no offers, so they lowered the price, twice in fact. But still nothing. So the listing agent suggested they con-

sider “depersonalizing” the house, by which she meant taking down the family pictures, and anything else like it, as the owners were black. They were thoroughly offended, but no one was biting and so finally the husband said they would, but then only if they listed the house at the original price. They ended up getting several overbids, and eventually sold to a party who’d looked the first time around.

So I told Hal, looking right at him, that I didn’t mind a good used plane.

“Okay, good. Now. How long have you been flying?”

“A good while now,” I said, thinking of course of my many hundred hours at the helm in coach, tray table ready. I don’t know why I felt the need to lie to the man. Normally I wouldn’t care if he knew I’d just touched down from my very first lesson and he thought I was crazy, but I guess seeing him like that, sitting invalid-style, made me think it might somehow push him over the edge to know a complete beginner would be manning his plane.

“I’m looking forward to pride of ownership,” I said, hoping this might sound suitably virtuous, to us both. “Take my interest to the next level. As it were.”

Hal nodded, though I couldn’t tell from the expression on his half-frozen face if he was agreeing or was now on to me.

He said, “I bought the plane ten years ago. This just after my son Donnie was killed. Donnie was going to start medical school at BU. Six-year program. You know about that?”

“I think one of my customers’ kids is in it. He got a perfect score on his SATs.”

“Donnie did, too.”

“No kidding.”

“Some people don’t believe me when I tell them, but you don’t lie about something like that. You can’t pretend yourself into perfection.”