

# THE WORLD REPORTER A Novel in Twelve Journeys

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*At first glance* she didn't like anything about him. That enormous walrus mustache! Puffy eyes, like two squeezed-out tea bags! His long hair parted down the middle, falling weary and pale-blond on his shoulders! At second glance, too, she found him anything but attractive. He was much too old for her, on the wrong side of fifty; his forehead one big crease. In purely theoretical terms, he could have been her father. At third and final glance, however, she managed a smile for him after all. Maybe it was his sad brown eyes. Maybe the leather jacket (tailor-made, she later learned), enveloping his broad shoulders. Maybe it was the elegant movements of his slender fingers when he lit a cigarillo. (Butane lighter!) Or maybe she liked the cheeky way he blew smoke rings in her direction. He was very skilled—could easily make two rings hook up in mid-air.

They were sitting in one of those bars that might have seemed avant-garde back in the day but are now downright antediluvian. Lots of glass, plenty of mirrors, barstools made of red plastic, blue fluorescent lamps, flatscreen TVs mounted above the counter. The bartender was a young twerpy fellow with a lanky figure in a black bowtie and velvet vest who didn't talk much and

diligently polished glasses. Apart from the two of them, just a handful of hotel guests had strayed into the bar. An American in the back spoke much too loudly into his smartphone. (He carried on his end of the conversation with the aid of just three words: yeah, nope and sure.) She had been in the kind of mood where you want to be alone but desperately need other people around. All the cafés in the city were closed—a curfew had been imposed again—so the only option was this hotel bar. The security man with his earpiece and face mask had stepped aside immediately when she flashed her orange ID. She’d sat down at the bar, ordered a glass of Sancerre, taken her glass tablet from her tote bag, bowed her head and begun to read. And now this stranger was disturbing her, this cigarillo smoker with his walrus mustache. She sat off to the side of the bar, he in the middle, one and a half arm’s lengths away. “That book seems pretty riveting,” he said. “A novel?”

“Not a novel,” she answered. “I hate novels.” After a micropause she added: “All that make-believe stuff!”

“So what is it?” he asked.

“Plotinus,” she said, curt and cold. Normally this answer would have sufficed to nip any conversation in the bud, but unfortunately the stranger was well-versed in philosophy, and so she was catapulted head over heels into a debate about the sense and nonsense of the prefix *neo* (why “neo-Marxist” and not just Marxist? and what the hell does “neoliberal” mean anyway? etc.). Because, of course, the “Neoplatonic thinkers” of the third century A.D.—Plotinus leading the way—by no means referred to themselves as such. They understood themselves as nothing more than

disciples of the great and venerable Plato—end of story, no *neo* needed! “I’m Bodo,” said the stranger by way of introduction, once the discussion was over. “It’s really not my fault. It was my parents who inflicted the name on me.”

“I’m Julia,” she said, taking the hand extended to her—which cost her no small effort, he was sitting so far away from her.

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “We should drink to that. Another glass of white wine?” She nodded, he ordered (and got himself another bourbon in the process). In the next half an hour she learned that he had the most important sexual organ a man can possess: ears. This man who was much too old (well, maybe not *that* old) was actually listening to her—with all seven senses, while his body tensely leaned in her direction. Little by little, in her eyes, he lost all his ugliness. She told him that she worked as a taxi driver to pay her way through college; that she didn’t have any family left in town; that, just like him, she wasn’t staying at the hotel. (Giggling, they both fished out their orange IDs: “Show me yours and I’ll show you mine!”) Finally they tried to calculate the statistical likelihood of two people like them even meeting in the first place. After all, just zero-point-zero-zero-seven percent of the population was immune.) She told him that she detested broccoli and that in the local art museum there was a painting by Vermeer that was her own private property. A domestic scene: a silent woman holding a letter, a brazen man with a lute, a checkered floor, a vase with flowers on a wooden table, a sliced loaf of bread. Light burst in through the window like from another world. If she didn’t see the original painting at least once

every two weeks she began to feel physically ill. After the third Sancerre the stranger asked her to sit down next to him. ("Otherwise I'll have to keep yelling.") It occurred to her in passing, at the very back of her mind, that they'd long begun to gesture in synch. They reached for their glasses at the same time; when she stroked her cheek absentmindedly, he stroked his cheek as well. But before she took the decisive next step she wanted to learn a few more things about him. Cunningly she asked where he lived. He mentioned a fancy neighborhood and disclosed without being asked that he lived alone in his apartment. No, no family. Hobbys? He turned his hobby into his profession. What was his profession? she asked. Journalist. Was the blog or magazine he wrote for well-known? "*Holzmann's Weltspiegel*," said Bodo casually. Julia tried hard not to look impressed: "Aha, the magazine with the stupid apostrophe!"

"It's not a stupid apostrophe," said Bodo calmly. "Using an apostrophe before the genitive S was common in German as early as the eighteenth century. I can show you signboards from the German Empire that say *Eckhard's Kolonialwaren and Müller's Lebensmittel*." (He drew an apostrophe in the air with the index finger of his right hand.) "It's not an Anglicism, like some of the uninformed would like to think. It's good old-fashioned German."

Julia listened to his lecture unfazed. "And what kind of things do you write?" she wanted to know.

"Travelogues. Maybe you've stumbled across them before. My surname is von Unruh."

No blink of recognition. Julia was familiar with *Holzmann's Weltspiegel* from the newsstand and the occasional doctor's appointment—every waiting room had a copy of the magazine with its distinctive cover design—but like most people of her generation she got her news from cyberspace, from the clouds, had little birds tweeting it to her. Truth be told, she didn't have the spare cash for a lavishly-produced glossy magazine. Twelve euros an issue! Ludicrous! But now—she rubbed her hands together in overacted anticipation—now she finally had a helpless contributor to *Holzmann's Weltspiegel* under her thumb and could pick his brains about whether or not all the rumors she'd heard were true. Dive in: Is it true that the photo essays in *Holzmann's Weltspiegel* sometimes cost half a million? (Yes. Sometimes more. And it's common knowledge that no issue is published without one.) Do members of the German parliament really browse through *Holzmann's Weltspiegel* on Tuesday evening—twelve hours before it's released? (Of course. They have to make sure that *Holzmann's Weltspiegel* hasn't seen through their game that week.) Did the magazine's founder, when he lost his temper, really throw typewriters at his underlings? (He's a couple generations too late to know that, said Bodo, grinning, but older employees had confessed to him that they did sometimes have to duck.) Do the people at *Holzmann's Weltspiegel* openly discuss the Nazi past of the magazine's founder? Georg Holzmann, after all, was a member of an SS propaganda unit—only in the 1960s did he morph into a left-leaning liberal. In the war he held Greece under his jackboot. In the early days *Holzmann's Weltspiegel* celebrated Hitler's soldiers as outright heroes, and Nazis were employed in

high positions. (Old hat. Preaching to the choir. Of course all of this has long been a topic of debate or, rather, has long since ceased to be a topic of debate.) Does *Holzmann’s Weltspiegel*, in all seriousness, provide every journalist working for the company with a brand-new Porsche? And a gas allowance paid each month cash in hand? (No comment.)

“But you haven’t even asked me the most important question,” said Bodo.

“What’s that?”

“If what we write in *Holzmann’s Weltspiegel* is even true to begin with.”

“Well? Is it?”

“Every word of it,” said Bodo. “We have an entire department whose only job is to fact-check every single claim and look up every quote. Every photo is scrutinized, every sound recording verified. Because we have to record every interview we do. On average every piece I write is put through the wringer three times before it goes into print.” The flatscreen TV above the bar had meanwhile switched to a map of the epidemic, casting a reddish reflection on Bodo’s face. There were ten new cases in Magdeburg. Dresden had now been under quarantine for a week—the city was one big red circle. Poland, among the neighboring countries, was now largely free of the disease. The Netherlands, on the other hand, had really been hit hard. “Do you actually enjoy your work?” asked Julia.

“Fiendishly,” said Bodo, sending another smoke ring towards the ceiling.

“My job’s a blast. A totally forbidden pleasure, to be perfectly honest with you. Suddenly Julia sensed a startling absence underneath her buttocks—an abyss opened up and she came within an inch of falling off her stool. Bodo

caught her with a strong arm just in the nick of time. Was she that drunk already? (It had only been four glasses of wine.) Or was it just a fit of acute ineptitude? Bodo, always the gentleman, left his hand on her hip for just a moment too long, and she accepted it with a smile. It wasn't long before their fingertips were brushing each other in the dark below the counter. Then came the old game of looking, looking away and looking back again that our species has played ever since the day in the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve discovered they were naked. She noticed he smelled good: like leather, and old-fashioned aftershave and sweat. By now she'd even gotten used to his mustache. And since Julia was an eminently practical person, at a little past nine-thirty she whispered into his ear: “I don't think either of us should be driving this evening.” The barkeeper fellow, who knew precisely what was unfolding right before his eyes, sent her a withering look.

“Correct,” said Bodo. “The hotel rooms here are great. They say there's a delightful view of the dumpsters in the courtyard.” He pulled up a crystal ashtray, a veritable mass grave, and added the remains of his cigarillo to the crumpled corpses of cigarettes. Then he placed a big bill on the counter and they left. Julia felt embarrassed, and stood a few steps behind him at the hotel reception. But Bodo settled the matter in an utterly dry and businesslike manner. He fished out a credit card black as sin and was back at her side with the room key three minutes later. Silently they rode up the elevator. They didn't embrace each other. Her knees were shaking. Actually it wasn't her style to be dragged off like this—certainly not by an older man who was basically a total stranger. A hallway. A white slit, a green light. The hotel



door banged shut behind them. Julia was astonished. Before them lay a suite with sumptuous carpets and a bed the size of a football field. The window, of course, did not look onto some shabby courtyard but offered a view of the artificial lake in the middle of the city. Bodo gently took her in his arms. He knew how to kiss. He knew how to do all kinds of things.

She marveled at his body when it was over. For a man his age he looked surprisingly good. The folds of fat on his belly were still countable, his arms were muscular. “You’re so tan,” she said.

“I was just in Brazil for three months,” said Bodo. “Amazonas.”

“Vacation?”

“Assignment. Investigating a pretty crazy story.” She didn’t ask him what kind of story, she was happy just to use his shoulder as a pillow. Moments later she fell asleep.

The next morning they used room service. On a whim Julia ordered a full English breakfast: three eggs sunny side up, bacon, baked beans in tomato sauce, smoked herring, toast, butter, orange marmalade. Bodo was content with chamomile tea and a fresh bowl of muesli. When they finished eating, Bodo said goodbye—a bit too brusque for her taste. He was in a tremendous hurry and had to stop by the editorial offices. On the way to the hotel-room door a little card fell out of his wallet as he was putting it into his pocket. Red pasteboard, white letters. Julia wanted to give him the card back but he’d already slipped out the door, and she couldn’t find him in the hallway either. Puzzled, she turned the card over in her hand. It was a membership card to a wellness center, tanning bed included. Julia thought nothing of it—

neither bad nor good. She was certainly nobody’s fool; she just wasn’t the kind of person who, walking through the forest, suspects a robber behind every tree.

[...]

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**SECOND JOURNEY:**

**THE RESTAURANT AT THE END OF THE WORLD**

(Words: Bodo von Unruh, Photos: Jacques Lacoste)

“The sea cucumber,” said the young man at the next table. “You have to try the sea cucumber! That’s the specialty here. The chef soaks them in milk for a few days then stews them in a sauce of chili peppers and garlic. Heavenly, I’m telling you.” It was chance that led me to this restaurant. I got on the No. 7 subway at Times Square and was drifting eastward—farther and farther away from Manhattan, deeper and deeper into Queens. Queens is the most ethnically diverse borough of the megalopolis of New York City. Churches, mosques, Hindu temples, synagogues: here you find Poland right next to Punjab, and Guatamala borders on West Africa. The clattering train first carries the traveler to Greece, then a little later he’s at the foot of the Himalayas again. And if you take the No. 7 all the way to the last stop in Flushing, you find yourself in the middle of East Asia—a mishmash of China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan. The stores have signs in Han, Kana and Hangul characters, and on the streets you no longer hear a word of English or Spanish. “The stewed pork belly is also very good, of course” said the young man. “If you’re one of those incorrigible meat-eaters, then the pork belly is just your thing! But if you like seafood, stick to the sea cucumber.”

The restaurant was in a side street. Inside it was dark, the decor tasteful: wood paneling on the walls, low tables, an aquarium with giant red ornamental fish. “If you’re undecided,” said the man at the next table, “then just order both. You’re in New York, you can take the leftovers home in a doggie bag.” He had an inconspicuous moon face, with friendly eyes peering darkly through narrow eyelid folds. Black horn-rimmed glasses, a touch of acne on his cheeks. A student, I thought—probably majoring in something impractical. Acting at the Lee Strasberg Institute in Manhattan, or journalism at Columbia University. I asked him if he was related in some way to the restaurant owners. “No,” he said, “I’m just a regular here at lunchtime. It’s rare to find authentic Chengdu cuisine like this outside of China. Not even in Flushing. It’s a very robust cuisine, you know. Not too fancy for the emperor’s palace—and just good enough for street vendors.”

I ordered the sea cucumber. It tasted phenomenal. The sauce brought tears to my eyes. “Thanks for the tip,” I said.

“Yeah, this place is great,” said the young man at the next table. “One of the best restaurants I know. A real hidden gem. There aren’t many restaurants better than this. Except of course...”

“Except what?” I asked and blew my nose. I could feel the chili peppers all the way to the roots of my hair.

The young man looked around to see if there was anyone nearby, then he leaned over to me and whispered: “*Forbidden Pleasures.*”

“What the hell is that?”

“Just the best Chinese restaurant in the world. What am I saying, the best restaurant in the world, period!”

“Have you been there?”

“Are you serious!” said the young man. “I could never afford it. It costs fifty grand just to book a table there. And that’s without the food, not even a glass of wine. They say one evening can easily set you back a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“Where is this Forbidden Pleasures?” I asked, pouring myself some green tea from the cast-iron teapot.

“Pssst!” said the young man at the next table. “You wanna get us thrown out? You shouldn’t utter the name of that... establishment in another restaurant. The same way actors never say *Macbeth*, but always just refer to it as ‘the Scottish play.’ Pure superstition, of course. Because normal restaurants have no reason to fear that... the other establishment is in any way their competitor.”

“Fair enough. So where is this fabled restaurant?”

“No one knows,” said the young man, waving his credit card in the air to indicate to the waiter that he wanted the check.

“And where did you hear about it?”

“Here and there, and on the Internet.” He lowered his head and settled the bill. Suddenly he seemed to be in a tremendous hurry. “Just a word of warning,” he said. “Should you have the means and intend to dine at that... establishment: they say it’s not exactly harmless. On account of the patrons alone. Just think about what kind of people can afford to drop a hundred and

fifty grand for one meal. Not just the nice kind.” He got up. “It was nice to meet you.” The young man with the horn-rimmed glasses grabbed his backpack and promptly left. Once he had vanished, I typed the name of the restaurant into my smartphone. “Forbidden Pleasures”—an upscale Californian sex shop. A lingerie store in Pennsylvania. A book of verse by Spanish poet Luis Cernuda. Not one single restaurant—not even the rumor of a restaurant. I only found what I was looking for when, two hours later in my hotel room, I logged into the Darknet—that is to say, when I descended into that deep, underground world where users around the globe can meet up anonymously. If the regular Internet is somewhere in between a goldmine and a garbage heap, the Darknet is a black market that also functions as a conspiratorial meeting place. The Darknet is where you can buy drugs, download child pornography, hire a contract killer. But the Darknet is also where journalists meet up with fearless informants who can’t reveal their identity because they live in a police state. And of course I have access.

The homepage was inordinately plain: “Forbidden Pleasures” in typewriter font, and under that “Restaurant,” nothing else. Clicking on the typewriter font, a form opened up: “Book a table.” Below this a place to leave your email address and enter a credit-card number. I hopped right to it. In the comment box I typed that I was a journalist and was bringing a photographer along. The reply came almost three weeks later, when I’d long since gone back home to Germany. An email with no sender: “Forbidden Pleasures, Anji Bridge, Xitang,” followed by a date and a time. And a simple, misspelled sentence that baffled me: “Fotografer no problem.”

*Caption: Interior of Forbidden Pleasures. Note the tinware place settings! Small photo: The only existing photograph of chef Peter Wang with his characteristic bandana and eyepatch (archive).*

Xitang is located close to the metropolis of Shanghai. But perhaps, since Xitang is considerably older, we should put it the other way around: Shanghai is located close to Xitang, and Xitang is gorgeous. A water town: nine canals, one hundred and four bridges, narrow lanes paved with flagstones. Flat fishing boats; the waves of the Yangtze Kiang shattering the rust-red evening sky. We almost came too late, since the high-speed train that was supposed to take us there broke down between stations. Luckily I was able to order a taxi with my smartphone, but the driver only took us to the outskirts of town, so we had to run to keep our appointment. It was clear to me from the start anyway that Anji Bridge couldn't possibly be where the restaurant was located. It was probably nowhere near the bridge. The bridge was just a meeting point. Someone—but who?—would escort us from there to the ominous restaurant.

It turned out to be three beefy gentlemen with shaved heads who looked like they were brothers or cousins. Maybe they really were brothers. All three wore dark suits, all three had earphones stuck in their right ears with cables coiling down into their jackets, all three were tattooed—black patterns crawling up their necks and down to their meaty fingers. None of them spoke a word with us, they simply took us in their midst and led us to a boat that was docked near the bridge. Once we were on board—the boat was rocking violently—and had left the river bank behind us, one of the

three men took two forms from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed them to us. They were written in a rather clumsy German. The forms were a disclaimer confirming that our visit to Forbidden Pleasures was voluntary, that we would follow all instructions given by the staff, that we were liable for any damage, and that we didn't suffer from any food allergies. The bald-headed man reached into his pocket again—his two associates were busy rowing—and held out two Montblanc fountain pens. We signed. What else were we supposed to do? The man indicated that we should roll up our sleeves. At first I resisted, but the man grunted impatiently. He held up the form, then he pointed to the riverbank, leisurely gliding past us. I understood that I could either do as he commanded or he'd toss me out on the spot and I could kiss my fifty thousand dollars goodbye. Sighing, I rolled up my sleeves. The bald-headed man bent down, picked up a plastic box on the floor of the boat right in front of him, and took out two syringes and two vials. My photographer went first. Then the bald-headed man broke the second vial in two and plunged the needle into my upper arm. I didn't even have time to wish myself a good night—it was like someone reached inside my brain and turned out the lights.

Of course I hadn't wasted my time in Germany. I did some research and found a few solid indications that the man behind Forbidden Pleasures was none other than Peter Wang. Then a number of things became clear to me. Peter Wang was a famous if not to say notorious chef, one of the best on the planet. His trademark look: a red patterned bandana tied around his forehead, and an eyepatch that made him look like a pirate. He was called the “Master



of Cumin,” specialized in the cuisine of his native Szechuan, and collected Michelin stars like other people do bottle caps. Like many geniuses, however, he had his fair share of quirks. He shunned publicity (there was only one photo of him, a black-and-white picture from the sixties). He also had a tendency to play some pretty cruel pranks. Once he laced a dessert with a strong laxative. Another time he served—as the special highlight of the evening—thumbtacks in vinegar, and was in stitches when several customers actually tried to eat them. Once, during a meal, a diner’s telephone rang and an unknown male voice announced that his grandson had been abducted. The man reached for his nitroglycerin pills; wheezing and with a clenched fist over his heart, he was about to notify the police when his grandson marched into the dining room safe and sound. This time even people who were well-disposed towards Peter Wang thought he had clearly overstepped the mark. After that no one heard from him. The “Master of Cumin” had vanished. Many people thought he was dead. But twenty years later, according to rumors on the Darknet, he’d become the head chef of Forbidden Pleasures, where he ruled with an iron hand over a troop of chefs de partie. There were also rumors that Forbidden Pleasures was a state-owned business, that Peter Wang in other words was serving the Chinese government. Some even claimed he’d been kidnapped back then by the Chinese secret service. But of course no one knew anything for sure.

When I woke up from my artificial sleep, I was still on a boat but not the same one. This one was bigger and had an outboard motor. Maybe we were still in Xitang, or maybe while we were sleeping they had taken us to the

museum village of Wuzhen Xizha about sixty kilometers away. I couldn't verify our location because my smartphone had disappeared. Our escorts had also confiscated my photographer's phone. We drifted down the silent nocturnal river, red lanterns illuminating its banks. A few minutes later we docked. Our three minders maneuvered us through narrow lanes, past inner courtyards. Then we marched through a passageway between buildings. Another street, another bridge, another courtyard—and finally we stood outside a metal door painted green. The bald-headed man ahead of me pushed it open with the palm of his hand.

I've dined at many a top-notch restaurant. I've sat under Chagall paintings at the Kronenhalle in Zurich and can testify to the fact that on a dreary Sunday afternoon there's no place in Europe more pleasant. And of course I've been to the superb Jules Verne restaurant in the Eiffel Tower, enjoying the view of Paris while I stuffed myself with truffled lobster. And I've watched Venice sink from the marvelous terrace of the Club del Doge. In this respect I should have been prepared for what was awaiting us behind the green steel door: a barren hall with no windows. It was about two stories high. Halfway up, a gallery made of roughly-hewn wood ran around the room. On the right, the gallery led to a stairway. The waiters (the tattooed bald-headed men, who else?) later used these stairs to carry down the food. Upstairs to the left, I spotted a swinging door which must have led to the kitchen. A bare bulb hung down from the ceiling, lighting up a big square table without a tablecloth. Around the table stood wobbly benches like the kind used in beer gardens. The food was served in tin bowls. The flatware,

too, was made of stamped sheet metal (no chopsticks were offered). There were no napkins. The wine to go with the food was plonked down on the table in its bottle. We served ourselves in plastic cups.

Ten faces eagerly awaited us. There was a married couple from Texas, both white and pretty wrinkled. There was a burly Russian with pockmarks. His young daughter (at least I really *hope* the girl was his daughter) didn't eat with us, but just sat on his lap while he shoveled in the food. Then there was a thin, bespectacled female student with a backpack—a Chilean from a well-to-do family, as it later turned out. A black dignitary in a military uniform with many medals. His wholly intimidated wife or lover. A Chinese man of indistinguishable age in a blue Mao suit. (Perhaps the Communist Party had sent him to inspect the quality of the food?) A beautiful woman in an evening gown who didn't say a single word so that even now I have no clue where she was from or where she was going. An Indian professor of physics who affably revealed to me that he'd discovered unified field theory—the ultimate formula for explaining the world—and wanted to celebrate.

The meal began with a beefy server handing an envelope to every member of the dinner party (everyone, that is, except the young girl and my photographer) and executing a curt bow. I tore mine open and took out a paper card. Someone had typed the following on it (spelling mistakes in the original):

Mealworm cocktail in buffalo grass

1820 Juglar Cuvee

Eel soup with century egg

2005 Domaine de la Romanee-Conti Montrachet

Lukewarm bird’s nest with catsup

1865 Chateau Lafite

Toadstool risotto with hakarl

1811 Chateau d’Yquem

Candied badger ears

1992 Screaming Eagle Cabernet

Eskimo ice-cream

2000 Royal DeMaria Icewine

BREAK

Five kinds of long pork

1947 Chateau Cheval Blanc

Eight treasures rice pudding

L’Art De Martell

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Mealworms? Toadstools? Badger ears? Was he trying to pull our leg? And *hákarl*? Really? I was fully and painfully aware of what *hákarl* was: the fermented flesh of Greenland sharks the way it’s eaten in Iceland. The smell is supposedly worse than the taste. The rotten shark has a strong ammonia smell, connoisseurs have told me. And birds’ nests served here with ketchup? Seriously? These are a sinfully expensive delicacy, harvested by climbers with bamboo ladders who risk their lives in doing so. Pure bird spit and nothing else, for two thousand dollars a kilo. One thing was clear after reading this bill of fare: Peter

Wang—if he really was the brains behind Forbidden Pleasures— had strayed considerably, gastronomically speaking, from his roots in Szechuan.

*Caption: The patrons of Forbidden Pleasures restaurant. From left to right: John Dubois Smith III with his wife Jennifer from Wichita Falls, Texas. Maricruz García from Valparaíso, Chile. Bao Liang from Beijing, China. His Excellency President Mwata Kumbukani with wife Namira from Lusaka, Zambia. Prof. Abdul Sayed from Mumbai, India. The reporter. Other participants at the banquet dinner did not wish to be identified and therefore have their eyes blacked out. Previous pages: Our reporter attempting to eat eel soup. / Five kinds of long pork: brain, carpaccio, tripe, blood sausage and a certain indefinable deep-fried something. Served with bok choy and mango dressing. Cheers!*

Food taboos are probably as old as humanity itself. The Hebrew Bible even begins with one—the prohibition of eating the fruits of a certain tree. Hunter-gatherer societies in the dim and distant past presumably reserved certain parts of a slain animal for their shaman, others for the men, and still others for the women. Nowadays almost all cultures and religions have ritual dietary laws. Hindus don’t eat beef (slaughtering a cow is considered a crime in almost all Indian states, punishable by imprisonment), nor do they eat elephants (whose flesh is a reminder of the elephant god Ganesha) or monkeys (on account of the god Hanuman). Members of the Brahman caste eat a vegetarian diet anyway. Adherents of Jainism don’t eat eggs. Some Somalian tribes abstain from eating fish. Certain strains of Hinduism and

some Buddhist priests do not eat mushrooms. The Yazidis consider salad taboo.

But the most extensive and complicated system of dietary laws was established by the Jews. An extraterrestrial reading the Hebrew Bible might easily get the idea that the Jews are an especially warlike tribe that is constantly preoccupied with eradicating idol worshippers. That same extraterrestrial would be surprised to learn that religious Jews actually spend most of their time trying to figure out what they’re allowed to eat. According to Mosaic dietary laws, the only permissible meats are those from animals that have split hooves and chew the cud—and then they have to be ritually slaughtered, meaning they must be bled out entirely, as the consumption of blood is prohibited to Jews. Meat must not be prepared or eaten with dairy. So long, veal cutlet in cream sauce! Crustaceans are forbidden, eel is forbidden. Only fish with scales and fins are admissible as food. Islam for the most part adopted its dietary laws from Judaism, though toning them down on the edges. Crustaceans are okay for most Muslims, even cutlet in cream sauce is halal provided it isn’t pork. That’s why pious Muslims can buy their meat from a Jewish butcher (but not pious Jews from a Muslim one!). They also added one into the bargain: the prohibition of alcohol, which, incidentally, is not derived from the Koran. (The prophet merely admonished his followers not to show up at the mosque completely sloshed.) And Christianity? Paul the Apostle vigorously tossed out Jewish dietary restrictions (Timothy 1:4), which didn’t mean that anything goes. Devout Christians do not eat meat on Fridays, because Jesus was crucified on this

day of the week. In the Western churches, Easter is preceded by Lent, a period of fasting. And why do most Christian-influenced Europeans find the idea of eating insects utterly repulsive? Is there any logical explanation for this? Are insects, by nature, any more disgusting than seafood, which often looks very similar? (A scorpion, on closer inspection, looks a lot like a miniature lobster.) And why do Europeans shudder at the thought of eating roast guinea pig, a delicacy in Peru? Why—except during times of extreme famine—have cats and dogs never been on a menu in Europe?

Of course there are food taboos in China or, rather, there used to be. China is the country where Buddha found most of his disciples, and Buddhists are vegetarians. But the Communist regime waged a very successful (and brutal) war against the Buddhist religion from the very start. Thus, China is nowadays the largest contiguous cultural area that is completely free of dietary laws. Maybe this accounts for the exoticism but also the fascination of Chinese cuisine. Nothing is off the table, the illogical prohibitions of old no longer hold, anything is edible. “We Chinese eat everything that moves on the surface of the earth—except cars,” a Chinese friend once told me.

The first one who dared to eat the mealworms was curiously enough the Chilean woman. They were undeniably crawling creatures, bedded in buffalo grass in the tin bowls before us—long, pale brown and revolting. The thin Chilean student stuck a forkful into her mouth, chewed, cocked her head, and immediately followed up with a second forkful. I didn’t want to be a coward. And discovered they weren’t too bad. To be more precise, they were excellent. Even the buffalo grass, swimming in an exquisite marinade,

was sheer delight. The taste of the mealworms was remotely reminiscent of North Sea shrimp—that is to say, the mealworms tasted the way North Sea shrimp *would* have tasted if God hadn’t botched His creation. The white wine was just as agreeable. Next course, please! This time there was a nasty surprise in store for us. The steaming bowl of soup had been placed on the table in front of me and I was just about to dip my spoon in when a black slippery bulge arched out of the cloudy liquid. The African president’s wife next to me squealed. No doubt about it, these eels were still alive. This was admittedly a step more extreme than *ikizukuri*—the awful Japanese art of fileting a live fish with a few quick cuts and serving it with its heart still beating. The raw fish is then eaten while the animal’s still flapping its gills. (Sometimes the mutilated fish is put back in the aquarium to recover for a second round.) This time it was the burly Russian who plucked up the courage to go first. He grabbed the eel by the tail, pulled it out of the broth, tilted his head back, popped the black snake in his throat and crushed it with the powerful movements of his jaw. Then he belched with pleasure. I only succeeded on the third try—they were especially tiny specimens, probably baby eels. They didn’t taste bad. The broth on the other hand... was heavenly. A peppery-fishy stock with a lot of ginger and even more garlic. When the century eggs (raw duck eggs fermented not quite a thousand but three years nonetheless, and hence shimmering dark-green)—when the century eggs were cracked open and spilled their semi-solid yolks into the cloudy, peppery liquid, it was like spooning a strong, tangy-tart sun. I actually ordered a second helping. And now the birds’ nests! Yes, indeed,



the master chef in all seriousness had ketchup bottles brought to the table—but the contents weren’t bright red, they were caramel-colored. And I suddenly remembered that ketchup was originally invented by the Chinese, and wasn’t made from ripe tomatoes but fermented anchovies and spices—a kind of fish sauce. We ate the birds’ nests by dipping them in the sauce like French fries. I finally understood why some people call them the “caviar of Southeast Asia.” It also dawned on me that we were eating a symphony that kept getting more dramatic. Its tenor was that we constantly had to overcome an inner reservation, an aversion. The reward was all the sweeter. There was just one thing I found unsettling: what was long pork?

The toadstool risotto would have been a credit to any chef from Lombardy or Liguria. The *hákarl* was cut into tiny pieces and of course tasted nothing like cleaning products but just tasted salty in a smoky, oily kind of way. It was used like a condiment, instead of, say, Parmesan cheese. As far as the toadstool was concerned, I trusted the chef now unreservedly. Presumably he had found a way to detoxify it—if worst came to worst I would have some pretty wild dreams. (Toadstools are known to have a psychedelic effect.) The badger ears turned out to be a foretaste of dessert. They’d been cooked with ginger, chili and honey. I thought I’d mastered my sense of revulsion and would sail through the rest of the evening, but I gagged when the ice-cream was served—a purple-colored concoction of smashed berries that faintly smelled of cod-liver oil. This obviously wasn’t Italian-style ice-cream made of cream and egg yolks. No, this was blubber mixed with snow, berries and sugar, the way the Yupik in Alaska prepare it. I carefully stuck

the spoon into the mixture and licked it off. Yuck, how delightful! Once I’d had three spoonfuls, I didn’t want to stop. If I hadn’t known that an entire main course was yet to follow I could have easily gulped down a kilo of this obscenely fatty dessert.

It turned out that the bald-headed gangsters in black suits who were serving us were not just employed as waiters; they were acrobats, too. Once the last tin bowl, the last empty bottle, the last half-full plastic cup had been cleared away, they began to perform tricks in the middle of our table. They juggled. They breathed fire. They formed a human pyramid. Meanwhile I continued to contemplate where I’d heard the word “long pork” before. What a pity they’d taken our smartphones away, I would have loved to google it. While all of this was going on, I heard noises coming from the kitchen upstairs. The noises grew louder, swelling into a terrible racket. The acrobats made a valiant effort to drown out the noise. They pounded on the table with the flat of their hands while standing on their heads and twirling colorful rings around their ankles. Finally the noise died down. And now the break in our banquet was over (which up until this point had maybe lasted four hours). The tattooed gangsters bowed out without even waiting for our applause, returning with full plates, the main course. It was the first time this evening that porcelain was used—oval dishes probably dating from the Ming era (white lucky dragons against a blue floral pattern). This was accompanied by the best red wine in the world in crystal decanters. In the middle of each porcelain dish: razor-thin slices of meat with a caper sauce. Around this—arranged in an appetizing way—a tiny blood sausage; a small

heap of sour tripe; brain with onions and herbs; and finally something long and deep-fried. In a small bowl beside it, tender bok choy in a mango vinaigrette. I worked from the inside outwards—and have now reached the limits of human language. Because this dish in its subtlety and at the same time in its zest outclassed everything I’d eaten this evening. I hadn’t been aware that meat could taste like this. Suddenly the little girl sitting on the lap of the pockmarked Russian let out a piercing scream. What had gotten into her? She pointed in front of her with a childish finger. The African president’s wife, too, stared at her plate with a look of sheer horror. Unmoved, I bit into the long, deep-fried dish that I hadn’t tasted yet. Tender meat. Hard, thin bone. Then I felt something else between my teeth. I spat it out violently and for a second had trouble wrapping my mind around what it was that I’d actually spat out: a finger nail.

I charged up the wooden stairs, my photographer in tow, ran halfway around the hall on the gallery, pushed the swinging door open that I thought led to the kitchen. It was empty. But in the middle of the steel sideboard I saw him. The “Master of Cumin.” The red bandana, the black eyepatch. The uncovered eye was open, looking glassy-eyed into infinity. The head sat in a dark pool of blood and seemed to have been severed cleanly from the body. My photographer readied his camera, but that very instant the burly men in black suits came through a side door and shoved us none too gently out of the kitchen. The hall with the dining tables had meanwhile become a pandemonium, and the dinner guests were the demons. In every corner of the room someone stood and vomited. Even the beautiful nameless woman

took the liberty to puke her guts out (she’d gotten a thumb). Some guests simply spewed on the table. Barf on the marvelous Ming dishes, barf on the crystal glasses. I, too, failed to keep my dinner down. The innocent child stood there confused and sobbing. At some point the gangsters in the dark suits jabbed needles into our upper arms again. I was grateful for this little act of kindness.

When I woke up the next morning in my hotel room in Shanghai, I wasn’t sure if Forbidden Pleasures and my visit there had only been a dream. But among my things I found the dinner menu on the piece of pasteboard, and then there were the photos. For sure, Peter Wang is notorious for his nasty pranks. Nothing would be easier than to fashion a seemingly realistic rubber skull and get hold of some stage blood. Perhaps the whole thing was a sick phantasmagoria. (Toadstool risotto!) But I fear I’ll never rid myself of the memory of how that fingernail felt inside my mouth—not least because I’ve meanwhile googled what “long pork” means.

[END OF SAMPLE]