Yellow Fruit

Yes, I am back in China, for fieldwork. And yes, it's hard. Yesterday my building had the water turned off, unexpectedly. The powers that be offered no reason, no warning. Merde. So early that morning I bathed using my purified drinking water (expensive bird bath bathing). Since I moved in here, I have had no hot water, so this problem just meant a smaller, quicker bird bath for me. Later, at lunchtime, I plodded home, unlocked the double doors and sat on the couch, debating what to do about lunch. I did not wonder for long; an old lady, my neighbor on the second floor, started pounding on my door. The old dear was wearing a torn bathrobe and had large, jagged yellow teeth, just like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood.

In a loud voice, as if I were deaf, she said: "Foreigner! Give you water. My apartment better, has some trickle, water runs. Give kettle! Give kettle!"

I looked at her trying to understand, for she talked with a thick northeastern accent and spittle was flying everywhere. Then I nodded, dodging spit, understanding her at last, and handed over my kettle.

"Follow me foreigner!" she commanded. I followed. She plodded downstairs in ratty slippers, which most Chinese never wear out of the house. Here one must change street shoes to slippers after crossing the boundary from outside to inside. This is an unspoken cultural rule: shoes are filthy and meant for outside; slippers are clean and meant for inside, just as foreigners are barbarians and not really human, and Chinese are superior and the higher race.

But when grandma opened the door to her apartment I thought I would faint. The stench of cat urine was so strong it was like entering a steam room powered by cat pee. It did not faze her in the least. My eyes were burning from uric acid fumes, but I saw not one cat. I got my water, thanked the old lady and RUSHED upstairs to wash my face.

Now I know why my landlady does not want me to have a cat.

Other Chinese people have knocked on my door in past years, with more extreme things to convey. In fact, I have a story here about a Chinaman, sad and sordid, romantic and desperate. And, although we never became lovers, I still am unsure how to remember Mr Yang, my erstwhile teaching partner and so-called good friend.

I met Mr Yang while teaching in North China. As a "foreign expert" - the Chinese love to give titles to those they do not intend to pay a decent wage - I taught English in adjoining classrooms near Mr Yang.

Slight, frail, with square glasses that went out of style in 1949, Mr Yang deftly began a campaign of socializing with me. He was an English teacher in need of English speaking practice. Funny, dapper in the way that only old communists can be - always clad in worn dark suits, never shiny

fabric, wearing a narrow yellow pinstripe tie, and with his thick black hair slicked back with Brillo creme, Mr. Yang seemed the true Confucian-Commie gentleman.

He was also very funny. Believe me, I needed a laugh, living in a place where there was nothing to do but to drink one's self into oblivion, or to watch, as dusk fell, my young students giggle and grope each other in the park behind my one room 'super suite.' Mr Yang was the best form of entertainment. In the teacher's break room, a little concrete stall with a broken window, Mr Yang told jokes, smiled, giggled nervously, played oddly with his tie, and always offered to eat with me. This was a great boon, for at that time I spoke little Chinese and was 100% illiterate. (Today I'm functionally literate, but no thanks to him).

Every day, we ate lunch together at grimy Chinese greasy spoons, always taking turns to ritually fight over paying the bill. We also rode bicycles, through clouds of car smog, to see the sights: the plaster Mongol horse, once looking north to Ulaan Baatar, which been patriotically turned south to face the capital city of the new motherland, Beijing; the best place to buy cotton undies; and once, even a site where a Buddhist temple had been razed during the Cultural Revolution.

My host city had little for me to see, just as it had little to offer me to do. "You'd be better off as a western man," Mr Yang quipped one day, "Then you could buy a girl and enjoy the pleasures of her jade palace. I am a poor rat, unable to burrow anywhere except in garbage. Western men always get the girls, either mistresses at the Splendid Waves Bathhouse for 100 kuai a night, or even a pretty wife, who dare not refuse pleasure to her foreign devil of a man, who, I am told, pushes deep into jade palaces with his magnificent member. But alas, I was born in an era that does not allow me such secret, forbidden pleasures, because I have no cash, and hence, no clout." After this confession, he went on to tell me of his dedication and devotion to his family, and how he, like most traditional Chinese sons, spent all day Sunday serving his mother, in her small, ill heated home on the west side. "It is my duty," he said, when I asked him once to take a Sunday off and go on a trip to the countryside. "Duty, like death, calls me and I fear disobeying. I cook her a meal and listen to her chat, just as I will feed a bird and listen to it chirp when I am in my golden years; that is, when I am seventy three, like Confucius."

Mr Yang had survived his childhood during the harsh times of the Cultural Revolution. "I was sent out to the countryside to eat grass," he said to me mildly, taking off his specs and polishing them. "Actually, I also ate millet, but never meat, and that is why I like to gorge myself on meat today, whenever I can afford it." Indeed, we ate much meat together. Living in Chinese Mongolia made me a connoisseur of mutton and lamb. Often I insisted on paying the bill for our meals, because I could afford the cold dishes - vegetables, and the hot dishes, which meant more meat on our plates. My salary was twice his, and I also tutored dazed, plump children who came from a high ranking governmental family. By Chinese standards, I was a rich parasite.

In those days, if I got up early enough, I could walk down alleyways and watch as the Hui butchers skinned and gutted a carcass. They could do this in less than ten minutes. Mongolian restaurateurs would stand by, smoking and spitting, and then point out the sections they wanted.

They would argue with each other over who got what; sometimes the shouting turned into a friendly fight, until a few blows would fell an opponent. The victor then bellowed something obscene and left with his cache of meat. The butcher and the victor sometimes together loaded this mass of meat onto a cart, covered it with an old Army blanket, and hauled it away, whipping the poor mule, who stood numbly with a plastic peony stuck in one ear. Anything left over was also transported in a similar fashion by the butcher's son, who rode his skinny mule around town, crying out in a castrato sing-song voice: "Fresh mutton! Tasty, so tasty! Come and buy it!"

And it was tasty. Mr Yang and I ate a lot of mutton. The Mongol eateries served it the best: a sheep leg roasted over a spit with cumin, salt, and pepper, then deep fried. The owner would take a huge knife from his belt, flourish it with Freudian pride, and cast slices of this mutton on your plate. It was delicious; buttery soft and greasy, and an excellent way to get more than one's needed daily protein intake. I considered this meal relatively safe from those pesky intestinal bacteria, because the food had literally been cooked twice. Vegetables had more danger, especially those eaten raw and seasoned with vinegar, for example, things like cucumbers and radishes.They had often made me violently ill.

Yet I felt safe eating around Mr Yang's hometown with him. He knew the place intimately, being a local, and he knew what to eat. I rode bicycles blithely, with my hair streaming behind like a Pantene commercial, and shouting out inane comments at my friend as we dodged a few black government cars and the ubiquitous mule carts. Now the carts have long gone, and all brands of foreign cars crowd the streets, like flies around a dead body. To add to my despair, Mr Yang no longer tells his silly jokes that make him giggle weirdly. I no longer watch him stroke his tie with strange intensity. You see, we had a falling out.

All those trite sayings about the exotic yellow race may well be true. I guess I never really knew the heart and mind of dear old Yang. He is Chinese and I am American. Chinese are subtle and inscrutable and Americans are childish and candid. He is an atheist and I am a Catholic. In hindsight, all I can venture is that neither of us is at fault and both of us are human and full of sin, just as those fat old New Mexico priests used to say back home.

The years I thought that I was getting to know old Yang taught me much about Chinese culture, if nothing about a Chinese man and his heart, his mind, his libido. Instead, I learned about the way things were done: the great divide between the farmers and the nomads, as well as the division between inside and outside. In those years past, on one bicycle foray, Mr Yang shouted in the wind to me: "All outsiders are barbarians, except you. Chinese build walls, and ignore anything outside that wall. But I, like Romeo, climb the wall to build this friendship between communist and capitalist." Then he giggled, and I poked him in the ribs, and we rode bikes toward downtown, where one could find, if lucky,"Soft, almost western toilet paper."

"Do not touch man in public!" he screeched as I poked him a second time. "Unseemly, very unseemly!" He swerved, and almost rode into traffic. This made me laugh harder, cruel woman

that I was, because Mr Yang had told me that day after lunch more than stories about barbarians and walls. He had talked of sparrows and cucumbers.

The Chinese language is very metaphorical, truly poetic, which makes it both eloquent and obscure. How could one like you, dear reader, guess the secret sexual significance of sparrows? We Americans are much more crude, with our schoolboy jargon describing a male's "rocket in his pocket." Mr Yang, however, that day, as we sat in a park after lunch, spoke of sparrows. The Glorious People's Number Three Park was, as usual, packed to capacity with elderly people dressed in drab Mao jackets. They were attempting either Tai Chi or break dancing (the times had already started changing with the Open Door Policy). Watching a limber elder splat himself into a perfect splits, Mr Yang casually mentioned that the sparrows were one of Mao's four pests.

"There was even a Great Sparrow Campaign," he told me, "Then the Four Pests Campaign, meant to eradicate rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows. This program aimed at upgrading the hygiene in China, as these creatures were nuisances, they hurt people and ate crops...but it upset the ecological balance of my country." He sighed deeply. "It is the same with me. In this town, in North China, we call our male member a sparrow." Here he paused and gazed at me shyly. " A dead sparrow is what I have. It no longer flies. My wife, who I do not love anyway, will not sleep with me. When she turned fifty last year, she completely stopped sleeping with me. She does not even share a bed, because she says I make noise and drool with my mouth, and this annoys her. This sparrow has only flown into one nest in its short life. And now, well now I have a dead sparrow in my trousers." He sighed again, and I tried not to laugh.

More importantly, I held myself together to NOT ask any questions, in order to 1) Not promote his sadness, and 2) To change the subject. I learned long ago that, by agreeing to have a conversation that alluded to sex in any form or fashion, men, from the age of 7 to 107, from anyplace on earth, all think you are ready to fuck. So instead, I asked Old Yang more about the four pests campaign, and this subject of sparrows was cut short. "Useless talk," Mr Yang said, frustrated. "Old China and New China, so much troubles and worries. Let us go eat something."

Like all Chinese, eating was the way Mr Yang cheered himself up. Food is so basic, so central to the Chinese consciousness. My theory is that in China eating is a substitute for sex. Yet it still amazes me that Chinese homes have very little kitchen facilities. Unless one is very wealthy, there is no oven, and just a one or two burner gas stove serves to make elaborate, extensive dishes for home and guests. But the amount of grease used in making dishes is enormous, especially here in North China.

After that talk in the park Mr Yang had explained in the Rock and Rolling Genghis Khan Cafeteria: "We see oil as a way to compliment a guest, so the dishes overflow with grease. Just like oily woman, good for the sliding in and out, don't you think so?" At this comment I also held my silence.

Weeks later, thinking about oily food and how it was affecting my waistline, I asked Mr Yang: "Why are you not fat? Everything here is so greasy."

"Because, as I said many times, I ate grass and this ruined my digestive system when I was a boy," he said. We were on that day sitting in the Red Chamber Glorious Dumpling Palace, pondering 35 types of dumplings. He could not make up his mind, and I was getting hungry. Finally he ordered garlic and lamb dumplings, with a side of cucumbers and tomatoes swimming in sesame oil. He'd forgotten the boiled peanuts, so I shouted out the addition to our order, feeling proud of my emergent Chinese language skills. Was my friend becoming absentminded? No -- Mr Yang was focusing more on talking about sex and less on ordering food. I had wanted to hear about his life in changing China, or wandering ghosts. But no, again, as before, the subject was to be sex.

"You know, a man's life can be compared to paper," Mr Yang began, poking some boiled peanuts pensively with his chopsticks. "It starts with marriage; he is a daily paper then, with production, lots of stuff rolling off the presses, if you get my meaning?" He looked up at me slyly.

"You are referring to sex?" I said archly.

"Correct," he said, swishing his chopsticks into the peanuts. "Then, after some years, it becomes a weekly newspaper...then a monthly journal. Finally it is only quarterly production, then semi-annual, and finally, the wheels are no longer rolling much on those presses...and, as for me, I am currently out of print."

"Look here," I said, "I want to eat well, not share your secret sexual woes. That's not my business. Tell me something about food."

"Let me tell you about cucumbers. They are delicious, and in China we have many types, they are usually smaller than your western ones, but just as juicy and delicious," Mr Yang said, fidgeting in his chair.

"Really?" I said, "Let's order one, then."

"It is here, in my pants, would you like to place an order? Joke! Only joke!" he screeched, grinning and then flushing. "I even think this talk has made my cucumber stand up and bow to you."

"Jesus, shut up and behave," I retorted, not at all amused. "Look, we have to eat and then go shopping."

As the days rolled past, Mr Yang attempted many times to bring up the subject of his yellow cucumber. He seemed to think that I would eventually capitulate to his desire, and want to tumble into bed with him. He even said one day that he would be happy to lead me to a "clean,

dimly lighted love hotel" to show me the delights of China's yellow fruit, but that "You must pay, as I am Romeo but gigolo Romeo, being pauper from the Communist system." I always cut him off, sometimes gently, sometimes furiously. In my heart I felt pained, however, because I really enjoyed his witty company, and what's more, I needed him.

Old Yang was the one who took me to the hospital when my eye became infected. He was the one who waited patiently, translated for me, and held my hand, despite his embarrassment, when the doctor shoved a strange device into my eye duct to clean the passage. He gave me his only hankie to dry my tears afterwards, and told me to keep it, as "a memory of your suffering and devotion of your friend watching suffering." Mr Yang took me to buy my bicycles; they all four got stolen, yet he stolidly helped me buy replacements, each time a cheaper version, "so as not to feel bitter heart from life in Middle Kingdom." He taught me the procedures for purchasing train tickets, although he was too broke to travel with me; he offered to "sleep under the compartment bed, on newspapers, to protect capitalist friend from thief." Mr Yang even fixed my toilet. In short, the man was irreplaceable and loyal. I thought of him as an excellent friend. For Christmas that year I gave him a Webster's English dictionary and a small DVD player. "Too generous, too much," he replied, blushing to the roots of his dyed black hair. "I can only offer you my cucumber."

"Oh shut up," I said, laughing. "You are obsessed with your damn cuke. Leave it alone and watch some movies with the DVD player."

In the middle of my second term I realized that the other Chinese teachers were gossiping about me. They all matter of factly assumed that I was having an affair with Mr Yang. "What are you going to do when you leave?" asked Mrs Na, "You have already stolen and broken his heart." She punched my arm and said coyly, "How's his cucumber? Big enough?" I flushed and asked her about her baby son.

"He is doing great, but now that he is out of my body, my hubby wants to hump me all the time. I get so tired of him pawing at me," she replied, playing with a braid in her long hair.

"Just tell him to chill out," I said.

"I could never do that; we Chinese never refuse our husbands, or they go off looking for other women, usually younger women, pretty women, in the bars and bath houses...just as Old Yang has done," she said, smiling a knowing smile at me.

"He is NOT my lover," I said, backing away from her.

"Yeah, right," Mrs Na replied, walking away.

I consoled myself by reviewing the fact that everyone on campus knew Mrs Na's story. She had married one of her own students, he was nine years younger, and he had pursued her relentlessly.

I could see why: Mrs Na looked like Whitney Houston, being half Mongolian and half Chinese. She had a tall, lithe figure, firm apple-like breasts and a shapely, tight behind. With her extraordinary face, those high cheekbones, and slanted, huge eyes, she was certainly a looker. But the marriage had not been a good choice, for Mrs Na now constantly worried that her husband would stray. She also used her home as a weekend kiddie English Academy, to bring in more and more money, to help satisfy her husband's dreams of starting up his own business. She worked seven days a week, and took care of her parents, and serviced her husband. Perhaps the saddest thing was that Mrs Na had turned down a prestigious fellowship to study abroad for a year in the west in order to enhance her English. "I can't leave my husband; he wouldn't be there when I came back," she had told me when I asked her about it. She had definitely not the kind of marriage I would envy, and definitely not the kind of lifestyle I wanted to live. But here she was, gossiping to my face about me and Mr Yang.

I guess she had some reason to talk, for Old Yang was now, in the last semester of my stay, calling me up at night to say "Sweet dreams, babycakes," to me every evening. I assumed he had been watching old movies like Casablanca to learn colloquial language and he was simply practicing it out on me. Many people take on new personalities when they switch languages; maybe Mr Yang thought he was Jimmy Stewart? At times, he would also text the oddest things: "Love your buns, baby"; or "I hot tonight." I just ignored the silliness, and continued to eat with him most afternoons.

Now, dear reader, I come to the end of this story, and tell you why I started out by saying that strange things have come knocking on my door in China. It was three days before I was to leave for Beijing, to escape from the remote northern Chinese city where I had worked for two years. I was going to take a job that paid me more than double my salary at my current ho-hum Chinese university, and I was going to be able to speak English with intelligent people, other expats, and even eat European dishes, instead of those greasy bowls of unknown matter I ate with Mr Yang. My future looked good.

Mr Yang called me as I sat reflecting on my rosy future. "Baby, oh baby, I cream my pants for you." This was a bit much, so I hung up, wondering if he actually understood what he had said. I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, after reflecting on the mistakes I had made by mistaking tones in Chinese.

Thirty two minutes later, I heard a knock on my door. "Who is it?" I said, for it was after nine at night, and I never had visitors at night.

"It's me, baby, open the door," said the familiar voice of Mr Yang.

I opened the door. There stood my friend, frantically unzipping his pants, and then waving about his yellow cucumber. It was firm, engorged, and looking very ready for adventure.

"You cannot leave without giving me service!" he trilled, grasping his cucumber in his right hand and flinging it in circles like a man trying to lasso a colt. "Come to me, baby! Lie down!" He tried to shove me backward on the bed with his free left arm, but I stood firm. Despite my shock, which made me almost want to laugh, I felt a rising rage. Who was this man, telling me I should service him?

"You put that thing back in your pants, or I will scream," I hissed at him, pushing him as strongly as he had pushed me.

"No!" he cried, "Cream, no scream. You owe it to me, I have been your friend for two years, helped you, eaten with you, you are just a western woman, it means nothing to you, you must do this for me! Tit for Tat as the Roman Emperors say."

I gaped at him, furious, and said, "I am opening the door for all to view your cucumber." We both struggled for the door handle. I won, being the one with two free hands. This incident was to be called later by Mrs Na "Bullying Western Capitalist Taunts People's Teacher." In any event, Mr Yang hastily returned his cucumber to the lair of trousers, as public cucumber viewing was not an option. Giving me a nasty look, he exited the room.

This event I could not keep to myself; it was too upsetting. The next day I went to Mrs Na and tried to tell her all about it. "You teased and bullied the poor man. You should be ashamed of yourself," she said smugly. "I have nothing more to say." As she spoke, my anger transferred from Yang to Na, from yang to yin, from male to female. The next day I left for Beijing; no one saw me off. A few years later Mrs Na had complications giving birth to her second child - being a Mongolian she had the right to two children. I hear that she now walks slowly, with a limp, and has gained weight. Her husband rarely comes home in the evenings. Mr Yang remains at the university; he is head of the English Department these days.

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