

Sea Cucumbers and Flying Solo

I approached the Korean dishes spread across my future mother-in-law's countertop and attempted to project the confidence of a seasoned world traveler. My fiancée, Grant, had convinced me that I had to attend his father's sixtieth birthday party. Sixty years is an important milestone in Korean culture; his mother, aunts, and their friends had been cooking for days. Any excuse short of death was insufficient.

In one corner, the women congregated in a large herd, discussing God-knows-what in raucous barrages of Korean. I felt awkward, conspicuous, and in need of a pep talk. *Aren't you on the Dean's list? Don't you speak three languages? Didn't you travel alone across the desert wastes of northwest China?* I asked myself.

It was an amazing trip. In 1988, I traveled alone across the Taklimakan desert by bus, jeep, and donkey cart. I explored Buddhist ruins and ancient oases. I convinced police officers to let me stay in towns that were officially closed to foreign travelers. I fended off weird men. *And, I thought, I ate many, many strange things without embarrassing myself.*

On one occasion, at a rest stop during a long bus ride, I was served noodle soup with chunks of mutton carved from a handy carcass suspended from the ceiling near the door. That was a bit of a shock, stumbling into a hanging sheep carcass after six bleary-eyed hours on a crowded bus, but I was too tired, hot and hungry to complain. I slurped up the noodles with everyone else, and tried not to think about the butt-numbing hours ahead. The sheep carcass was helpful; it tended to monopolize my attention. On my way out, I noticed a young boy in a green army cap cleaning our bowls. He swirled a little tepid tea, or perhaps broth, in each one with a dented, aluminum teakettle, and then emptied the bowl in the cooking pot. It was kind of like a toilet: one flush, and it's ready for the next guy.

I survived the Hepatitis Café with no (lasting) ill effects. *Certainly, I thought, a Korean-American birthday buffet in Illinois should pose no serious difficulties.* A few minutes earlier, the men had served themselves as the

ladies looked on. They were already eating in the dining room. A graduate student in Asian history, I believed such behaviors to be vestigial habits of a patriarchal culture that used the subjugation of women to bolster the political and economic ascendancy of the elite. I pitied the middle-aged women and their anachronistic baggage. Perhaps sensing my disdain, the ladies decided that I should be the first female to fill a plate.

“Go on,” they said, switching to English. They smiled sweetly and performed little, obsequious bows. This extra courtesy was a line in the sand. *You’re not one of us*, it said. *You don’t belong here and we intend to kill you with kindness*. I knew that going first while they all waited oh-so-graciously made me the social equivalent of a hermaphrodite—kind of like a woman, but with balls and back hair, say. But what can you do? You look like a perfect ass if you take offense at going first. “I’m mad because they were so hateful, letting me be first in line and all,” you say, and no one cares.

The ladies watched with interest as I moved along, filling my plate. Acorn jelly, check. Jellyfish salad, good. Bellflower roots, fine. Young bracken shoots, no problem. A head popped up from the nearby scrum.

“Can you eat kimchee?” a woman asked. I looked her straight in the eye. *Oh, it’s ON*, I thought.

“Of course,” I said.

I took an extra-large helping of spicy pickled cabbage.

An excited murmur swept the room and I felt gratified.

Kimchee is an iconic dish for Koreans. As my mother-in-law would say, “Korea is the country of kimchee.” What she really meant is: “Koreans eat kimchee. Everyone else is a wimp.” I knew the score. Eat kimchee and you can hang with the big dogs. Refuse it and be branded a weenie forever.

Fortunately, I happen to like kimchee. I find the effervescent tang of fermenting cabbage to be invigorating. I can tolerate the heat, too. It’s nothing compared to some soup I ate in Thailand. I think I have one taste bud left from that experience, and no tooth enamel.

It began when my friend, Dara, and I were taking in the sights of Bangkok. Dara and I shared a propensity for wanderlust, and frequently went on trips together during our time as students in China. One day, as we stood on a street corner trying to figure out our map, a young man approached us. He said he was a college student and offered to be our tour

guide in exchange for practicing English all day. Since we didn't speak Thai, we happily agreed.

It was a good decision. We took a lovely boat ride, explored several temples, and shopped at the open-air markets. At the end of the day, our new friend wanted to take us to a good Thai restaurant. "A real Thai restaurant, not one for tourists," he said. We were thrilled.

At the restaurant, we suggested he order his personal favorite; it turned out to be some kind of soup. When the waitress arrived, our friend asked how much spiciness we could tolerate.

"Oh," I said, "just whatever you like. I'm sure it will be fine."

He looked concerned. For the first time all day, he was not smiling.

"Well," he said, "I really think you should cut the heat by half or three quarters."

With three Singha beers under my belt, I was feeling brave, stupid brave, and offended.

"I'm sure I can eat whatever you eat," I said.

"You may want to get another couple of beers," he said.

When the soup arrived, I was determined to prove myself. At first, it went down easily. "This is great!" I crowed. "I love REAL Thai food."

"Mmm-hmm," said our host. I wondered why he kept staring into his bowl. And then I felt the pain.

It was a searing fire that began at my lips, then engulfed my entire mouth. I sensed every nerve ending in the little half-moon curves my gums made around my teeth. My uvula hung in my throat like a flaming meteor in Earth's atmosphere. My tonsils were coated in napalm. Molten iron surged down my esophagus into the cauldron of my stomach. Tears streamed from my eyes. My nose ran.

"Are you okay?" our new friend asked. He didn't look straight at me, but a little to the side instead. I smiled. When my lips stretched, they hurt.

"Of course," I said. I spoke like a ventriloquist, without moving my mouth. He asked if I wanted to send the soup back. I informed him that I wasn't willing to part with it, and then proceeded to consume the whole thing, with a lot of beer.

I don't know why people say that when you are drunk you feel no pain. It's simply not true. I couldn't walk straight, but everything still hurt. I paid

dearly for that little episode. My mouth stung for two days, and I became acutely familiar with every twist and turn of my body's digestive and waste disposal system. The train ride south to the beach was horrible because my backside burned so badly.

I told myself that kimchee was child's play compared to Thai soup. *Bring it on*, I thought. Korean conversation continued to swirl around me. I speak Chinese, but Korean and Chinese are not related. I was able to pick out a few words, however, as the conversation sounded like this: "Koreankoreankorean koreankorean Lisa koreankoreankorean (laugh) koreankoreankorean Lisa koreankorean (laugh)."

What a hen fest. Grant will pay dearly for this, I thought. Actually, he was having a hard time, too. It wasn't easy to look casual as he wandered back and forth between the men's domain, where he belonged, and the kitchen, where he feared for me on my own, like a wildebeest culled from the herd by a pack of lionesses. He kept coming back into the kitchen to check on me, but had to cover his intrusion into female territory by getting more food each time.

"Grant, you are getting too fat," said his mom. Check and mate. Grant looked at me helplessly and skulked back into the dining room. I lifted my chin and squared my shoulders in my new dress, bought specially for this occasion as a means of self-defense. It was purple and fitted, with a deep, square neckline and a slim skirt that fell just above the knee. Very classy. It had cost two weeks of my graduate student stipend, but I felt like it was worth it. I could always eat next month.

I'd heard that Grant's mother and her friends were talking about our recent engagement, and not in positive terms. "Why did Grant not marry a nice Korean girl?" they wondered. My best friend (and the woman who'd introduced us), Kelly Choi, had heard all of this from her mother, who did her best to defend me.

"I'd be happy if she married my son," she said.

"She actually admitted that she can't even cook," Grant's mother said. "Imagine a woman who can't cook."

Before Grant and I met, his parents tried several times to hook him up with Nice Korean Women. When he resisted, they got sneaky and the game was on. One day, Grant's mom called to invite him home for dinner. It was all very casual. "I decided to make noodles in black bean sauce, your

favorite. You should drive out and have some,” his mom said. When he got there, he was surprised to find a young Korean woman with a hopeful smile talking to his mother in the kitchen. It turned out that she’d flown in from Korea the day before, specifically to meet him. Grant’s parents had floated his resumé on the Korean marriage market, and lucky for him, several families were interested.

Grant sat through dinner and tried to be polite, but he was fuming. He left abruptly and refused his parents’ request to take the woman out to dinner the next night, before she flew back home.

“Wow! That’s harsh,” I said when I heard about it, maybe a year later.

“I had to embarrass them,” he said. “If I was nice to her, they’d just do it again.”

Clearly, Grant’s family had raised the game of social “chicken” to a level I had never encountered, or even considered. I thought about this as I continued down the buffet, scooping up helpings of sautéed zucchini, young bracken shoots, and a mung bean pancake. Then I saw it: the plate of sea cucumbers, lying like anemic, gray turds across a beautiful Korean platter decorated with vibrant arcs of yellow, red, and blue. I glanced up, straight into fifteen pairs of eyes. *So that’s how it is.*

Sea cucumbers are vile creatures (animals, not plants), the ultimate bottom feeders. Really. They skulk along the ocean floor sucking up whatever’s there, which is why they taste like crap and sand. My husband’s aunt Sun-young had a system for choosing the best sea cucumbers. “Choose black ones with pointed warts,” she’d say. When cooking sea cucumbers, people start by boiling them with green onions, ginger, and wine to get rid of the odor. Then they cook them with pork, and maybe some bell peppers, mussels, and squid. You know you’re in trouble when the taste of something is improved by sautéing it with mussels and squid. Sea cucumbers are hideously expensive and a Korean delicacy. *Just my luck to be at the party where they went all out,* I thought.

It’s not just the shape, the odor, and the taste. The texture of sea cucumbers is revolting, like chewing bits of plastic foam that have floated in a brackish cesspool for a hundred years. The rubbery pieces get smaller, but they never seem to go away. I grasped the handle of the silver spoon, took a deep breath, and slid a small sea cucumber onto my plate.

Korean chatter erupted. I heard my name several times, but I was focused on strategies for getting the sea cucumber down. Could I swallow it whole? It was about one inch in diameter and three inches long. I took my food into the TV room off the kitchen. I didn't want anyone to witness my attempt to swallow a sea cucumber. *Drug smugglers fill condoms with cocaine and swallow them*, I recalled. *Surely I can deal with a sea cucumber, which is at least legal and not life-threatening.*

It turned out that the TV room was neutral territory, neither male nor female, so Grant eventually joined me. We were our own little island of English, but close to the kitchen. Grant understands Korean, though he doesn't speak it. I asked him what the ladies were talking about. He turned red. "Nothing," he mumbled. We ate together and discussed our upcoming final exams. At one point, Grant pointed to the sea cucumber.

"You got that?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm saving it for last."

"Really? Did they make you try it?"

"Of course not. They can't make me do anything. Why would I be afraid of a bunch of middle-aged women?"

"Well, they can be pretty...direct," he said.

"Yeah, like when she said you were fat."

I shouldn't have said that. Grant was not in a positive frame of mind when I casually spoke again.

"Hey, would you like some of this?" I asked, pointing to the sea cucumber.

"Um, I can't stand sea cucumbers," he said. "They're my dad's favorite, so mom always tries to get them for his birthday. Sometimes she can't find them. This time she got lucky." *Yeah, lucky.*

I stared at my plate and considered crying. He might cave in and eat the thing, or at least be the one to take it back into the kitchen. His mother would be furious, of course. Grant's mother took two things in life very seriously: food and money. Throwing away a perfectly good sea cucumber was an affront to both.

"Why'd you take it, if you don't want it?"

"I just thought I'd try it."

Silence.

“Well, I’m going to get some rice cake,” Grant said.

I considered my options. Unfortunately, the sea cucumber wasn’t getting any smaller. It sat on my plate like an accusation: *quit trying to be something you’re not*, perhaps, or, *since you couldn’t swallow your pride, now you have to swallow me. Haha*. But I was not going to be defeated by something without a backbone. I summoned my courage and hacked the thing into two segments with my chopsticks. I lifted one piece to my mouth, popped it in and swallowed. It went down fine, as did the next chunk. Triumphant, I stood to take my plate into the kitchen.

“I’ll take that,” said Grant’s aunt, who intercepted me before I could get to the trashcan. She studied my perfectly clean plate with raised eyebrows. *Put that in your pipe and smoke it*, I thought.

The ladies were doing the dishes in a happy gaggle. I watched them laughing together and envied their camaraderie. It appeared that there were many things to joke about besides me. I began to realize that the ladies didn’t confine themselves to the kitchen out of a sense of inferiority, but because they thought it was more fun without the men. They knew who they were; they had nothing to prove. I went to find Grant.

“Well, I ate it,” I said.

“Wow. I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. I was just too afraid of your mom to take it back into the kitchen.”

“That was probably a wise choice. How’d you get it down?”

“Two pieces, swallowed whole.”

“Whole?”

“Yup.”

He put his arm around me.

“That’s what I love about you. You never shy away from a challenge,” he said.

In that moment, I knew that Grant was worth choking down any number of horrible food items, even ones that look like animated snot. In a few years, I would cling to him as we waited together through painful contractions, hoping they would stop, praying that somehow our baby could be saved. Finally, the doctor would say to the nurse, “Here it is, give her the morphine.” Later, we would weather one child’s emotional breakdown, Grant’s heart failure, and a series of chronic diseases. We would take care of

his mother as she transitioned from moderate to advanced Alzheimer's. We would face financial ruin. And somehow, we would stay together.

Of course, I didn't know any of that in the TV room that night. I did know that flying solo wasn't all it was cracked up to be, however. Before I embarked on that last jaunt across northwest China, I packed up most of my belongings, plus the souvenirs I had acquired in the course of a year in Asia: large Chinese fan, wood block prints, Thai tapestries, batiks, and whatnot.

I had mixed feeling about returning home. I loved the excitement of discovering Asia (like it was lost before I knew about it). I was addicted to the freedom of taking off into unknown territory, not knowing what I would see, or even where I would sleep each night. I felt perfectly self-sufficient.

Then, one day, I stood in the profound stillness of an ancient, hand-carved chamber in the Thousand Buddha Caves at Kizil. I reached out my hand to touch a rough sandstone shelf, the Spartan bed of one of the nameless Buddhist monks who lived and worshipped there a millennium ago. I considered his chosen solitude; a lifetime spent searching for the universe within. "Can you imagine what this must have been like?" I asked. But of course, no one was there.