

Extract from:

## Eight-Hundred-Year-Old Fish

Safely in our hotel room, I cracked open a can of beer to calm my nerves, and played yet another game of don't-suck-that-drain-hole with Oscar on the bathroom floor. Perhaps it was the chrome coating that attracted him, though most were a dingy gleam at best. As soon as he spotted the bathroom door, he'd be off in a bounding blur of chubby arms and legs, tongue ready to give the thing a damn good licking. Not if I catch you first.

It would soon be dinnertime, so I went downstairs to take a pre-emptive look at the hotel's restaurant, a small brightly lit room with about a dozen tables covered in green gingham-check tablecloths. As no staff were on duty, I picked up one of the green plastic-sheathed menus and was surprised by a lively hors d'oeuvre of scurrying cockroach. I decided the fleet-footed daily special was sent by those naughty Chinese devils, and ignored it.

Jeopardising the health of my family, I gathered Jacqui and Oscar and returned to the small lake of green gingham, hoping for a relaxing meal. After the traumatising taxi ride, I felt it wise to avoid mentioning my recent vermin encounter – the creature probably crawled over the very menu Jacqui had in her hand. She sensed something was awry. 'Are you OK, Greg?', she inquired. 'Ghastly music', I replied, sidestepping the question, glancing down at her menu, hoping nothing escaped when she opened the verdant-toned cover.

In keeping with the colour harmony of our tablecloths and menus, we ordered two bottles of the local beer, Hangzhou One, which featured a lawn-coloured label. Somewhat unnervingly, when poured, the foaming cold lager had a swampy-green hue. This was getting a bit much. I began to wonder if the people of Hangzhou had a fetish for green, and if the colour of our beer was a manifestation of this bent. Perhaps they viewed it as a mark of regional distinction, moreover a nod of reverence for the body of water across the road from our hotel – Hangzhou's most famous attraction, Xi Hu (West Lake).

Sipping on our jade-tinged lager, noting its tangy lychee flavour, we perused the menu to the nauseating lilt of Kenny G-style saxophone muzak: 'Moon River', 'Blue Moon', 'You are the Sunshine of My Life', 'I Just Called to Say I Love You', 'I'll Be Right There Waiting for You'. It was depressing that I recognised them all, but I knew muzak better than most – courtesy of my formative years. I grew up in a series of hotels managed by my father. From the age of thirteen, I regularly worked the well-stocked bars of cabarets, conferences and wedding receptions. I was intimately acquainted with the conservative constraints of mass-market hospitality and the aural fluff of its muzak heartbeat. Fortunately, my middle-of-the-road memories were soon pleasantly blurred by our green alcohol and Oscar's own vocal attempts to drown out the syrupy dirge.

One of the dishes we ordered was West Lake fish, a regional favourite, though I doubt it was actually caught in West Lake – I'd been told the water was too polluted. The fish was on my list of dishes to photograph, as was another menu item, 'stinking tofu'. I'd seen stinking tofu on menus elsewhere in China, but had avoided it until now. The name was hardly appetising and not at all in keeping with the Chinese penchant for christening their edible creations with poetic titles to increase their appeal. Surely 'breath of crystal moon tofu', 'cool zephyrs of early morning tofu' or some such poetic mishmash would have been more appropriate. Perhaps it originally had such a title, but in the cold aesthetic nihilism of the Cultural Revolution such dishes probably had their poetic vagaries struck out, peeled back to a mere perfunctory descriptor: stinking tofu. Might as well have said 'slimy yellow muck with a pong to make you puke'.

I'd also photographed stinking tofu's namesake ingredient at markets where some varieties of it were set out in flat slabs, the surface covered in a hairy green-grey thatch of mould spores. It wasn't a memory to make me salivate. In some versions the tofu itself was green, though further coordination with the rest of our chlorophyll-hued table setting was not a priority for the meal. Fortunately, when the stinking tofu arrived it didn't resemble Martian cheese. Devoid of mould, cut into soft creamy white chunks, fried golden, and set in a bowl with fried ham, slices of fresh green pepper and sweet and sour sauce, it didn't even stink. Slightly cheesy in taste, the tofu was, in fact, a perfect flavour base for the other ingredients.