

猴
Monkey

I wake up wearing just my boxers and see that it's 3 p.m. I'm home alone. Was someone here yesterday? I have no memory, but my brain feels like it has remnants of shotgun shells stuck in the gaps between wrinkles, and it smells like that too. I wouldn't trust a brain like that.

Stumbling to the toilet, I piss and don't flush. Then I just let gravity drag me back down onto the bed, and I drift back to sleep.

My home has one bedroom and no living room. Elsewhere, we'd call it an efficiency unit or a studio. So that means that the bathroom's really close to the bed, and there's little other space.

The sun glares onto my face, but I ignore it. Squinting with partly open eyes at my cell phone on the floor, I see that I have four WeWa messages. Well, I can't be bothered with them now.

When I awaken again at 5 p.m., the sun has set much lower. My stomach feels like it's been emptied out from the inside with a rusty spoon.

Opening the refrigerator, I drink straight from the water-boiler kettle. I don't like hot water (not very Chinese of me), and you can't drink what comes right out of a tap here, so I like to stash the boiler in my fridge and drink from it when I'm thirsty. That's a habit you'd form only in China.

Empty *baijiu* bottles fill my kitchen counter right to its edge. Just one of them falling would trigger a chain reaction, turning my floor into a death trap of jagged glass, like a barbed-wire rug. But all I care about is that they're empty.

After putting on a bathrobe and slippers, I take the elevator downstairs. The building's doorman just ignores me. Not quite outside, a convenience store called Fam Fam Mart connects to the lobby. It pays to live downtown.

In the store, I snatch up a cup of instant noodles and then hear the clink of bottles as I grab three tall ones of the cheapest domestic beers they got. The cashier, an old lady, starts yelling at me in some shit Chinese dialect, and I almost can't take it when setting the bottles as carefully as I can in front of her.

It's too bright in here. I should have brought sunglasses. While squinting again, I also cover my ears.

The cashier scans the items. I pay.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I say.

At home again, I resume drinking. Removing the water-boiler from the fridge, I turn it on, impatient for it to heat up. While I'm waiting for water, I usually kill time on my laptop. For a moment, I nearly panic when I don't see it on my desk, but then I find it on the floor half unfolded under a blanket and several layers of dirty pants.

I take it out of the mini-fridge and plug everything in, but still must wait for the damn thing to turn on.

Checking on the water-boiler, it seems hot enough. I pour water into the cup of noodles, cover it with a dirty plate and wait.

The computer powers up and goes online. I click on my web-browser, of which the home page stays set to my email, logged on as always. Just then, I remember my phone and find it buried beneath several undershirts and powerful-smelling socks. The screen informs me that the number of unopened messages has graduated to ten.

At almost the very same instant, I look at who sent the texts and my twelve unread emails. I couldn't even tell you which list that I read first. Most of the messages, except for spam, came from my editor. Fuck! Apparently I'm several hours late for an important deadline.

"Fuckin' damn it!"

Quickly I type with my left hand and text with my right. "*Didn't you get my email?*" The texting works fast, and I hit Send on that. Tossing aside the phone, I start to type at a record 200 WPM. "*Sorry for the technical difficulties. Electrical emergency here. I have the final draft and*

thought I sent it. I don't know what happened. Must be that annoying Great Firewall."

Opening Word, I frantically write some partly plagiarized drivel about the serene atmosphere at a new Turkish restaurant, about the sights and scents that please the eyes and nose as you enter the establishment. Mind you, I've never set foot in the place.

I find the restaurant's website, and it displays a menu so I randomly choose two dishes: mixed kebab and something called *Kuzu Pirzola*, which I assume has a succulent taste.

One more problem troubles me. I don't know how to end this review. It needs to be 800 words long, and that's so much harder than 500 words. That's not just due to the 300-word difference, but it's the whole tone and organization. Having already done a decent intro, how do I handle the outro? I think of another sentence. The onscreen arrow hovers over Word Count to inform me: presently tallies at 672. I think of two more sentences, and now it's 719.

Urgently I need some witty and cultural Turkish-related phrase to end on a high note, but I know next to nothing about the region. Suddenly my vast knowledge of culture saves me, and I write a sappy regurgitation of the lyrics to an old swing song, "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)". Humming the tune, I hit *Send*.

That's 804 words.

I hope that the editor, his colleagues and their readers will all appreciate the good review.

Well, that covers rent.

* * *

With the crisis now resolved, I need to relax. I jerk off and finish quickly. Out of breath, I collapse onto the bed again where I look at my semen-stained boxers and don't even do anything about them. I close my eyes, refusing to think. My preference is to wait it out and wake up with dry shorts. Maybe I could find this place cleaned up too. I want to

awaken from this bad dream, open my eyes, and enter the life that I was supposed to live.

The lamp shines right into my face, but I'm too overwhelmed to turn it off. Squinting yet again, I look at the haphazard bookcase in front of me, full of paperback novels and nonfiction about East Asian economics. My books are stacked precariously, almost ready to tumble. I read some of the authors' names. Chandler, Shelby, Welsh, Bukowski, Thompson, Cheever, Ellis, Hemingway, and Stephen bloody King. Obviously, I'm a pale empty shadow, undeserving of the literary satire that's my life.

"My God," I mutter. "I'm such a fucking cliché."

* * *

The great thing about having friends who are DJs is that you always know where the next party is at.

I've attended parties like this one tonight for years, and the faces change, but it's always the same thing, especially the rehearsed lines. Whether at an Irish pub, Taiwanese nightclub or elsewhere, it's all the same.

I wonder if I should settle down, forget all this and write the Great Chinese-American Novel. I could get married and spit out a few kids. Would a family help or hinder my writing goals? Any and all experiences theoretically should help with whatever kind of memoir, if only I had it in me to write one.

At tonight's venue, I wave, order a Scotch, listen to the music, and nod to various acquaintances. I want to meet a girl. I always think that way, instantly falling in love with every other girl I see. Yet when did I last have a serious girlfriend? I barely even remember.

Even if I were in a player mood, I can't take anyone back to my place, considering the dirt and disarray of that hole. Won't stop me from trying to score, but generally having an apartment that smells like fermented socks isn't a good strategy.

Why don't I just hire a maid already?

Or at least buy some air-freshener.

“Hey, Monkey, what up, you common bastard?” someone yells from across the room.

“What up, bitch?” I retort. That guy, Eric, has all the good bud, and I’m trying to get in on his group.

Yes, my nickname’s Monkey, but that’s not as racist as it sounds. It sounds pretty funny in English, but in Chinese it sounds even better. At least, so I’m told. *Hou-hou*.

On my way toward Eric’s scene, I’m snatched and pulled to a table occupied by my editor Jonas and his trader friends. They all wear jet-black suits and smell of cologne.

“Aren’t you going to buy me a drink first?” I half-joke to Jonas.

On cue, he motions to a waitress, and I expect a free drink to arrive.

Jonas supplies my main source of revenue and seldom calls me Monkey. He’s the editor-in-chief at *Pearl Delta Expat*, the leading province-wide, English-language magazine that’s free to pick up at coffee shops. I’ve eaten literally dozens of free meals for the sake of its restaurant reviews. Occasionally he even subsidizes my travel expenses for longer pieces.

Jonas is middle-aged, balding, and, I suspect, Jewish, but I’ve never asked. He likes me, and apparently my alma mater happens to be the same university where his son from New Jersey now studies. Blessed with an amazing ability to blend in with the suits crowd, Jonas probably could earn much more money if he really tried. But he works in publishing for the long haul, no matter how much money he gains or loses. His heart, like mine, remains in literature.

Usually, Jonas and I like to drink beers and talk about James Joyce or Lu Xun, sprinkled with discussions about articles for submission and baseball statistics. Every once in a while, he invites me in on a new investment opportunity.

“Check this out,” he says now, as everyone at his table huddles over the latest shiny smartphone.

“What am I looking at?” I ask, like a true investigative reporter.

“Wait for it.”

“You grabbed me for this? I could be fuckin’ picking up girls.”

“Like you’re going to get laid in that shirt,” he scoffs.

“What’s wrong with my fuckin’ shirt?”

“I’m trying to make you money here,” he says. “Boy, take heed.”

My free drink comes, and it’s a Long Island Iced.

Soon Jonas punches in his new app for some kind of tour-guide system. “A company out of Shanghai does work like this,” he says. “Take a look. This is about Xi’an.”

I see pictures of the famous terracotta warriors, and with each touch-screen movement, historical trivia pops up like a cartoon word balloon. It’s impressive and looks nice, user-friendly and informative. “I want to market this in Guangzhou,” Jonas says.

“Here?”

“Think about it. We’re just beyond Hong Kong in by far the most major and historical city of Guangdong Province. Tourism profits should soar with all the general development. The company already has apps like this in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and French.”

“French?”

“Believe it.”

As it turns out, the suits at the table are investors, and I’m designated as the project’s head-writer. All that I need to do is to conduct research about Guangzhou’s scenic sites and format the information into pithy prose to fit comfortably onto two-by-four-inch screens. They want a young tech-savvy journalist who fits undetected into the crowds. Somehow they think that I’m their man.

“What’s the pay?” I ask.

Jonas types a number on the screen.

“You flatter me, Jonas. How about an advance? What percentage up front?”

He types another number.

“Alright, I’m in!”

That covers rent for an entire year.

* * *

With camera on hand, I get off at the Peasant Movement Institute metro station and look around. There's a big library, a park, and a shopping mall under construction. I walk to the library, go upstairs, and ask a lady at the desk where to find the English section. She shows me, and I browse through some graying, dusty books, but soon get bored and leave.

Nearby at the Peasant Movement Training Institute, I wait in line amid some tourists. With the usual mix of Chinese-student girls and European backpackers, it could be a party in Taojin. I see the original classroom where the revered revolutionaries once studied. It's a hot day, and so I wonder how people could have studied in this place ninety years ago, long before air conditioners. Maybe back then people were used to the searing weather. Even now, fans are blowing here, but I'd prefer AC.

I shoot some pictures of the front gate, chairs, desks, dormitory bunk beds, blackboards, old wooden tables and peeling red-paint walls. My camera, a Canon EOS Rebel T3i, cost me a sweet penny, and no one will reimburse me, but with it I feel somewhat more like a legitimate journalist. Unfortunately, I'm not really here as a photographer. The investors most likely already have a stock library of professional photos. No, this is for fucking *inspiration*.

As for my value as a professional travel writer, I'm confident about that. I'm good at headlines, pithy summaries, and taglines under blurry photos too, but I prefer having something to work with, something to summarize. A menu or an interview to paraphrase always helps me, something more than just my own experiences walking around and absorbing the atmosphere.

On a wall, I see an English section beneath old black-and-white film photos of Mao Tse-tung and Sun Yat-sen (none of this digital-photography shit back then). My camera fits nicely onto the strap tied

around my neck so I let it dangle, take out my notepad from a back pocket, and scribble some notes.

It's too damn hot, I'm tired, and, after about twenty minutes of this, I abandon my mission. I take a taxi home, asking for a receipt because maybe they'll pay me back.

Once at home, I dig out my copy of the travel book, *Lonely Planet China*, and toss it onto my bed. But if I'm honest with myself, I probably won't even open the book.

Instead I open my computer, Google the place, and start writing.

The Institute was founded on July 3, 1924, not by the Communist Party, but by the Kuomintang (KMT) back when it was led by Sun Yat-sen. At that time in history, the KMT had an alliance with the Communist Party. I hope that part won't be censored.

Chairman Mao, the Institute's sixth director, had its largest class or something. Maybe that's just propaganda, you never know.

From studying literature and writing, I've learned two things. For starters, you never really know anything. Historian-scholars refer to this as revisionism. In literature, you'd call it the unreliable narrator. The second thing, which I've learned from journalism specifically, is that almost nobody ever checks up on these things.

So I write in short hundred-word bursts, like sprint running, inserting a quip about Mao's success here and an observation about the architecture there. It amounts to just taglines, like on the backs of cereal boxes.

Maybe Jonas has me pegged. This all comes kind of naturally to me. It's easy too. After an hour's work, I have twelve word-balloon-sized factoids, each of which would read nicely on a handheld screen.

Going to the fridge, I reward myself with a cold one.

Next I log on to Wikipedia and learn what I can about the Canton Tower, Baiyun Mountain, Chen Clan Academy, Yuexiu Park, Martyr's Park, Ching Long Amusement Park, and that big Catholic church cathedral building thing in Haizhu. I bookmark each page and prepare myself a schedule on Excel to keep my writing at a good pace for the next three weeks.

When the chance arises, I'll visit all these places, I tell myself. I'll absorb the air, get a feel for them, and then really write. For now, I read what others have written and merely summarize. That's what I'm good at.

* * *

All week I've looked forward to this.

"Baby doll," I softly say into the phone. "Go to sleep early tonight. I'll meet you at the metro station tomorrow morning."

Gigi is a local girl with whom I've had an on-again-off relationship for the past year. I met her, guess how, through the fuckin' WeWa app.

"Goodnight, Monkey," she coos.

We met online, and although it wasn't serious, she proved rather good in bed. When it did start getting serious, I up and went to Washington for the summer. After I returned to Guangzhou, I heard rumors that she had forged another relationship, and so I didn't pursue her. Occasionally I'd call her for help with translations, like for my bills and when I need to communicate with my landlord. She's nice about that sort of thing, and anyway, she likes an excuse to hang out with me and practice her English.

For the last few months, she occasionally contacts me for late-night booty calls. Three times so far. When we do this, I tend to stay at her place, which is much nicer than mine.

Sometimes I feel rather lonely, and we went out together two weekends in a row. Almost like real dates with dinner and everything.

When I got the travel-writing job, I stuck to myself at first. Then, as the job continued, I figured out that I could better utilize the free, reimbursed cab rides. I even studied the fine print and realized that for ticketed-fee locations, I could claim reimbursement not just for one ticket, but for two, on any assignment.

So, with savings at hand, I figured that I should make a date out of my day at the Ching Long Amusement Park.

“Bye-bye,” I say, disconnecting. Tomorrow will be a long day, and I need to wake up early. This time I mean it.

I figure that a glass of white wine can't hurt to help me nod off. While I'm at it, I can go online and check my email to pass the time while drinking. That's a bad habit, I know. Many-a-night this sort of logic leads to hours of drunken masturbation and sleep deprivation.

When I open my laptop like a flower's petals blooming, it fails to turn on automatically like it usually does.

“Huh?”

I check the battery. It's plugged in so I unplug it and plug it in again, but still nothing.

“Oh, what the sweet fuck is this?”

I bought this Toshiba model about a year ago. It should be good quality. It's definitely no knockoff. Sure, my Windows Seven is most certainly a bootleg, but luckily the hardware has given me no problems. I've downloaded, uploaded, typed, printed, shifted, and deleted with nary a worry.

After spending some time with a machine, you develop a certain emotional attachment, and it hurts your feelings by abruptly refusing to respond to you. It's like a lover suddenly angry at you and she won't say why. If not similar to the feelings of a broken heart in all the subtle ways, at least it's just as fucking frustrating.

When thinking these poetic thoughts with no format to record them, I smell something burning. Just a little, like the moment before ramen noodles burn and the smoke alarm goes off.

A tiny puff of smoke rises from the keyboard's left side. I levitate my nose just above that location, and no question, detect the smell of melting microchips.

“FUCK!”

I raise the laptop toward my nose and sense something worryingly familiar. Sticky, wet, and I'd taste its sweetness on my tongue if I was a centimeter closer. White wine seeps into each and every crack between the keyboard's letters.

“FUCK, FUCK, TRIPLE FUCK!”

Rushing to the wardrobe, I dig underneath my winter blankets for a small luggage case in which I keep a plastic bag filled with receipts. For the next twenty minutes, I rummage through the receipts, examining each and every one. Not only are they all written in a complex, character-based language that I can't understand, but they're crinkled and faded too.

Finally I find it, my warranty for the computer. It's good for one year. I remember that much, but can't recall on what date I bought it. There! I see the date in tiny print.

The Chinese receipts use numbers instead of names for the months. So I can make out the date: 5-4.

Distrusting my judgment, I need to look up today's date. I want to see it in front of me. Unable to use the computer, I go to my pants on the floor and dig out my cell phone from a pocket. What's today's date?

May 8.

“FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK AND MORE FUCK!”

I pace around the room and then try to sleep, but too much roils my mind. Realizing that it's after 2 a.m., I can't call Gigi now, not yet, and tell her that tomorrow's plans have changed. So I make a new plan, set my alarm for 9 a.m. and try again to sleep.

* * *

This is epically unjust. I feel like shit, and I'm not even hung-over.

I dreamed of roses and missed deadlines. Once awake, I send a text to Gigi saying that my plans have changed. Then I pass the fuck out and wake up again at noon. I stumble to the water-boiler, fill it and wait so that I can make instant coffee.

When I check my messages, not even bothering to read the nine unopened ones (this can turn into a habit), I call her.

“I'm so very, very sorry. There's an emergency. I promise, promise, and promise to make it up to you. Let me buy you flowers.”

She's a sucker for that romantic stuff. Yet this truly is a sincere apology.

Spitting forth my smoothest game, I beg and plead for forgiveness. I tug at her heartstrings and play them like that traditional musical instrument that you see blind people playing on the sidewalks as you toss coins to them.

I almost have her won over when I add, "One more thing. Baby, will you be a dear and meet me at Gangding? I have to fix my computer and kind of, uh, need a translator."

Gangding is the kind of place that gives nightmares to copyright lawyers. It's the electronics district in the third-biggest city of the world's first-biggest copyright-infringing nation. A hundred-building theme park of unhinged electronics and bootlegged software, a shanty town straight out of cyberpunk literature, and it's not even remotely where a girl wants to go on a date.

We meet at the metro station. More precisely, we meet in the station's attached underground shopping malls that sell video games and novelty mouse pads. I lug my dead laptop inside a bag and can't wait to make this 6,000-*kuai* paperweight useful again.

"Hey, girl," I say, waving.

Gigi, of course, is delighted.

"Hello," she says in monotone.

Yeah, delighted, is that the word?

She does look cute. Gigi is short. I'm one head taller. When frowning, she looks irresistibly lovely. With her arms crossed over her big round breasts right now, she looks like she may want to hit me.

"Where you want to go?" she asks with little-girl venom.

"First," I say, "I need to visit an Internet café."

My phone won't work without Wi-Fi, and I'm desperate to check my email, not having done so for over twelve hours. We find a nearby *wang ba* within seconds. This is grand central for such things.

Chinese Internet cafés are like the bars were in mid-America until New York took over the world. That is, a haze of tobacco smoke hangs

over everyone's heads. You hear occasional coughs, but mostly notice the teenagers playing online games and yelling to each other.

Gigi goes to the front desk, hands over her ID card, and explains that I'm a foreigner. It costs only four *kuai* to use a computer for an hour. Fucking glorious, indeed!

Luckily, nobody has emailed me about any lapsed deadlines that I'd forgotten. Then I surf some news sites, listen to music, read reviews and soon it's time to go. Meanwhile, Gigi sits beside me on QQ.

I'm enough of a gentleman that I generously pay for the hour for both of us.

"Thanks so much," I tell Gigi. "I couldn't do this without you."

"Okay, okay," she says. Maybe she doubts my sincerity.

I put an arm around her shoulders. She backs away.

"Next week I'll take you to Ching Long," I say. "I promise. We'll have a great time. Go on roller coasters and shit. Do they have a teapot ride? It'll all be paid for. But for work, you know, I need to do this now."

We just walk, and I follow behind Gigi, my head lowered in shame. Several blocks later, she leads me into a small repair shop behind the fourth shopping mall. She talks to a guy there, and I twiddle my thumbs. He looks at my computer, takes it to the back of his shop, and I wait and wait. Gigi and I don't talk. The guy comes back and quotes a price.

"He says it cost five hundred, fix the power."

"Can we bargain it down?"

"No," she simply answers. Perhaps I haven't given her much incentive to fight for me.

"That's fine then," I say, desperately appreciative of her translator acumen.

Accepting a receipt, I'm instructed to return here tomorrow after 2 p.m., but before 6 p.m. I take a name-card with the shop address, and I'm pretty sure that I can find this place again.

"Let's go," says Gigi.

So I treat her to dinner. We go to a kind of modern Chinese restaurant with little phone-like devices so you can punch in your food-and-drinks

orders electronically. The waitresses look like they're texting on cell phones, and I can't help feeling offended. I'd prefer the old-fashioned way, a server with a notepad.

"Isn't that funny," I say. "It's like the waitress receives and sends text messages. I'm like, no tip for you."

"It's very good technology," Gigi says. "The cook in the back can see too and make the food very fast."

"I know. Just joking. No tip, ha, ha!" I say unenthusiastically.

"No tip in China? I don't understand."

Chalk it up to cultural differences. We eat in silence. I don't try any more jokes or attempt to lighten the mood.

Being hopeful, I'd brought a condom in my wallet. I wasn't sure where I'd end up tonight, at my place or hers. Now I'm not even going to try. I fucked up this date well and proper. My literary idols would be proud.

"Goodnight, Monkey," Gigi says, since the sky has darkened when we return to the metro station. I'm going west, and she's going east (so symbolic).

"Please don't call me that," I say. "Call me by my name. Call me Terry."

"Bye-bye," she says, turning and walking away.

It's an anticlimactic story. I wonder why I even tell it. It's self-destructive, solipsistic, and beneath my education and ambition. Maybe I'm doing alright, but I should do better, right?

Well, I haven't quite hit rock-bottom yet. I think I'll keep going.

豬

Adventures in Estates

"Guangzhou's like Los Angeles and New York put together," Eric says.

"But maybe more like L.A."

"I wouldn't know," I say. "I haven't been to either one."