

The best of *Bon Journal*

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To dance is to be merry. To be merry is to laugh.

Squat toilets

The culture shock of visiting mainland China is visiting its squat toilets. Friends and relatives have warned me about what to expect, but the reality had to be experienced.

Guess why the local women carry umbrellas into the toilet? To act as doors.

If you're unlucky enough to arrive without an umbrella at a doorless toilet stall, you'll have to decide whether it's best to face those in the queue or show your backside.

Needless to say, you should bring your own toilet paper in case there's none.

Long time ago in Japan and Taiwan, squat toilets were the norm. After living in Europe and the US for so long, I have forgotten just how to squat. Indeed my first squat toilet in Chong Qing was a bit daunting. I was afraid of falling or stepping into the sunken toilet.

After I became accustomed to the squat position, I then had to learn to aim. I was afraid of hitting my foot or ankle.

Then there was the problem of standing up to dress up. There was always a chance of losing my balance and falling. In some toilets, the adjoining walls are so low that I could see my neighbours still squatting comfortably.

There are no toilets that are perfect. In the worst case, there are no doors, no water, no flush power, and no toilet paper. Your predecessor's deposits sit cumulatively in the long gully. You then have to pray for rain to wash it downhill. If there's a door, there might not be a lock. If the doors are lockable, it might be dimly lit.

I've come to the conclusion that toilets outside of five star hotels are dangerous. After nine days of

drinking very little water so as to avoid going to the squat toilets, I still have nightmares about slipping into the toilets or getting cramps while squatting for the stubborn number two. If you plan to visit mainland China for the first time, I suggest that you practise squatting.

Cooking up a storm

Tonight I made celery, stilton, and walnut soup. Everything was going well until I had to pour the natural yoghurt at the end. Although I was aware that the use-by-date on the yoghurt container was more than two weeks ago, I thought yoghurt lasted much longer than the expiration date. Well, that is true provided you don't throw it into a hot soup!

So my celery, stilton, and walnut soup was looking very creamy and delicious UNTIL I Poured the YOGHURT INTO IT. The yoghurt split up like cottage cheese. And my smile turned into a frown. How I wished there was an "undo" button like the "control-Z" to undo this. I could have used milk instead of yoghurt. I could have tested the yoghurt. I could have hesitated. I could have bought a fresh container of yoghurt!

Well, all's not lost. Nobody else is going to have this soup. I had a bowl just now, and I didn't get sick. I will pour the soup into several containers, and microwave a portion when I get hungry. Meanwhile, I'm drinking lassi, made from the remainder of that yoghurt. And it tastes pretty good to me!

The other woman

He never comes home anymore.

No, that's not quite true.

He does come home, when I'm not around.

I can tell.

I still stock the kitchen full of his favourite snacks. I still leave dinner out for him, in case he gets hungry.

Once he came back when I was here. He went straight to the kitchen without even looking at me.

I suppose it must be unconditional love that I still wait for him. I wait for him to acknowledge my existence again.

I know he's seeing someone else.

Once when I was able to get close enough, I smelled the scent of another woman.

In the last few weeks when I did manage to catch a glimpse of him from afar, I noticed that he's lost weight.

I know who it is.

One evening after work, I finally took up the courage and knocked on her door.

Much to my surprise, she welcomed me inside.

He was nowhere to be found. But somehow I knew he's been there.

With a touch of guilt, she said, "Your cat has been sleeping here. I hope you don't mind."

Missing my cat?

I read an article recently that said having a pet was more stress relieving than being alone or with a (human) partner. So I sent it to my single friend who has a cat. This is her reply, which I'm sure was intended to make me miss my cat less.

Well, I think they can be stress inducers as well as relievers.

How about:

- Having to catch frogs as they jump round the living room (in the small hours)
- Trying to catch mice as they run round the living room (in the small hours)
- Having to scrape up little corpses from the carpet
- Avoiding stepping on said dead bodies in the first place

- Being woken up in the small hours so that you can be formally presented with a corpse
- Waking up in the small hours on the edge of the bed - because the cat's got the rest
- Trying to stop furniture scratching attacks
- Trying to get him into the cat basket without being scratched to shreds
- Paying the vet's outrageous bills
- Trying to get him to swallow the outrageously expensive pills the vet prescribes
- Worrying that he'll miss you when you're away
- knowing he doesn't really as long as he's fed!

But I wouldn't swap him for the world.

Royal Albion Hotel

The venue search booking agent assured me that it was a four star hotel, newly renovated, conveniently located.

The Royal Albion in Brighton, England was a big white house right by the famous Brighton Pier. It was more than one hundred years old, if not the oldest hotel in this seaside resort. After a fire which scorched the roof took down an entire east side of the building, it was shut down for complete renovation. The fire was apparently caused by an apprentice cook who forgot about his burnt sausage. The reception was spacious but minimally furnished, like the rest of the hotel. One lift served all five floors sprawled in non-symmetrical directions.

My room half-faced the turbulent sea. For that I was glad. However, the secondary glazing did not stop the sound of the whistling wind all night. The next evening, the old radiator acted up. It groaned like a pressure cooker on heat. I had to get up every few minutes to tend to it. Finally I called the front desk. A timid lad came to my rescue at two

in the morning, only to suggest that I move to another room, noisier than the one I was in. So I decided to suffer in what seemed now more like a two star hotel. When I checked out, the receptionist didn't even acknowledge my problem. Another disgruntled guest told me the next morning at breakfast that he was woken up at midnight by the sound of someone trying to get into his room. The porter had used his keys to open the room claimed by another guest. "Didn't he have the brains to check the registry?"

For all the grandeur of new wallpaper and carpeting, history and tradition, the Royal Albion just doesn't cut its four star rating.

Rembrandt's women

"Don't you want to see Rembrandt's women?" I asked excitedly.

"Ugh! What about his women?"

"I thought you liked impressionism," I replied.

So we met at the Ritz and walked to the Royal Academy of Arts where the special exhibition was running until 16th December.

At the entrance, it said:

"15 July 1606
Rembrandt van Rijn born in Leiden, The Netherlands."

No wonder my Dutch friend wanted to see this, but he won't be in London before the exhibition closes. But wait, I thought Rembrandt was French.

Once we got inside, I noticed that the walls were painted brown to coincide with the mood of his paintings and sketches. They were somber, not at all what I expected.

Then it dawned on me that I had confused Rembrandt with Renoir! I never felt so stupid in my life!

Ever since I saw the big posters in the London Underground announcing this exhibition a few months ago, I had imagined Renoir's plump, healthy, and orange-haired women in my mind. So it was a big disappointment to see sick and pregnant women lying in bed.

Rembrandt first painted his mother, then his sickly wife, and the two servants who became his mistresses (not at the same time of course). There were just a few commissioned portraits of daughters of wealthy families, all equally ugly. But Dutch women in those days weren't the kind of slender, model-like figures we see nowadays. A diet of beer and fatty food made them flabby and overweight, though it was not a stigma to be fat back then.

Rembrandt was prolific at sketching intense details of their cellulite and other unsightly folds. [But why was Renoir, on the other hand, able to portray his chubby women beautifully? Perhaps it was the fuzzy strokes of impressionism that did the trick!]

Rembrandt is probably most famous for the huge painting Night Watch. But his women? Had I not mistaken him for Renoir, I probably wouldn't have even known about his women!



Anne Ku

Editor's note:

Readers like the funny stuff. I don't write intentionally to be funny. These extracts come from my online journal at analyticalQ's platform for self-expression including feedback. Someone even wrote a parody on the Wild Blackberries as a result!

Reader feedback:

Virginia: *I just finished reading your latest journal postings. The "Missing My Cat?" story made me laugh out loud! I sometimes miss having a pet around...they do provide a wealth of laughter!*

Taiwan: *You have written about your travel in China in a quite humorous manner. It always makes me laugh to read them.*

Holland: *I just read your latest journal entries and had a big laugh! very nice, well written and a pleasure to read!*

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