

A Turning World

Dinner is being served in a revolving restaurant, high above a Chinese city. Three Australian visitors are looking at the city beneath them, the table which has been indicated as theirs, or at the way the restaurant operates. Staff beam on them with courteous indifference.

Magnusson They don't have many trees in this city.

Elfing Their parks are pretty bloody miserable.

Johnson (offered a seat by a beautiful waitress) But boy, have they got charm!

Magnusson Nothing so beautiful as a woman of another race.

Johnson Makes you wonder what's wrong with our own?

Elfing Nothing wrong with our own, except they're not here!

Magnusson And if they were?

Elfing I'd have to behave myself.

Zhang, the host, approaches Magnusson, whom he takes to be the senior of the three foreigners.

Zhang Sir! Australian lady journalist has approach me with a telephone. She will be dining here tonight. May I put her with you at your table?

Magnusson (to the others) That okay? (to Zhang) Yes, of course. We'd be pleased to have her join us. See if you can find out who she represents.

Zhang Represents?

Magunsson The name of the paper she works for.

Zhang Yah! I find out.

He disappears, but a few moments later, he sends Liu, a beautiful waitress, to the men, bearing what appears to be a calendar.

Liu Owner of restaurant send this to honorable gentlemen for their kindness in accepting Australian lady at their table.

Johnson What is it?

Liu Many photo of your country.

Johnson Let's have a look. (He riffles through the pages of what is an elaborate and costly calendar; the pictures appear on a large screen which is blocking the kitchen area of the restaurant from view.) Snow gums. Oh, that takes me back a bit!

Elfing What else is there?

He riffles a page or two, and we see a scene of wattles in flower.

Liu Wattw.

Johnson What was that?

Liu Austrawian flower. You call wattw. We do not have. You lucky.

Johnson They call our country the lucky country. I tell you what, if you came and worked in my country for a while, we'd be lucky then.

Liu I get other girl.

Johnson Hey! (But Liu is gone, and Ho takes her place. Johnson invites her to keep turning the pages of the calendar.) Let's see some more.

Ho turns a page and we see, via the screen, a picture, vastly above life-size, of a nodding greenhood orchid. Ho indicates, to the puzzlement of the foreigners, that she has to get a third waitress. She signals to a very beautiful young woman that she is to join them.

Ho Nodding Greenhood.

Johnson Hi, Nodding!

Ho Her name is same.

Johnson Same?

Elfing She must mean Sam. What else could she mean?

Johnson Nodding?

Ho (pointing to the picture) Nodding. (then pointing to the girl) Nodding. Girl and flower.

Magnusson Don't be dills, you two. The girl's taken the name of the flower. Get it? They do it a lot in China, for some reason.

Johnson What's it say? Nodding Greenhood. Jeezus, that's something I didn't know.

Ho Women are flower, men are trees. Huge and powerful. See. (She turns the pages of the calendar and the screen shows us scenes depicting Australian trees – forests of messmate (E.Obliqua); mountain ash (E.Regnans); snow gum (E.Pauciflora); ironbark (E.Sideroxylon);

and river red gum (E.Camaldulensis). Now I ask, which one are you?

Magnusson That puts us on the spot! Come on boys, which ones are we?

Ho turns the pages with commanding movements of her fingers, and the pictures on the screen change too – messmate, mountain ash, snow gum, ironbark, river red gum, et cetera. The men are confused and excited by this unexpected routine, but more surprised when Ho moves from the trees back to pictures of the Nodding Greenhood orchid, the flannel flower, the pink and white heath plants (Epacris Impresa) and other wildflowers.

Nodding (most agreeably, and seductively) Nodding.

Johnson Nodding?

Ho Nodding!

Nodding (touching her hair) Greenhood!

Johnson But your hair is black!

Nodding Black is ugly. Not like bewtifulw Austrawian lady.

Johnson Heavens! Don't say that! Your hair is beautiful. Oh, if I could have you in my arms. (thinking he's gone a bit too far) I mean, your hair in my hands ...

Nodding I tell Mister Zhang I am not worthy to work here.

Magnusson Don't say that. Look, we really ought to order ...

Elfing Aren't we going to wait for that journalist?

Magnusson I'd forgotten her. We can do it the Chinese way, a round of tasty dishes before the mains. What are we having?

The three men look at the menu with varying degrees of comprehension, and they are surrounded, advised and to some extent encouraged by Liu, Ho and Nodding Greenwood. After a while an order of sorts is given. Zhang comes to their table.

Zhang Awstrawian lady ring again. On her way, in taxi.
 She say, serve up when ready. In mean time, she say,
 point out the city to you, from tower.

The three men, somewhat confused, rise to follow Zhang to the view surrounding the restaurant's windows, high above the city.

Zhang Airport. No sorry, have moved. Not airport move,
 but tower. We turn. When you come in, (pointing)
 was north. Now south. You understand. You have
 revolving restaurant in your country.

Elfing Only one that I know of, but perhaps there's more.

Zhang Sign of progress! (pointing again) Port. See river.
 Ships. Much trade, your country and mine.

Elfing Ah!

Magnusson That's why we're here!

Zhang We do business while you here.

Johnson Business is good, some things are better!

Zhang You like our Chinese girls.

Johnson Do I ever!

Zhang (picking up the calendar, and calling) Nodding!
 These men will recommen' their trees, then you pick
 one for yourself!

Nodding Trees are strange to me. Only Austwawian
 businessmen know these trees.

Magnusson Er, perhaps we do.

Nodding What you call flower with my name?

Elfing They're called orchids.

Nodding Awkids?

All Orchids.

Nodding Ah! And they like grow, maybe, at foot of trees?

Elfing Yes.

Nodding I am Nodding Orchid. Which tree do I like?

Johnson Ah!

Elfing (cutting in) You choose. We tell you about the trees,
 and you choose.

Nodding I choose tree I grow near?

All Yes!

Nodding beckons to Liu and Ho, who come close as well.

Johnson Who's going to start?

Magnusson You, Johnno, you!

Johnson (taking the calendar) This is a snowgum. They grow
 in the mountains, where it's cold. Winds blow in
 winter, so their only protection is to huddle down
 and cling together. Snowgums don't like to grow on
 their own. They need others to be close.

Nodding Like Chinee people. Snowgum is good.

Johnson (pleased by this) Aussies like to be like that too. In
 winter, by a fire, in a ski lodge. With the lights out,
 and a few rums under the belt ...

Zhang Under the belt?
 Elfing He means they've been drinking.
 Zhang We have toast of rice wine later. To celebrate the night!
 Liu Next tree!
 Magnusson (pointing to the red gum) This is the most widespread tree in Australia. It grows along our inland rivers. This tree has a meaning, and the word is water.
 Johnson (wriggling closer to Nodding) Okay with rum!
 Magnusson You can be driving through sand, and if you see a belt of these trees, you know that under the wheels of your vehicle, you have only to dig, if you're thirsty, and there, filling up the hole you've dug, will be water!
 Liu In the desert, water?
 Magnusson Water. Life. The thing we all need most.
 Ho These trees all have meaning. Sir, choose a tree for me.
 Elfing There's hundreds to choose from. They aren't all in this calendar. Where did you get it, by the way?
 Ho Lady who is dining with you, lady in taxi, she give to Mr Zhang.
 Elfing Did she indeed? Well, if I have to choose, this is the one for me. (The screen shows a scene of mountain ash trees, high, slender, and packed.)
 Ho Is your country covered with these trees? I am amazed!

Elfing No, unfortunately. It's called a mountain ash. Ash is an English word we borrowed. It doesn't suit. But we are like that all too often, I'm afraid. Names that aren't quite right.
 Zhang Names ...
 Magnusson It's called Eucalyptus Regnans. Regnans means reigning, as a king or queen reigns, on the throne, er ...
 Nodding (as if in personal triumph) Water fall from sky! Little flower grow!
 Johnson Oh yes, please. Please let that happen, Greenhood, Nodding mine!
 Ho Where does Greenhood grow?
 Johnson Er ...
 Elfing Orchids pop out of the ground where they're least expected. You had no idea this barren ground was going to produce something wonderful, and suddenly it's there!
 Nodding I should be green flower. My awfoo black hair! I will cut off. Get new colour rub in my skin!
 Johnson No no, a thousand times no!
 Magnusson (to Zhang) Don't let her do that. She's beautiful as she is!
 Elfing We're getting a little bit lost in all this!
 Liu (looking to the door) Lady arrive now. Can serve when everyone is seated.
 Ho Austwawian lady is here!

Jasmine, not her real name as we shall hear, is greeted warmly by Mr Zhang, and led to the businessmen's table. She is quick to notice the impromptu entertainment created from the calendar she presented on an earlier visit.

Jasmine You're in the bush, naming flowers! Not a bad way of passing time! Greenhood, my darling. You've never been more lovely than you are tonight.

Magnusson She's created an occasion and we've tried to rise to it.

Jasmine Risen, I'm sure. Did you give her a choice?

Elfing In the game, we all had to choose a tree, and she would decide at whose feet she would choose to grow.

Jasmine (with a trace of suspicion) She'd be at someone's feet?

Magnusson Trees are grand ...

Zhang (the peacemaking host) ... flowers are dainty, in the shade ...

Jasmine Yes yes, of course.

Ho Sit. We bring first course!

Jasmine and the three men take their seats, Zhang fusses over proceedings, and Liu, Ho and Nodding place dishes in front of the foreigners. The restaurant continues to revolve, unnoticed.

Jasmine (to Magnusson) I've been freelancing for a while. I'm negotiating to get myself on a payroll right now.

Magnusson You'll be more secure.

Jasmine That's something you think less about in this country. They've never known security here. It's a very changeable place.

Liu We hope you are enjoying dinner?

Johnson Yes, yes. And we want to get back to those trees in a minute.

Liu Beautiful flower?

Magnusson (to Jasmine) I don't think I knew how proud I was of my country until I saw those pictures. There's so much we take for granted, back home.

Jasmine They're very good to me here. Old Zhang is a rogue, but he's smart.

Magnusson I think you've found a new way to see him?

Jasmine You have to be smart, in China. Good-natured dills can't survive. Now tell me, what are you gentlemen doing?

Johnson I'm in coal. Dirty hands!

Elfing Iron ore. Giving them steel.

Magnusson I'm in money. It's a funny thing, a shipload of iron ore, a shipload of coal, no worries. But getting a cheque to change hands – you'd be amazed at the difficulties.

Jasmine That's where you come in?

Magnusson (nodding) And what shall we call you, er ...

Jasmine My name's Betty, but call me Jasmine, because that's how they know me here.

Elfing Betty?

Jasmine It was my mother's name and my grandmother's name, Elizabeth, Elizabetta, but it hasn't got any glamour. Too workaday for a foreign journalist. Greenhood called me Jasmine, and Jasmine it is.

Elfing Who called her Greenhood?

Jasmine She did, then they all did, as soon as they saw the picture.

Johnson She chose it for herself? (Jasmine nods.) But she's never seen one.

Jasmine She's seen a picture. It represents something she would like to be.

Zhang Honorable visitors, how is your dinner? Must order second course. Then we can prepare!

All four Good, good, good.

Zhang beckons to his waitresses to come for the order.

Ho This fish caught far out to sea. This fish caught in bay. This fish caught in river, far inland. This fish best, it come from special farm!

Johnson I'm going for the one caught at sea.

Jasmine Take the one she recommends.

Johnson Isn't it safer if it comes from the ocean?

Jasmine If it does ...

Johnson Eh?

Jasmine If that's where it really comes from.

Johnson How do you mean?

Jasmine It's easy to write something on the side of a box, and say that's where it comes from. Easy, but not the same as knowing.

Johnson How can you be sure?

Jasmine Make the people trust you. Which means, it has to be more valuable, for them, if you know the truth than if you don't.

Magnusson That might not be simple.

Jasmine It could be very tricky.

Johnson I'm on the verge of giving up hope.

Jasmine And that's different from starting out without such a thing as hope. Greenhood, darling, are you ready for our orders? Four fish from the special farm. You choose them for us.

Nodding All same fish?

Jasmine All different fish, but all from the farm. You choose.

Nodding I choose for you, Miss Jasmine, and your Austwawian friends. (She goes.)

Jasmine That means Zhang will choose, but that's all right.

Johnson Doesn't anybody ever do what they say they'll do?

Jasmine You must understand, it's transparent enough for them.

Johnson Crikey. So what's all this about the trees? The flowers?

Jasmine It's called negotiation. You want the waitress. They want to know what you're offering to get her.

Johnson What? Me!

Jasmine Mr Magnusson?

Magnusson Don't look at me, Betty. Jasmine. I'm too old for this sort of thing.

Jasmine Mr Elfing?

Elfing They're tempting, but they're a way for a visitor to make a fool of himself.

Jasmine Mr Johnson?

Johnson (after a struggle) It's obvious enough, but it's a hard thing for a man to do.

Jasmine What's that?

Johnson You see a flower, you want to pick it. Break it off and carry it home. Look at this lovely thing I found. Then you chuck it away ...

Jasmine You've used it, you don't need it any more.

Johnson That's what most of us are like. (There is a pause; the others wait for him to take the next step in his thoughts.) We have to do better. If I can't do better than that it means I'm no better than that. (loudly) And I am! (His companions are still waiting.) While they're getting those fish, let's have another look at those trees! (The screen shows us, once again, the scene with the snow gums in the high country.) That was me when I was young. (He thinks.) I wasn't too fussy in those days. Anything for a good time. I feel different, today.

Jasmine How do they make you feel, today?

Johnson They're so austere. They're beautiful because they live as they have to live to survive where they live. If you see what I mean ...

Magnusson I think we do.

The screen shows river red gums trailing across a vast stretch of landscape, somewhere in the Australian inland.

Elfing Survival. There's not a lot of water. The trees grow where they can live.

Zhang (hypocritically) Austwawians love their country!

Magnusson Or so we say. And sometimes, even, we do.

Jasmine But do we love ourselves?

Elfing That's a serious question, and it deserves a thought before we answer.

Jasmine What thought do you have in mind?

Elfing How would we know if we love ourselves? How could we tell?

Jasmine We could look at the way we treat others. (beckoning) Greenhood, darling?

Nodding Miss Jasmine?

Jasmine Mr Johnson wants to send you a present when he gets back to Australia. He will send it to me and I will pass it on. He will send a present to Mr Zhang, and also to Liu and Ho, but he is mainly thinking of you. What would you like him to send?

Nodding Can he send me flower?

Jasmine I don't think so. It would die before it reached you.

Nodding Can he send me photo of flower? From your country.
I put on my wall.

Johnson is looking at the young Chinese woman with rapture in his eyes.

Jasmine We are still learning to love our country. He will find something good for you, something he will feel proud to send, and you can put it on your wall.

Nodding Perhaps I will visit your country one day. (Johnson gasps.)

Jasmine Perhaps. If you visit, Mr Johnson will send you a book so you know the things to look for. There are so many places. You will have to come back!

Johnson Yes! Yes!

Nodding (pointing to her head of black hair) Will I see Nodding Greenhood?

Jasmine Ah ...

Johnson Yes! Yes!

Zhang (coming over) Fish coming right away! Also rice wine! Toast to our countries. May you come often to our land!

Magnusson And you to ours! (as the fish arrive) Thank you for a wonderful dinner!

Elfing Marvellous!

Johnson What a fool I was making of myself. (to Jasmine) You got me out of that.

Jasmine We got ourselves out of it because we had something good to fall back on.

Elfing It was simpler than I thought.

Magnusson That's the way of things, isn't it? If there's a tricky solution and a simple one, go for the simple one, every time!

Johnson That suits me! I'm only a simple man. I don't know if it's good or bad to be that way. Most of the time, I'm supposed to be smart ...

Jasmine Our country teaches us to be simple. Find out what can be done, and what can't, and make that your rule. Then let the generosity of our nation flow, as and when it will!

Zhang To our great countries! May they long be friends!

Johnson (to Nodding Greenhood) I will send you a present. I will send it to Miss Jasmine. She will give it to you. Please value it. It will come with ... (he struggles, again) ... my most respectful admiration!

Nodding Thank you sir! Thank you! Thank you!

Liu & Ho Thank you, thank you all.

Zhang Thank you. Thank you all!

Magnusson You got us out of that very nicely!

Jasmine I've needed help myself, at times.

The screen continues to show trees and wildflowers from the calendar Jasmine has given Mr Zhang and his restaurant.