



# THE PLUMJUNGLE

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On June 20, 2014, Annie took me to the town where her childhood happened: McHenry, Illinois. After exploring that town, but before leaving it, she took me to her favorite childhood restaurant: Plum Garden (“since 1965”).

Annie’s family rarely dined out, but whenever they did, this was their spot.

We got there at around 9:00 p.m. Upon walking in, we were greeted by a middle-aged Chinese woman who was smiling uncontrollably. This was apparently the hostess, who spends most of her shift standing behind a greeting station (sort of a hybrid desk-meets-lectern piece of furniture).

To the right of this station was the “Dragon Bar”. It was fluorescent and festive, but totally vacant.

To the left was a small room lined with lotto machines. The kind that look like little arcade games. And there was one woman in that room who was playing all of the machines simultaneously.

She was about fifty years old. And probably battling menopause. Though given her choice of activity on a cloudless Friday night, I have a hunch the biological changes were affecting no part of her womanhood; they were stripping no opportunity from her.

I stood for a moment and watched as she anxiously depleted her life savings into the row of mechanical burglars. The whole affair was so much more entertaining than any spectator sport (especially the World Cup, which was playing on the TVs next to the “Dragon Bar”). But after about five seconds of watching, it began to feel a bit too voyeuristic. As though I were spying on a sad, old spinster who was masturbating furiously to fantasies of yesteryear (all the pornographies that got away).

Once that feeling struck me, I couldn’t shake it. Watching her any longer just felt dirty. So I averted my eyes.

And that’s when I greeted the hostess, who was still smiling to the point of excess, her entire face radiating joy for what appeared to be no reason at all.

“Hi”, I said to her, followed by my attempt to reciprocate her gigantic smile. I tried to match it fully, but couldn’t muster the energy. At most, mine had about 20% of her vigor.

“Just the two of you?”, she asked Annie and me through a set of lips that continued to smile harder than mine, refusing to break their expression for something as simple as speech.

“Yup. Just us.”

“Okay, right this way, please.”

She then turned her back to us and led the way, beyond the room of infinite sadness (i.e., lotto room), and into the dining area.

As we followed her, I pictured her face, imagining all of its seeming happiness vanishing the instant it was turned from our view. Maybe the creases that had been imprinted on her cheeks lingered for a moment, but the expression itself was immediately gone. For her sake, I hoped that was the case.

Annie and I followed her (and her mystery expression) into a large room that was completely unoccupied but for one other table (which was actually two tables pressed together).

Around those conjoined tables sat half a dozen twenty-something-year-olds. All boys who thought of themselves as men. And who clearly operated under the belief that enthusiasm is a form of humor. And thus group enthusiasm doubles as great comedy. The louder and more animated the company, the funnier and more memorable the party.

This is the worst belief a human being can hold. Nothing rubs me wronger than people who subscribe to it.<sup>1</sup>

To me, a social doctrine like that is just as poisonous to civilization as belief in (and obedience to) the penal code of any Islamic judiciary. As far as I’m concerned, the two worldviews have inflicted comparable amounts of harm to civil society.

In the present case (belief in the comedic value of group enthusiasm), it seems to fester in (and spread from) American college fraternities. Once a “brother” is infected, the consequences are more debilitating and less curable than anything venereal.

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<sup>1</sup> Not even made up words.

Even after they graduate, these “Greek” brotherly boy-men carry on behaving as though vigor and volume and excitement are acceptable surrogates for wit and humor and intelligence.<sup>2</sup>

There are few types of people I detest more.

Luckily, their departure was timed pretty close to our arrival. And then Annie and I had the whole room to ourselves.

The tables in this room had tablecloths on them, but those cloths weren’t made of cloth; they were just sheets of butcher paper. So Annie and I decided it was okay to draw on them.

Before the waitress had returned with our waters, Annie had already taken out a pen and we had played our first game of tic-tac-toe. She went first, drawing an O in a side square.

- A) Who starts with O?
- B) Who starts in a side square?

The answer to both of those questions is (a resounding) Annie. And that’s why I love her. Not because of her tic-tac-toe strategy specifically, but because scribbling an O into a side square as an opening move is the perfect metaphor for how Annie takes on the world. It describes her approach to everything.

And so does the result of that game: a draw.

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<sup>2</sup> While I’m overseas, I’ll occasionally witness a fellow American ask a non-English-speaking native where a bathroom can be found. “I’m sorry, I don’t speak your language”, that native will say in a language that isn’t English. At this point, if the American is an aging asshole who still identifies with a college fraternity, he’ll respond by increasing the volume of his voice. He’ll just repeat his exact question except he’ll enunciate it more, make it a bit louder, and include a bunch of physical gestures: “I A S K E D W H E R E T H E B A T H R O O M I S !”, while waving his hands all over the place. Clearly this man believes that any limitation in comprehension can be overcome by enthusiasm alone. But it can’t. Shouting a foreign language at someone will never cause the unknown words to become understood. Likewise, shouting at one’s audience will never communicate a humor that isn’t already present in the words themselves. Comedy barriers are no less sturdy than language barriers; neither can be knocked down with volume and vigor.

Annie isn't big on the idea of winners and losers, of zero-sum outcomes. She prefers the feelings of involvement, of open participation. No cuts, no team captains, no score-keeping. Just a world of friendly inclusion. That's what matters to her. It's engagement in the activity itself, absent the competition, that's worth cherishing.

I cherish in a different direction. The lens through which I look upon the world has a much harsher prescription. One that focuses *only* on score, on ruthless biological selection, on propagating winners and dying losers. So I tend to approach nothing – not even tic-tac-toe against my girlfriend – with a pacifist's resolve.

Thus, after our tie, I immediately redrew the grid (with deep lines practically slicing through the butcher paper) and put an X in the top right corner.<sup>3</sup>

Three Xs later, I won. I shouldn't have. It is tic-tac-toe, after all. 100% of games should end in a draw. But it didn't. I was now 1-0 (with one draw).

At this point, the waitress appeared with Annie's tea.

Whenever Annie receives tea, she puts honey in it. It doesn't matter what kind of tea it is; in goes the sweetness. But the volume she squeezes into it cannot possibly be tasted. It's more about the essence of bees, I've realized. And once that essence is deposited into her cup, she grabs a spoon, flips it upside down, and uses the handle to stir her newly honeyed tea.<sup>4</sup>

After doing this (and then taking a sip), Annie redrew the grid and marked her square. This time with an X. And this time in the center of the board.

I won again. 2-0.

Then it was my turn to go first. I drew the grid and we played. 3-0.

Then Annie's turn. 4-0.

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<sup>3</sup> Although, if you think about it, that's every corner. All you have to do is rotate the board and any corner becomes every corner. The way we were sitting, my top right was her bottom left. So, technically, one's opening play can only be one of three moves: center, side, or corner. And because I care less about the value of participation than I do the celebration of victory, I chose a corner.

<sup>4</sup> Like how Dave Grohl plays drums, except gently.

My turn. 5-0 (again, with one draw).

“Annie”, I began, “do you know how to play this game?”

In the middle of a very adorable response (one that managed to deepen my affection for her), the waitress dropped off our appetizers.<sup>5</sup>

This felt like a good time to stop playing tic-tac-toe, but I was having a really nice time writing all over the butcher paper. So I asked Annie if we could do something else:

“Annie, my dear, will you write a story with me?”

“Of course, babe.”

“Okay, so I’ll start. I’ll write a few words and then I’ll pass you the pen. And then you can write a few words and pass it back. And then me and then you and so on. And eventually we’ll have a whole story. Good?”

She agreed. And we spent the remainder of our dinner co-writing a story we decided to call “the plumjungle”.<sup>6</sup>

This:

The history of the jungle is written in the thick, calligraphic strokes of its branches and vines. Its floor is a deep kudzu hidden beneath a rolling fog with an ocean’s tide. Its misty waves crash into the mighty tree trunks that erupt from some basement netherworld. The youngest vines in the jungle coil tightly around those trunks, like toddlers clinging to their mothers. The adolescent vines can be found playing on the lowest branches of the trees, dancing and exploring their long arms. In middle age, the vines continue to climb, now pacing themselves, sagging into their postures as they reach up toward the roof of the jungle. And the oldest vines – the most ancient scripts in the language of the jungle – radiate down from the rooftop like blazing green sunbeams shooting through the canopy. These vines have become transportation for the youngest creatures in the jungle: those without roots.

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<sup>5</sup> The word “appetizer” (like “movie”) is one that I’ve always hated.

<sup>6</sup> It’s not pronounced “plum jungle” though. Just like how “madrigal” is not pronounced “mad riggle”. Plumjungle. It’s one word. With accents on the first and last syllables (just like madrigal).

“Can I get you anything else? Dessert? More tea?”, the waitress asked us, interrupting our writing session.

“Oh, no thanks. We’re stuffed”, I said. I would have thought that was obvious. Most of our food was still on the table. “Can we just get a box? I don’t think we’re going to get through what we have.”

“Sure thing.”

“Actually, can we get a *few* boxes?”

“Yup. I’ll be right back.”

“Thanks.”

Then Annie and I returned to our tabletop storytelling.

Beneath the mist, footsteps could be heard rearranging the kudzu leaves; the rigid stems snapping, oozing their lifeblood of sap and chlorophyll.

The waitress returned with two boxes (despite having asked for “a few”): a small, white Styrofoam one and an aluminum pie tin with a plastic lid.

I would have asked her to bring another, but instead I asked if she would be willing to take our picture.

“Of course!”

Annie started digging through her purse, rummaging around for her iPhone, as I shoveled the remains of my dinner into the little Styrofoam box and then slid the leftover appetizers into the pie pan.

Once Annie found her phone, she handed it to the waitress, who stepped back and said, “let me know when you’re ready.”

I reached across the table to hold Annie’s hand. As soon as it was in mine, “okay, we’re ready.”

She took our picture, handed the phone back to Annie, and hurried off.

“We forgot to ask her for another box”, Annie realized out loud while she was putting her phone away.

“Oh... right. Oh well, I’m sure she’ll come back around. Okay, let’s get back to the story.”

I picked up the pen, added three words, and passed it to Annie. She added three and passed it back. My three, her three, and eventually this:

Hearing this, the omega chipmonkey howled a warning cry into the air. His colony quickly hurried up the trees, latched onto the ancient vines, and swung to the last tree in the jungle; the very edge. From this post, they could see the Plum Garden. And they thought about what they would order.

“Can I get you anything?”, mumbled the busboy who came to clear our table.

“Actually yeah. Can you get us a box?”, I asked. “The waitress brought us a couple, but we were hoping we could get one more. Just a little more food left to pack up.”

“Sure, I’ll take care of it for you.”

He grabbed the last plate of food sitting in front of Annie and walked off. Then she and I got back to our story:

Definitely the Hong Kong chicken. Szechuan vegetables probably. Those were pretty good too. Maybe won-ton soup or shrimp lo mein. But then a stranger entered the restaurant, singing, which was illegal.

As Annie was writing those last three words, the busboy returned with our bill and an empty box. He placed both on the table.

“Where’s our food?”, I asked him.

“You asked for a box.”

“Yeah, I know. To pack up our food. The food that you took.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I threw it away.”



“Are you serious? And you brought us an empty box to box up nothing?”

Before he had a chance to respond, Annie interrupted: “It’s okay. I don’t think we explained what we wanted.”

He began to apologize, but Annie reassured him that he did everything right.

For a moment, I looked at her in dumb wonder. Here was a busboy, telling us he threw away the food we bought. And here was Annie, complimenting him. Here was Annie, starting up a new conversation by etching her O into the side of the grid, forever interacting with the world in unexpected ways.

It was in that moment that I realized Annie’s constitution – the one without team captains or cuts, the one of acceptance and forgiveness, of compassion and inclusion, of zen resolve when confronted with people’s mistakes and deficiencies – is one I really admire. She can look the brain dead in the face, the disabled in the legs, and find something to appreciate, something to celebrate, something to compliment.

By comparison, I go through life insisting that I’m better than everyone else. Better than the retarded busboy who returns to our table with an empty box. Better than the lotto spinster who gambled away her fertility. Better than the hostess who pointlessly smiles to excess for a living. And I can’t even be compared to that group of hyperactive fraternity diners. Those enthusiastic boy-men who have nothing to say... and shout it.

But I know Annie is right. I’m not actually better than any of these people (perhaps excepting the fraternity bros). They may have just slipped from their high vines. Or maybe no vines ever hung as conveniently for them as they did for me. The growth of the jungle is arbitrary, after all. I didn’t earn my station among the low branches any more than those marching through the kudzu earned their struggle. And it would be at least ugly, if not more than that, to pretend otherwise. To pretend that those chipmonkeys in the oldest vines somehow deserve their height.