



Ho Lin

## Bora Bora

The last time Sheila and I saw Phil was a week after lockdown ended, when he invited us over for dinner. Phil lived half an hour away, but Sheila, true to her upbringing, insisted we leave an hour early. On the way over we argued about where we would travel once COVID was truly done with: I said Europe, she said Asia. I don't think either of us really cared either way, but we ended up arguing over stopover flights and Airbnb. This was just our daily thing. Living with someone 24-7 in lockdown, you learn to expect and accept stupid as part of the routine.

Phil resembled Phil Rosenthal from the Netflix show *Somebody Feed Phil*—something I brought up the first time we met, to which Phil said, I want to take a fucking bat to that guy's face. From then on it was easy to joke every time we met up: *Somebody feed Phil!* But not having seen him for over a year, we had more important things to talk about. Phil's apartment reeked of his dog Daisy, and every chair leg held bitemarks. Where's Daisy? I asked him. Died, Phil said. He said it like one would say: Looks like rain tomorrow.

Phil had invited over a handful of strangers. He mixed and matched those he knew across his life: work, college, his year in Taiwan, friends of friends. At worst, dinner with these people would be a procession of awkward monologues and silences. At best, friendships would be cemented: *Remember when we first met at one of Phil's dinners...* That's how I met Sheila, at one of Phil's dinners. He often cited us as his greatest social achievement.

One couple was visiting from Taipei and barely spoke; to Sheila, this was equivalent to lighting a distress beacon. Slipping in and out of Chinese, she peppered them with smiles and questions.

*Nimen ganggang lai ma?* (You just get here?) *Yinggai qu*—shit, how do you say Twin Peaks? Where else should they go? Phil, you must have suggestions, right? Whenever Sheila got chatty with others, she enunciated to an extreme degree. We'd been isolated so long, I'd forgotten about that. Unaware of this quirk, the Taiwanese just nodded, gave her not-quite-knowing smiles.

Phil mentioned to the group that Sheila and I had just started living together when lockdown started, and Sheila took it from there. It was a well-worn tale at this point—I'd heard her give the same spiel on her Zoom work calls. We were at the local coffee shop, *our* coffee shop, the week before the city shut down (and four months before the coffee shop closed permanently), debating yes or no on co-habitation. She gave me the third degree: what did I *really* want, was I serious about kids, how did I feel about divvying up our household budget, including the mortgage on her place (because there was no question I was moving in with her, my apartment was a closet), was I committed to cleanliness or was I one to let things decline towards filth, etcetera etcetera.

I gave the correct answers, I informed the assembled group.

At the time, she added.

Sheila got her desired laughs and half-joke reactions: *You guys made it through a pandemic without killing each other, so it must be destiny...* It wasn't all great, Sheila cut in. She described the crud that grew on my electric toothbrush as one would describe a mystifying avant-garde work of art. Somehow the crud spread to her sink, propelled by its own alien life force. She explained how she missed eating eggplant just because I couldn't stand it (This eggplant is fantastic, by the way, Phil). She mentioned how she had to fix the dishwasher regularly because I clogged it up with food particles from dishes I didn't hand-rinse well enough. You have a man in the house, you figure he'd be handy, right? Wrong! she said. Her eyes were shining as she talked. Fair enough, she needed to vent, and I wasn't an uninvolved party, but I still felt she was being a bit much. Like ordering milk tea at 75% sweetness when 25% would do.

One of the other guests was named John, but he didn't remind me of any famous Johns. His clothes smelled of pot, strong enough to overpower Phil's dead dog. John had spent his lockdown in Bora Bora through pure chance: he was a part-time elementary teacher so he took tropical trips for months at a time, and he happened to be in Bora Bora when the pandemic hit. So voila, a year's sabbatical in Bora Bora. No COVID in Bora Bora—nothing really at all in Bora Bora except sun and sand. His stringy hair and salt-and-pepper gristle on his cheeks and chin suggested he was still there.

Sounds fantastic, Sheila said.

It was, John said. For a little while. But I didn't get along with the locals.

Really? I hear they're *so* friendly out there.

Naw. They make like they're friendly, but they bust your balls about everything. Non-stop. Not being able to swim like them, or how to say *poisson cru*. Like I was an idiot. Like they understood everything about the world and I didn't.

I'm sure they were just—

And I tell you what, it's all due to their brains.

Sheila's neck was working, as if she was swallowing, but she wasn't eating. Their brains? she said, and I knew she regretted saying it as soon as she said it, because no way did she want to hear more about the brains, but her reflexes for extending a conversation, so long dormant during her time with me, had kicked in.

Their frontal lobes are underdeveloped, John said. You know how kids' frontal lobes aren't fully grown until they're twenty-five? These island people's lobes never grow, so they're like little kids their entire lives.

That's ridiculous, Sheila said.

I've seen studies on this, John said. Think about it, you live on an island paradise, you don't need to worry about complicated stuff like consequences and impulse control. So your prefrontal cortex doesn't develop, and the genetics get passed down.

More eggplant? Phil suggested. Problem was, he was all the way on the other side of the table, and thus not really in a position to intercede.

That sounds like a crock of shit, Sheila said. And frankly, it sounds racist to me.

It's not about racism, John said. It's a matter of science. These people are direct descendants of Neanderthals, so they have fewer neurons firing at the front of the brain.

Sheila had that knot in the middle of her forehead. I was glad it wasn't directed at me for once. I knew what she was thinking too: These are the people educating our nation's youth?

I've done the research, John continued. East Asians and Pacific Islanders have more Neanderthal DNA in their genomes than other ethnicities. You can look it up.

Sheila locked eyes with the Taiwan couple, their smiles now more confused than wrinkly. That did it. She had to speak for them now, too. She said, Jesus, are you listening to yourself?

It's not me who said it, John said. I just researched it. He munched on Phil's steak, which was excellent as always. The sight made me think of a T-Rex chomping away on a dinosaur carcass while little Neanderthals scattered around him. A historical impossibility, of course.

Sheila glared, mouth open, inviting us to agree with her—*Come on, we should all be outraged, how can you not say anything?* Would she leave it at that or would she say more? I could see her working the possibilities in her prefrontal cortex: impulse control, consequences. Phil was pouring a fresh round of wine for everyone, saying something about the wildfires up north.

You know Sheila's a Neanderthal, I said.

What? Sheila said.

Remember when you did that ancestry report? Just to make sure I wasn't your second cousin? Didn't you have more Neanderthal gene variants than like 95 percent of other people?

That doesn't mean—

Three hundred fifteen variants, wasn't it? I mean, maybe your prefrontal cortex has a few less neurons too?

I laughed. I'm not sure if it came out as a nervous laugh or a hearty one. I didn't intend to laugh at all. It just came out of me, bypassing cortexes completely.

Ah! John said, nodding. He drew a lazy circle with his beer bottle, and it struck me: he's kind of like John Wayne, if John Wayne became a beach bum. And I take it you're of east Asian descent? he asked Sheila. He took another swig at the same moment I sipped my wine, and I suppose the matched gestures suggested we were in full lock-step, the universe confirming itself.

With a giant cough, Phil ordered us out onto his balcony so he could clear the table for dessert. It was a standard Bay Area summer night, and as we stamped feet and rubbed arms, new conversations formed, and Bora Bora receded into the past. John and the Taiwanese got along famously—he seemed to know quite a bit about the hot springs on Taiwan's east coast. Phil and I drank and gabbed about gas prices and wildfires, each of us trying to outdo the other in volume. At the far end of the balcony, Sheila stood by herself, sometimes shooting a look at me or John, as if debating who deserved to go first. I nibbled on a small plate of Phil's eggplant; it actually wasn't bad.

Sheila said nothing all the way home, and when we got there she curled up on the couch, the back of her head to me. I remembered when I first saw her neck like that, how warm it felt as I massaged it, how sexy it looked. I didn't touch it this time. The rest of the night she said nothing, even when we were in our bedroom—really her bedroom, she'd lived there for years before I moved in—and I was fucking her. I don't know why I was so intent on fucking her that night, I

wasn't feeling horny. For once I didn't even feel the need to apologize to her, so it wasn't make-up sex either. Still she said nothing.

That was the last time we shared a bed. Soon after we had a conscious uncoupling, as they say—it was something she would say too, except she didn't, and from what I hear, she's mellowed out since then. She's now down in Baja with a surfer and two kids, and her Instagram is so wholesome you could just melt. Most of the people from that night aren't around anymore, even Phil, who followed his tech firm to Texas. Still, I remember how Phil's eggplant tasted—somebody feed Phil—and how Sheila's bedroom was tidy and organized that night as it always was, but beyond her ruffled bedsheets was darkness, the sounds of passing traffic outside coming and going in waves.

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