

"Omakase" by Weike Wang - *The New Yorker*, June 18, 2018

Note: Omakase is a Japanese phrase that means 'I'll leave it up to you.' It is most commonly used when dining at Japanese restaurants where the customer leaves it up to the chef to select and serve seasonal specialties. The Michelin Guide said of omakase that "few formal dining experiences are as revered or as intimidating." Customers ordering omakase style expect the chef to be innovative and surprising in selecting dishes, and the meal can be likened to an artistic performance. Ordering omakase can be a gamble, but the customer typically receives the highest-quality fish available at a lower cost than if it had been ordered à la carte.

The couple decided that tonight they would go out for sushi. Two years ago, they'd met online. Three months ago, they'd moved in together. Previously, she'd lived in Boston, but now she lived in New York with him.

The woman was a research analyst at a bank downtown. The man was a ceramic-pottery instructor at a studio uptown. Both were in their late thirties, and neither of them wanted kids. Both enjoyed Asian cuisine, specifically sushi, specifically omakase. It was the element of surprise that they liked. And it suited them in different ways. She got nervous looking at a list of options and would second-guess herself. He enjoyed going with the flow. What is the best choice? she'd ask him when flipping through menus with many pages and many words, and he'd reply, The best choice is whatever you feel like eating at the moment.

Before they got there, the man had described the restaurant as a "hole-in-the-wall." He had found it on a list of top sushi places in central Harlem. Not that there were many. So, instead of top sushi places, it may just have been a list of all sushi places. Be prepared, he said. Nothing is actually a hole-in-the-wall, she replied. Yet the restaurant was as the man had described: a tiny room with a sushi bar and a cash register. Behind the bar stood an old sushi chef. Behind the cash register sat a young waitress. The woman estimated that the hole could seat no more than six adults and a child. Good thing sushi pieces were small. Upon entering, she gave the man a look. The look said, Is this going to be O.K.? Usually, for sushi, they went downtown to places that were brightly lit, crowded, and did not smell so strongly of fish. But tonight downtown trains were experiencing delays because someone had jumped onto the tracks at Port Authority and been hit.

That was something the woman had to get used to about New York. In Boston, the subway didn't get you anywhere, but the stations were generally clean and quiet and no one bothered you on the actual train. Also, there were rarely delays due to people jumping in front of trains. Probably because the trains came so infrequently that there were quicker ways to die. In New York, the subway generally got you where you needed to go, but you had to endure a lot. For example, by the end of her first month the woman had already seen someone pee in the corner of a car. She had been solicited for money numerous times. And, if she didn't have money, the same person would ask her for food

or a pencil or a tissue to wipe his nose. On a trip into Brooklyn on the L, she had almost been kicked in the face by a pole-dancing kid. She'd refused to give that kid any money.

You worry too much, the man said whenever she brought up the fact that she still didn't feel quite at home in New York. And not only did she not feel at home; she felt that she was constantly in danger.

You exaggerate, the man replied.

At the restaurant, he gave the woman a look of his own. This look said two things: one, you worry too much, and, two, this is fun—I'm having fun, now you have fun.

The woman *was* having fun, but she also didn't want to get food poisoning.

As if having read her mind, the man said, If you do get sick, you can blame me.

Eventually, the waitress noticed that the couple had arrived. She had been picking polish off her nails. She looked up but didn't get up and instead waved them to the bar. Sit anywhere you like, she said sleepily. Then she disappeared behind a black curtain embroidered with the Chinese character for the sun.

When they first started dating, they'd agreed that if there weren't any glaring red flags, and there weren't, they would try to live together, and they did. To make things fair, each tried to find a job in the other's city. Not surprisingly, the demand for financial analysts in New York was much higher than the demand for pottery instructors in Boston.

Huzzah, he texted the day the movers arrived at her old apartment. She texted back a smiley face, then, later, pictures of her empty living room, bedroom, bathroom, and the pile of furniture and things she was donating so that, once they were living together, they would not have, for example, two dining-room sets, twenty pots and pans, seven paring knives, and so on.

She was one of those people—the kind to create an Excel spreadsheet of everything she owned and send it to him, so that he could then highlight what he also owned and specify quantity and type, since it might make sense to have seven paring knives if they were of different thicknesses and lengths and could pare different things.

He was one of these people—the kind to look at an Excel spreadsheet and squint.

Before the big move, she had done some research on the best time to drive into the city in a large moving truck. She did not want to take up too much space. It would pain her if the moving truck was responsible for a blocked intersection and a mess of cars honking non-stop. The Internet said that New Yorkers were tough and could probably handle anything. But the Internet also said, To avoid the angriest of New Yorkers during rush hour,

try 5 *a.m.* When she arrived at 5 *a.m.*, he was waiting for her in the lobby of his building, with a coffee, an extra sweatshirt, and a very enthusiastic kiss. After the kiss, he handed her a set of keys. There were four in total: one for the building, one for the trash room, one for the mailbox, one for their apartment door. Because all the keys looked the same, he said that it might take her a month to figure out which was which, but it took her only a day. She was happy that he was happy. She would frequently wonder, but never ask, if he had looked for a job as diligently as she had.

I'll just have water, the man said, when the waitress gave them each a cup of hot tea. It was eight degrees outside, and the waitress explained that the tea, made from barley, was intentionally paired with the Pacific oyster, which was the first course of the omakase. The waitress looked no older than eighteen. She was Asian, with a diamond nose stud and a purple lip ring. When talking to her, the woman could only stare at the ring and bite her own lip. The woman was also Asian (Chinese), and seeing another Asian with facial piercings reminded her of all the things she had not been able to get away with as a kid. Her immigrant parents had wanted the best for her, so imagine coming home to them with a lip ring. First, her parents would have made her take the ring out, then they would have slapped her, then they would have reminded her that a lip ring made her look like a hoodlum and in this country not everyone would give someone with an Asian face the benefit of the doubt. If she looked like a hoodlum, then she would have trouble getting into college. If she couldn't get into college, then she couldn't get a job. If she couldn't get a job, then she couldn't enter society. If she couldn't enter society, then she might as well go to jail. Ultimately, a lip ring could only land her in jail—what other purpose did it serve? She was not joining the circus. She was not part of an indigenous African tribe. She was not Marilyn Manson. (Her father, for some strange reason, knew who Marilyn Manson was and listened to him and liked him.) Then, in jail, she could make friends with other people wearing lip rings and form a gang. Is that what you want as a career? her parents would have asked. To form a lip-ring gang in jail? And she would have answered no.

Tea it is, the man said. He smiled at the pretty waitress. She *was* pretty. The purple lip ring matched the purple streak in her hair, which matched the purple nail polish. Nevertheless, the man complimented the waitress's unremarkable black uniform. The waitress returned the favor by complimenting the man's circular eyeglass frames.

Oh, these silly things, the man said, lifting his glasses off his nose for a second.

They're not silly, the waitress said matter-of-factly. They're cool. My boyfriend couldn't pull those off. He doesn't have the head shape for it.

If the man lost interest, he didn't show it. If anything, knowing that the pretty waitress had a boyfriend only made the flirtation more fun.

Kids now are so different, the woman thought. She hadn't had a boyfriend until college. She wasn't this bold until after grad school. But the waitress might not have immigrant parents. Perhaps her parents were born here, which would mean different expectations, or parenting so opposed to the way they had been brought up by their own strict immigrant parents that there were basically no expectations. Another possibility: the waitress might have been adopted. In which case all bets were off. Kids now were not only different but lucky, the woman thought. She wanted to say to the waitress, You have no idea how hard some of us worked so that you could dye your hair purple and pierce your lip.

The man nudged the woman, who was sitting next to him like a statue.

You're staring, he said. The waitress had noticed, too, and huffed off.

The mugs that the tea came in were handleless. The tea was so hot that neither of them could pick up the handleless mug comfortably. They could only blow at the steam, hoping that the tea would cool, and comment to each other on how hot it was. Until now, the sushi chef had not said a word to the couple. But it seemed to irritate him as he prepared the Pacific oyster (which turned out to be delicious) to see them not drink the tea.

This is the Japanese way, he finally said. He reached over the bar for the woman's mug. He then held the mug delicately at the very top with two fingertips and a thumb. The other hand was placed under the mug like a saucer. This is the Japanese way, he said again. He handed the mug back to the woman. The couple tried to mimic the chef, but perhaps their skin was thinner than his; holding the mug the Japanese way didn't hurt any less than sticking their hands into boiling water. The man put his mug down. The woman, however, did not want to offend the chef and held her mug until she felt her hands go numb.

Now that the man knew the chef could speak English, he tried to talk to him.

What kind of mug is this? he asked. It looks handmade. The glaze is magnificent. Then the man turned to the woman and pointed out how the green-blue glaze of their mugs seemed to differ. The layering, he said, was subtly thicker and darker in this part of her mug than in his.

Hmm, the woman said. To her, a mug was a mug.

It's a yunomi, isn't it? he said to the chef. Taller than it is wide, handleless. Yes, handleless, with a trimmed foot. Used in traditional tea ceremonies.

The chef looked suspiciously at the man. Maybe he was wondering if the man was fucking with him, as people sometimes did when they encountered a different culture

and, in an effort to tease, came off as incredibly earnest, only to draw information out of the person they were teasing until the person looked foolish.

He's a potter, the woman said.

The man quickly turned to her as if to say, Why did you just do that? We were having so much fun. Then he began to laugh, leaning back and almost falling off the barstool. I'm sorry, he said to the chef. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. The mug is beautiful, and you should be proud to have something like this in your kitchen. I would be.

The chef said thank you and served them their first piece of fish on similarly green-blue ceramic plates that the man promised not to scrutinize.

Enjoy, the chef said, and gave them a steady thumbs-up.

The man responded with his own thumbs-up.

The woman liked how easily the man handled everything. He never took anything too seriously. He was a natural extrovert. By now, the woman knew that, although he worked alone in his studio, he not only enjoyed the company of others but needed it. When out, he talked to anyone and everyone. Sometimes it was jokey talk, the kind he was having with the sushi chef. Sometimes it was playful banter, the kind he had with the pretty waitress. The flirting didn't bother the woman. Instead, it made her feel good that the man was desired. While he was not handsome, he had a friendly face and rosy cheeks. The word "wholesome" came to mind. He was someone who could have just stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting.

Their first official date had been on Skype. It had consisted of each of them drinking a bottle of wine and watching the same movie on their respective laptops. He suggested "House of Flying Daggers," and she said that she was O.K. with watching something else. Maybe something that wasn't so overtly Chinese and, no offense to the talented Zhang Yimou, so old-school.

What do you mean, "old-school"? he had asked.

I mean Tang dynasty, she had said.

She was fine with watching something more mainstream, set in modern day, with story lines about non-Asians. She didn't need the man to make her feel comfortable, if that was, in fact, what he was trying to do.

But it's a critically acclaimed movie, he'd replied.

So they ended up watching “House of Flying Daggers.” The entire movie was in Chinese, with English subtitles. As they got progressively tipsier, the man asked the woman if the subtitles were all correct. I guess, the woman said, even though she understood only half of what was said and was reading the English herself. The man knew much more about Wuxia than she did. He also knew much more about the Tang dynasty, especially the pottery. During that dynasty, the Chinese had perfected color glazes. Most famously, they had perfected the tricolored glaze, which is a combination of green, yellow, and white. He even said the Chinese word for it, *sancai*, and she was a little shocked. No, she was a lot shocked. You would know the glaze if you saw it, he said once the movie was over and the wine had been drunk. The next day, he sent her a picture of a Tang-dynasty camel with *sancai* glaze. It was the same camel that had sat next to her mother’s fireplace for the past twenty-five years.

The woman asked some of her friends. Most of them were Asian, but she had a few non-Asian friends as well. A red flag? She did not want to continue with this man if he was interested in her only because she was Chinese. She had heard of these men, especially the kind you met on the Internet. She had heard of “yellow fever.” She didn’t like that it was called yellow fever. To name a kind of attraction after a disease carried by mosquitoes that killed one out of four people severely infected said something about the attraction. Her closest friends told her that she was doing what she did best, overthinking and picking out flaws where there weren’t any, hence the reason she was still single at thirty-six. As a potter, the man would obviously know about the history of pottery. And he probably just liked “House of Flying Daggers” as a movie. One of her non-Asian friends said, He’s a guy and probably just thinks martial arts are cool. One of her Asian friends said, He probably just wants to impress you.

We’ll see, she replied.

For their next Skype date, he suggested a romantic comedy set in England. The following week, an American action film. The next week, a Russian spy drama. After watching, they chatted first about the movie and then about other things. He told her that he had been in a few serious relationships, the most recent of which ended a year ago. What was she like? the woman asked, but really just wanted to know if she was Chinese. The man said that she was nice, though a little neurotic. But what was she like? the woman asked again, and the man said, What do you mean? She was Jewish and tall. He didn’t suggest watching a Chinese movie again. When they visited each other, they ate not at Chinese places but at French, Italian, and Japanese restaurants. She was excited that he was turning out to be a regular guy. He met most of her friends, who afterward found a way to tell her how lucky she was to have met someone like him: single, American—an artist, no less—and her age. By “American,” some of her Asian friends also meant “white,” the implication being that she was somehow climbing the social ladder. She hadn’t thought any of these things before, but now she did. Or maybe she had thought all of these things before and was just now admitting to them. Eventually, the woman felt comfortable enough to ask the man why he had picked “House of Flying Daggers” for their first date.

The answer he gave was even less profound than what her friends had said. It was a random choice, he explained. That day, the movie had popped up on his browser as something that he might be interested in watching. It was critically acclaimed, he said again.

So it was settled. The big question of why he was dating her was out of the way. Her Chineseness was not a factor. They were merely one out of a billion or so Asian girl–white guy couples walking around on this earth.

The sushi chef worked quickly with his hands, and the woman couldn't help but be mesmerized. From a giant wooden tub of warm rice he scooped out two tiny balls. He molded the balls into elongated dollops. Then he pressed a slice of fish on top of the rice using two fingers, the index and middle, turning the nigiri in the palm of his hand as if displaying a shiny toy car. As a final touch, he dipped a delicate brush into a bowl of black sauce and lightly painted the top of the car. For certain pieces, he wrapped a thin strip of nori around the nigiri. For others, he left the fish slices on a small grill to char.

The woman was impressed. This chef looked as though he belonged at the Four Seasons or the Mandarin Oriental. Between courses, he wiped down his cooking station and conversed with them. He spoke softly, which meant that the couple had to listen carefully and not chew too loudly. The man told the chef that they lived only a few blocks away. The chef lived in Queens but was originally from Tokyo. The man said that he had seen the chef working here before. The chef said that that was impossible. The man insisted that he had. He said that he walked by this restaurant every day on the way back from his studio, and though he had never come in, he peeked inside every now and then and saw a chef—you, he said—working diligently behind the bar.

The chef chuckled and said, That's impossible.

Why do you say impossible? the man asked.

Because this is my first day working here.

Oh, the man said, but, refusing to admit that he had been wrong, pushed on. He asked if the restaurant was a family-run business. He might not have seen the chef, as in *you*, but he might have seen a brother or a friend. And surely the chef must have come in for an interview. Perhaps when he peeked in that day the chef was actually there, learning the ropes from the previous chef, who might have been the brother or the friend. At this point, the woman put a hand on the man's thigh.

The chef chuckled again, longer and louder than before. He looked at the woman, and she felt herself unable to meet his gaze. It was not a family-run business, he clarified. He did not know the previous chef. He had been hired yesterday and had interviewed by phone.

The man finally let the topic slide, and the woman was relieved. If he'd continued, she would have had to say something. She would have had to explain to the man (in a roundabout way) that he sounded insensitive, assuming that the chef he'd seen in the window was this chef and then assuming that the chefs could have been brothers. The roundabout way would have to involve a joke—something like Oh-don't-think-all-of-us-look-the-same—and the man would have laughed and the woman would have laughed and the chef would have chuckled. It would have to be said as a joke, because the woman knew that the man hadn't meant to seem insensitive; he had just wanted to be right. Also, the woman didn't want to make a big deal out of nothing. She didn't want to be one of those women who noted every teeny tiny thing and racialized it. And wasn't it something that she and her closest Asian friends joked about, too—that, if you considered how people are typically described, by the color of their hair and their eyes, it did sound as though they all looked the same?

But joking about this with her friends was different from joking with the man.

For a moment, the woman felt a kinship with the chef, but the moment passed.

After the couple had finished their tea, the waitress came back and started them on a bottle of unfiltered sake. She still seemed miffed from earlier. She spoke only to the man, explaining that the nigori had herbal notes and hints of chrysanthemum. The woman tossed back her sake and couldn't taste either. The man hovered his nose over his cup for a long minute and said that he could smell subtle hints of something.

Alcohol? the woman said.

Something else.

Chrysanthemum?

Something else.

The woman wanted to add that perhaps what the man was smelling was bullshit, because the waitress was clearly making everything up. How the woman knew was that she had read the back of the bottle, which said the sake had a fruity nose with hints of citrus.

What's wrong with me? the woman thought. She was getting riled up over nothing. This was nothing. The man leaned over and rubbed a finger under her chin. She felt better, but not entirely right. The chef smiled at them while slicing two thin pieces of snapper.

When enough time had passed, the man began chatting with the chef again. He was curious, he said. The sushi was delicious, and he was wondering where the chef had worked before. He must have had years of experience. It showed. Speaking on behalf of

both of them, the man continued, he hadn't had omakase like this in years and they went to some of the best places in the city.

Like where? the chef asked.

The man listed the places, and the chef nodded in approval and the man beamed. The woman felt a need to interject. Many of these omakase places had been her suggestion. To be honest, when they first started dating the man knew what omakase was but had never tried it. He said the opportunity had never come up, and the woman wondered if this was code for I didn't know how to go about it, I didn't want to look like an idiot if I went in and ordered wrong. So, for one of their early in-person dates she had taken him to a place in Boston. She knew the chef, who was Chinese. Many Chinese chefs turned to Japanese food, as it was significantly classier and more lucrative. She spoke with the Chinese chef in Chinese about the Japanese omakase, an experience that she would not have known how to describe to her parents, who had been taught to loathe the Japanese, or her grandparents, who had lived through the Sino-Japanese War and did loathe the Japanese. Thankfully, that history was not part of the woman's identity. She had grown up in the States. She felt no animosity toward Japanese people, culture, or food. Anyway, the point was that, when she'd visited the man in New York, she had looked up the places he had just listed. She had taught the man that, in Japanese, "omakase" means "I leave it up to you." There was one more thing. She had paid. Not always but most of the time, especially at the more expensive places. And it made sense for her to pay. She earned more, and trying omakase together had become one of their things. She liked that they had things.

There was also that place in Boston, the woman interjected. Remember? The one I took you to. The first time you had omakase. While she was saying this, the woman wondered if she was being too defensive, but she said it anyway.

Of course, the man said without glancing at her. So where did you work again? he asked the chef.

A restaurant downtown, he said. He then gave the name, but it was not one that either the man or the woman recognized.

You might not know it, he said. It was a very exclusive place. Very fancy. We didn't open every day. We opened only by reservation. And to make a reservation you had to call a specific number that wasn't listed, that was only passed by word of mouth. When you called, you asked to speak with the manager. The manager had to know you, or else he would say you'd called the wrong number and hang up.

You're kidding, the man said. Then he looked at the woman and asked if she'd heard that.

She had heard it. The chef wasn't whispering. The man leaned over the bar, so that his upper body was now above the trays of nori and the bowl of sauce. He was leaning on his elbows, like a little boy waiting for a treat from his mother in the kitchen. Adorable, the woman noted, and momentarily felt fine again.

So I'm guessing you got tired of that, the man said. Dealing with all those rich folks.

No.

It was probably the stress. I bet a place like that made you work terrible hours. All those private parties. People who have nothing better to do with their money.

No.

And not being able to make whatever you wanted. What the customer wants the customer gets. A place that exclusive, you probably got some strange requests.

Yes, but that's not the reason I was fired.

Fired?

The man looked even more interested. Did you hear that? he said to the woman. To him, if a high-class chef had been fired that meant that the chef had a rogue streak, which was something the man tended to respect. Also, he was getting drunk. The sake bottle was empty, and the waitress had brought another.

Fired for what? the man asked. He offered the chef a cup of sake, but the chef declined.

The woman turned her own cup in her hands and stared at the wall behind the chef, which had a painting of a giant wave about to crush three tiny boats. The woman liked the fact that she and the man worked in completely different fields. It meant that there was very little competition between them, and what they had in common was something genuine. The man had no interest in money, and that fascinated her. He seemed a free spirit, but how was he still alive today if he didn't care about money? She, on the other hand, was much more concerned about money and where it came from. She liked her job, but she liked it most because it was stable and salaried. Although she could not say those things to the man, who sometimes said to his friends, Bankers, when she made practical remarks about how they were going to split the check. After he said that, he did one of those comical eye rolls to show everyone that he was kidding. It was funny. She laughed along. But later, when she asked him why he did that, he would put a hand on her head and say that she was overthinking it. He was only teasing her because he was so proud of her. She did something he couldn't in a million years do. Numbers, graphs—just hearing her on the phone made his head spin, but the work was clearly important and necessary. And you're able to do this because, well, let's face it, you're smarter than me. The man had

said that. When he said it, the woman felt a happy balloon rise from her stomach to her mouth.

Fired for what?

The chef didn't answer. Instead, he washed his hands, which were now covered in red slime, and picked up a blowtorch to sear the skin of a nearby salmon.

A year into dating, she had taken the man to meet her parents. They lived in a cookie-cutter suburb in Springfield, Massachusetts. Her father worked for a company that designed prosthetic limbs. Her mother was a housewife. Back in China, they'd had different jobs. Her father had been a computer-science professor and her mother had been a salesclerk, but their success in those former roles had hinged on being loquacious and witty in their native language, none of which translated into English. Every now and then, her father went out for academic jobs and would make it as far as the interview stage, at which point he had to teach a class. He would dress as sharply as he could. He would prepare careful notes. Then, during class, the only question he was asked, usually by a clownish kid in the back row, was whether he could please repeat something. Her mother took a job at JCPenney but eventually quit. In China, an efficient salesclerk followed customers from place to place like a shadow, but no one wanted her mother to do that at JCPenney. In fact, her mother was frequently reported for looking like a thief. Nevertheless, her parents were now comfortable in their two-thousand-square-foot house, which had a plastic mailbox and resembled everyone else's. Perhaps her parents liked the sameness of suburban houses because, from the outside, you couldn't tell that a Chinese family lived inside. Not that her parents were ashamed of being Chinese, and they had taught their daughter not to be ashamed, either. You are just as good as anyone else, they'd told her, even before she realized that this was a thought she was supposed to have.

The woman did not know how her parents would react. She had brought home other boyfriends, and the reception had been lukewarm. The man was the first boyfriend she had brought home in a long time. Unfortunately, that made the question of race even harder to answer, as he was also the first white boyfriend she had brought home. So, were her parents being welcoming out of relief that their daughter wouldn't become a spinster or out of surprise that she, as her friends pointed out, had got lucky? As with every complex question in life, it was probably a mixture of both. But was it a fifty-fifty mix or a twenty-eighty one, and, if the latter, which was the eighty and which was the twenty?

Throughout the weekend, the woman felt feverish. Her brain was in overdrive. She watched the man help her mother bring in groceries and then help her father shovel the driveway. She was in disbelief when her father went out and came back with a bottle of whiskey. She didn't know that he drank whiskey. She then had to recalculate the fifty-fifty ratio to take into account the whiskey. For each meal, her mother set out a pair of

chopsticks and also cutlery. When the man chose the chopsticks, her parents smiled at him as if he were a clever monkey who had put the square peg into the square hole.

That he could use chopsticks correctly elicited another smile, even a clap. Then they complimented him on everything, from the color of his hair down to the color of his shoes.

The woman was glad that her parents were being nice, as it dispelled the cliché of difficult Asian parents. Previously she had explained to the man that her parents had a tendency to be cold, but the coldness was more a reflex from years of being underdogs than their natural state. When her parents turned out not to be cold at all, the woman was glad, but then she wondered why they hadn't been more difficult. Why hadn't her father been more like a typical American dad and greeted the man at their cookie-cutter door with a cookie-cutter threat?

By the end of the weekend, her mother had pulled her aside to say that she should consider moving to New York. The man had thrown the idea out there, and the woman didn't know how to respond.

"I'm just sayin'—seventeen TVs in this joint and you can't turn one to the dressage championship?"

I'm not sure yet, she told her mother. But we're going to look for jobs in both places.

Her mother nodded and said, Good. Then she reminded the woman that a man like that wouldn't wait around forever.

For their last piece of omakase, the chef presented them with the classic tamago egg on sushi rice. The egg was fluffy and sweet. How was that? the chef asked. He asked this question after every course, with his shoulders slumped forward, and their response—that it was the best tamago egg on sushi rice they'd ever had—pushed his shoulders back like a strong wind.

The Japanese way, the woman thought. Or perhaps the Asian way. Or perhaps the human way.

Dessert was two scoops of mocha ice cream. For the remainder of the meal, the man kept asking the chef why he'd been fired. Another bottle of sake had arrived.

It's nothing interesting, the chef said.

I doubt that, the man said. Come on. We're all friends here.

Though neither he nor the woman knew the chef's name, and vice versa. During the meal, no one else had come into the restaurant. People had stopped by the window and looked at the menu but had moved on.

Management, the chef finally said. He was done making sushi and had begun to clean the counter. He would clean the counter and wash his rag. Then he would clean the counter again.

His purpose wasn't to clean anymore, the woman decided. It was to look as if he had something to do while he told the story.

What happened? she asked. At this point, she might as well know.

I was fired three weeks ago, the chef said. The manager had booked a party of fifty for a day that I was supposed to have off. Then he called me in. I initially said no, but the party was for one of our regulars. I said I couldn't serve a party of fifty on my own and he would need to call in backup. He said O.K., and an hour later I showed up. But there was no backup, just me. The manager was Chinese, and said that he had called other chefs but no one had come.

The chef stopped cleaning for a moment to wash his rag. I'm not an idiot, he continued. I knew that was a lie. So I only made sushi for two people. I refused to make sushi for the other forty-eight, and eventually the entire party left.

Bold, the man said.

The woman didn't say anything. There was a piece of egg stuck between her molars and she was trying to get it out with her tongue. When she couldn't, she used a finger. She stuck her finger into the back of her mouth. Then she wiped the piece of egg—no longer yellow and fluffy but white and foamy—on her napkin.

I'm Chinese, the woman said reflexively, the way her parents might have.

The chef went back to cleaning his counter. The man cleared his throat. He said, not specifically to the woman or the chef but to an invisible audience, That's not what the chef meant.

I know, the woman said. She was looking at the man. I know that's not what he meant. I just wanted to put it out there. I don't mean anything by it, either.

The man rolled his eyes and a spike of anger went through the woman. Or maybe two spikes. She imagined taking two toothpicks and sticking them through the man's pretty eyes to stop them from rolling. Then she imagined making herself a very dry Martini with a skewer of olives.

Sorry, the chef said. He was now rearranging the boxes of sesame seeds and bonito flakes. He was smiling but not making eye contact. In a moment, he would start humming and the woman would not be able to tell if he was sorry for what he'd said or sorry that she was Chinese. A mix of both? She wanted to ask which one it was, or how much of each, but then she would sound insane. She didn't want to sound insane, yet she also didn't want to be a quiet little flower. So there she was, saying nothing but oscillating between these two extremes. In truth, what could she say? The chef was over sixty years old. And the Chinese, or so she'd heard, were the cheapest of the cheap.

The man never called her sweetheart. Sweetheart, he said, I think you've had enough to drink. Then he turned to the chef. Time to go, methinks.

The chef spoke only to the waitress after that. He called her over to help the couple settle the bill. The woman put her credit card down while the man pretended not to notice. She tipped her usual twenty per cent.

What was that? the man said once they were outside. It had got colder. It would take them fifteen minutes to walk home.

I'm not mad at him, the woman said.

And you shouldn't be. He was just telling a story.

Again, I'm not mad at him.

The man understood. They walked in silence for a while before he said, Look, I wasn't the one who told the story and you have to learn not to take everything so personally. You take everything so personally.

Do I?

Also, you have to be a little more self-aware.

Aware of what?

The man sighed.

Aware of what?

The man said, Never mind. Then he put a hand on her head and told her to stop overthinking it. ♦

Weike Wang is the author of the novel "Chemistry," which won the PEN/Hemingway Award and the Whiting Award in fiction.