

White-Chinese Thanksgiving in Harlem

It's Thanksgiving, and I'm standing on Lenox Avenue and 127th Street in Harlem with my twin daughters, Nori and Helena, waiting for Melanie and her two kids. This is the first time my kids are meeting Melanie, though my third daughter isn't here because she's taking some time off from college to hang out in Europe. Rather than cook for Thanksgiving, I've made a reservation at Sylvia's, the queen of Harlem restaurants, an obligatory watering hole on presidential campaign trails and, I think, a novel place for our Chinese-Caucasian crowd to celebrate Thanksgiving.

The six of us are crammed around a table for four where, beyond introductions, no one's talking much. In any event, the din would make hearing difficult. I flag down one of the waitresses to take our order. She says that *our* waitress is the one who gave us our menus, which isn't her. Squeezing my shoulder affectionately, she says, loud enough for all the people around to hear, that all the waitresses *here* probably look alike to me.

“Good going, Dad,” Nori says. “Just relax, huh.”

“Okay, honey,” I say. “Did I tell you Melanie’s opening a massage business?”

“Oh, uh, where?”

“Lew Jeesee. Maybe Connicut,” Melanie says.

“New Jersey or Connecticut,” I say, translating, the subject triggering none too fond memories of chauffeuring Melanie all over New Jersey and Connecticut looking at potential store locations, brokers quizzing me about the nature of the business, a subject I elide to avoid insinuations about “Asian massage.”

Sylvia’s food is ghastly, the most fatty, salty, sugary extreme of black cuisine, all served at room temperature, apparently having sat in chaffing dishes all morning; soggy fried chicken, dried-out turkey, greasy ribs floating in an ocean of barbecue sauce, tough collard greens, watery mashed potatoes, lumpy pumpkin pie.

“Do you understand her?” Nori asks on the subway after Sylvia’s as I accompany the twins to Grand Central Station to get their train back to Connecticut.

“Sometimes. Did I tell you I’m learning Mandarin? Did you know that there are many dialects in China but they all use the same characters, so everyone—”

“You’re learning Mandarin to understand her?” Nori asks.

“I like the culture and—”

“So it’s like you were learning Russian for those Russian women?”

“Well maybe. But I’m—”

“Why do you move into their worlds, Dad? Does she go out to Montauk with you?”

“She doesn’t like the sun. Asians generally hate the sun. In Chinatown they walk around with umbrellas on sunny—”

“What does she do for you, Dad?”

“She cooks my favorite, ma po tofu. If my arm hurts, she’ll massage it forever. And she got me a Nook and—”

“That isn’t—”

“And someone in Chinatown who cuts my hair for fifteen bucks . . .”

“Why don’t you find someone less than twenty years younger than you? Someone smart and similar. Someone whose apartment you don’t have to set up and furnish, whose chiropractor appointments you don’t

have to pay for, whose food shopping you don't have to do, whose kids you don't have to get Western food for and get into high school and drive all over. Someone who you understand and who gets you, and who has a real job. And if she's got to be Asian, what happened to the one working at that big company, the one with the chemistry doctorate?"

"I texted her a while ago."

"What did she say?"

"She didn't answer," I say, not adding how disappointed I was.