

Taboo

The civilization discovered on the Earth-like planet was composed of a species almost indistinguishable from humans. The predominant theory was that sometime in the distant past, interstellar travel had been developed, then lost. Two social scientists were assigned to study the society and document its nature.

Polly and Anna walked through the city as if they were two young college girls on vacation, eager for strange sights and sounds. Their sightseeing served a professional purpose as well. There is no better way to study people than to seem not to be studying them.

Hunger crept upon the two young ladies as they strolled the brightly lit boulevards. Only then did they notice that among all the neon-signed boutiques, bookstores, theaters, and nightclubs was not a single restaurant.

"Where do you suppose we could eat?" asked Polly.

"This city is probably zoned. Hotels on one street, used car lots on another, and somewhere a restaurant row."

"Well, let's ask. I'm starved." A middle-aged lady stood at a bus stop nearby. Ann asked. The lady gasped, blushed, and walked away from them without a word.

"Do you suppose she misunderstood us? After all, these quickie language courses don't make one's accent perfect."

"Could be. Let's try again." They approached a young man and carefully enunciated the words for "Where could we get something to eat?"

He reacted by raising his eyebrows in obvious surprise. Then he gave them such a leer that Anna looked down to see if her blouse was unbuttoned. It wasn't; at least, not that much. The young man bent down and asked in a low voice, "Do you really want some food?"

"Yes", said Polly, "We're ravenous." The native could not hide the shock in his expression at that word, but he quickly recovered. He glanced furtively around and whispered, "Come with me. I know a place."

They walked two blocks down the broad boulevard and turned into a darker, less traveled side street. It was lined with large windowless structures, apparently warehouses. Another turn took them onto a narrow alleyway, which became a meandering pathway, sandwiched between a high metal fence on either side. They walked silently along the strange dark route. A gate appeared in the seemingly endless fence, which the trio entered. Crossing the short expanse of bare ground, they arrived at what looked like the back door of a private dwelling. The man knocked. "Kzork?" came a voice.

"Zelbo 1421," replied Zelbo. The door drifted slowly open. The smell of cooking food wafted faintly out the opening, but it was hard to detect amid a heavy artificial odor blended with it.

They were led down a narrow hallway by an old white-haired woman. The hall was lined with doors. Their wrinkled usherette opened one of them and indicated they should enter. It was a 1.5 meter square cubicle with a table, chairs, and a plastic garbage can. "Fifty fkogs," said the woman, her hand outstretched. Polly dug into her bag and paid her, calculating the currency equivalent and realizing the price to be very high.

Having collected, the white-haired hostess disappeared. Zelbo waited until the ladies were seated, then bid goodbye to them. "Won't you stay and eat with us?" Anna asked.

Zelbo blushed and looked away for a moment. "No, thank you." He gave them a forced smile and strode quickly away.

Alone in the cubicle, the women began to analyze the bewildering procedure surrounding the usually simple act of eating out. "It's like the old whorehouses they used to have on Earth. Or one of those prohibited-drug parlors."

"Could eating be illegal?"

"Not completely, I'm sure. Everyone would starve. But maybe it's banned in public-- considered obscene. Only allowed in private."

"Well, this is certainly private." Polly looked around the cramped cubicle at the four bare walls.

"Even places like this must be outside the law." Just then, the door opened halfway and the old woman appeared carrying a large plastic plate filled with food, and two smaller plates, empty, of the same material. She arranged them on the table and left, closing the door behind her.

Dinner consisted of patties of simulated meat made from vegetable protein, an unrecognizable green vegetable, and several slices of bread. It proved to be tasty and sufficient for the two of them, but hardly worth the price charged.

While eating, Anna had noticed two pieces of black cloth lying on the table. Thinking they were napkins, she picked one up and discovered it to be a mask, obviously meant to cover the eyes and block the vision. Anna and Polly began to feel a tingle of excitement at having done something illegal and gotten away with it. The mystery and intrigue of finding and patronizing this “underground” establishment made the spartan atmosphere and average cuisine seem as appealing as a fancy restaurant back home.

Polly emitted a wicked giggle. “It’s been a pleasure eating with you, Anna.”
“But will you respect me in the morning?”

As they emerged from the restaurant, Polly and Anna were met with a broad Cheshire-cat grin in the dimness. They responded with a grin of their own-- Zelbo had waited for them. They followed him, of course, and were not surprised to have been led to his residence.

In the morning the two social scientists were able to report that the natives were not at all inhibited about sexual activity, but that centuries of hunger from an extended period of famine and overpopulation had caused strict taboos, deeply ingrained, against eating in public. No doubt there had been a time when a public eater might touch off a riot among the less fortunate. Though the food supply had since become adequate, it had never reached a level high enough to erase the inhibitions about consumption.

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