

The Restaurant of Many Orders
A translation of and commentary on Kenji Miyazawa's story
『注文の多い料理店』

George Wallace

宮沢賢治の『注文の多い料理店』の英訳と解説

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Two young gentlemen dressed like officers in the British Army were walking deep in the mountains. They had shiny new rifles and a pair of huskies the size of polar bears. They chatted as they went.

“These mountains are such a disappointment. There’s not a single bird or beast for us to bag. I’ve got to the stage I don’t care what I shoot, just as long as I get something.”

“Wouldn’t it be fun to fire off a round of bullets bang slap into the soft belly of a deer, and then watch it stagger and crash to the ground!”

They were so high up in the mountains, even their guide, a professional hunter, had got lost, wandering off somewhere on the way. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, now their dogs were getting spooked; they started howling and growling, foaming at the mouth before suddenly keeling over.

One of the gentlemen checked his dog’s eyelids.

“That’s two thousand four hundred that’s just gone down the drain.”

“That’s nothing. Mine cost two thousand eight.”

The first gentleman went a whiter shade of pale.

“We should start making tracks for home.”

“Roger that. It’s getting mighty chilly and I’m hungry. Let’s head back.”

“Enough hunting for today. We can pick up some pheasants at ten yen a pop at that lodge where we stayed last night.”

“They had hare too, didn’t they? No need to go home empty-handed.”

There was just one slight problem : the two gentlemen didn’t have the foggiest idea how to

get down the mountain. The wind was blowing, buffeting the leaves, as the branches creaked and groaned, and the grass swished and swayed.

“I’m starving. My stomach’s rumbling so much, the pain’s more than I can bear.”

“Same here. I’m all in.”

“My feet are killing me.”

The two gentlemen walked slowly through the long grass. Suddenly they caught sight of a magnificent brick building. Over the entrance there was a sign.

WILDCAT HOUSE – Western Food is Our Speciality!

“Just what the doctor ordered! Let’s get stuck in!”

“Seems a bit odd there being a restaurant out here in the middle of nowhere. Still, if we can get a bite to eat, I won’t be complaining.”

“Of course, we can. The sign says so, doesn’t it?”

“Okay, let’s give it a go. If I don’t eat soon, I’ll faint.”

The two gentlemen walked in. The entrance hall was decorated with white tiles. It looked lovely. In front of them was a glass door with gold letters on it.

Everyone is welcome. Please feel free to help yourself.

The two gentlemen were ecstatic.

“What do you say to that, then? We’ve been through the mill today, but look, our luck’s changed at last! This place is a restaurant, and what’s more, they don’t even charge!”

“Seems so. That’s what the sign implies, doesn’t it?”

They pushed open the door and went in. They found themselves in a corridor. On the back of the glass door there was another sign.

We extend a particularly warm welcome to all our well-upholstered customers and younger patrons.

The two gentlemen were all smiles.

“How about that then? You and me, we’re guaranteed a warm welcome!”

“Yes, indeedly! We fit the bill on both counts, don’t we just?”

They walked down the corridor and came to another door, this one painted bright blue.

“What a strange place! I wonder why there are so many doors?”

“This is like one of those Russian dolls.”

They were about to push open the blue door when they noticed a sign in yellow letters above it.

We ask for your patience and understanding — we are a restaurant of many orders.

“They must be booked solid. And them being all the way out here!”

“But of course. Just think about it. You don’t see the top restaurants in Tokyo on the busy main streets. They’re all hidden away somewhere quiet.”

The two gentlemen went through the blue door. There was another sign.

We have a large volume of orders so please bear with us.

“What on earth is that supposed to mean?”

“I suppose it means they’re sorry, but it might take some time to get all the food ready. They simply have so many orders to prepare.”

“No doubt you’re right. I just hope we can get a table soon.”

“Fingers crossed, eh?”

But frustratingly, first there was another door to face. Next to it was a mirror and below that a brush with a long handle. There was a sign in red ink.

Customers are requested to comb their hair and brush any dirt from their boots.

“Well, I never! What a fancy establishment this is!”

“They certainly have strict house rules. No doubt they cater to a very discerning clientele.”

The two gentlemen combed their hair and brushed the mud from their boots.

No sooner had they put the brush back in its place than it began to fade away. A sharp gust of wind blew into the room.

Astonished, the two gentlemen huddled closer together. They pushed open the door and went into the next room. They were beginning to feel if they didn’t get something to eat soon, they would collapse in a heap on the floor.

There was another sign.

Please leave your guns and your bullets here.

Next to the door was a long black table.

“I suppose it’s not the done thing to take guns into the dining area.”

“Perhaps they’ve got some VIPs in tonight.”

The two gentlemen took off their rifles, unbuckled their leather belts and put them on the table.

The next door was black.

There was yet another sign.

Please take off your hats, coats and boots.

“What do you reckon? Should we do as it says?”

“We don’t have much choice, do we? There must be some very lah-di-dah customers here today.”

They hung their hats and coats on the hooks, took off their boots and walked through the doorway in their stocking feet.

On the other side of the door there was another sign.

Please leave all metal objects here, including tiepins, cuff links, spectacles, and anything sharp. Please leave your wallets, too.

Next to the door there sat a magnificent black lacquer safe, with its door slightly ajar. There was even a key.

“Maybe they use electricity when they cook the food. Anything metallic would be dangerous, especially anything sharp.”

“You’re probably right. I guess this means we’ll pay our bill here on our way out.”

“That must be it.”

The two gentlemen took off their glasses and their cuff links, and put them in the safe, which they then locked with the key.

They walked on a few steps further and came to another door. There was a glass jar in front of it and a sign on the door.

Please rub the cream in this jar all over your hands, face and feet.

The jar was full of dairy cream.

“Why on earth do they want us to rub ourselves with cream?”

“It’s cold outside, and here it’s very warm, so I reckon this cream is to keep our skin from drying out and cracking. There must be some important customers here today. I wouldn’t be surprised if we didn’t find ourselves rubbing shoulders with royalty.”

The two gentlemen rubbed cream onto their hands and faces, then took off their socks and rubbed cream onto their feet and toes. There was still a little left over, which they surreptitiously scooped down while pretending to rub it on their faces.

They opened the door as quickly as they could and hurried through.

There was another sign behind the door.

Did you rub the cream in properly? And did you remember to do your ears?

There in front of them was another, smaller jar of cream.

“Well, I never! I completely forgot to do my ears. That was a close call. They might have ended up all chapped and cracked. The owners of this place have thought of everything.”

“They’ve got it all sorted, down to the very last detail, haven’t they? I’m dying for a bite to eat, but it feels like this corridor’s going to go on forever.”

Before they knew it, they were standing before another door.

Dinner will be served shortly. We will not keep you waiting more than ten minutes at the very most. Please splash a few drops of the perfume in the bottle onto your head.

In front of the door there was a golden bottle. The two gentlemen took the bottle and splashed the perfume over their heads.

For some strange reason the liquid in the bottle smelled an awful lot like vinegar.

“This perfume smells an awful lot like vinegar, you know.”

“Must have been a mix-up. Maybe one of the waitresses caught a cold and put out the wrong bottle by mistake.”

The two gentlemen opened the door and went in.

On the other side of the door there was another sign in big letters.

Sorry for all these tiresome orders. Rest assured this will be the last one. We would very much appreciate it if you would take some salt from the jar and rub it all over your body.

There was a beautiful blue china jar of salt laid out in front of them. Sadly the two gentlemen were in no fit state to appreciate the gesture. They stood frozen to the spot, staring at each other covered in cream.

“Something fishy’s going on here.”

“Very fishy.”

“When they said there’d be many orders, they meant orders for us.”

“The restaurant won’t be serving us food. It’ll be serving *us* up *as* —”

The gentleman was shaking so much with fright he couldn’t utter another word.

“Let’s g-g-g-get out of here!”

Trembling like a leaf, the other gentleman pushed at the door they had just come through, but it wouldn’t budge an inch. At the far end there was another door. It had two large keyholes, and there was a knife and a fork carved into the wood.

There was another sign.

Thank you for your cooperation. You look quite ready. Please come on through!

Two big blue eyes were peering through the keyholes, sizing them up.

“Help!”

“Oh, my giddy aunt!”

The two gentlemen burst into tears, shivering and shaking. Voices could be heard whispering on the other side of the door.

“Drat! They’re not rubbing on the salt.”

“Of course not! The boss got his wording all wrong. *Sorry for all these tiresome orders*. What sort of an idiot writes that?”

“Why should we care? We’re not going to get a share of the bones, after all.”

“Yeah, but if those two don’t get in here pretty damn quick, it’ll be you and me who take the blame.”

“Let’s call them over... Hello there, fine fellows! Please come on through! The plates are washed and ready, and the vegetables are sprinkled with salt. All that’s left to do is to arrange you and the greens nicely on the clean white plates. This way, please!”

“Over here, please, if you would be so kind. If you’re not keen on greens, we can easily get

the fire going and rustle up a nice fry-up instead. Chop, chop! Let's be having you!"

The two gentlemen stood there sobbing, their bodies all aquiver, their faces crumpled up like scraps of paper.

Laughter could be heard coming from the other side of the door.

"Come on in! Stop your crying or all that lovely cream will get washed away! (*Yes, sir, one moment, sir, your food is almost ready.*) Come on in, you two, hurry up!"

"No hanging about, please! Our boss has got his napkin ready, he's licking his lips, and he's waiting to welcome you with his carving knife."

The two gentlemen cried and sobbed, and sobbed and cried.

Suddenly from behind, they heard barking and their polar-bear-sized dogs burst into the room. In a flash, the eyes at the keyholes were gone. The huskies ran round and round, barking and snarling, before hurling themselves at the door. It flew open with a crash, and the dogs leaped through as if sucked in by the wind. From the pitch-black darkness beyond came a cacophony of snapping and meowing.

Suddenly there was a big puff of smoke, and before they knew it, the two gentlemen found themselves in a field of long grass, shivering with cold. Their boots and coats were hanging from the branches of a tree, and their wallets and tiepins lay scattered on the ground. A sharp gust of wind blew, buffeting the leaves, as the branches creaked and groaned. The grass swished and swayed. The dogs appeared at their side, panting. Behind them they could hear someone calling out.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

The two gentlemen suddenly felt a whole lot better.

"Come quick! We're over here!"

The professional hunter came striding towards them through the swaying grass in his straw cape. The two gentlemen could finally breathe a sigh of relief. They ate some dumplings the hunter had brought with him, and on their way back to Tokyo they bought some pheasants at ten yen a pop.

But back in the big city, no matter how many hot baths they bathed in, the two gentlemen never quite managed to lose their look of crumpled up paper.

Commentary on the text

Two well-off young men hire a local guide when they go hunting in the Tohoku mountains. They are big city types, full of themselves and full of insouciance. They think of the mountains as their playground, and all the animals there as fair game for their guns. They have bought the

latest gear, no doubt at great expense. They are vying with each other to see who can lavish the most money on this outing. They are looking forward to regaling friends of their trip and of all the animals they killed. They are dressed up in such finery, they look like officers in the British army. The country bumpkins will have never seen anything like it. They will be blown away.

The two young gentlemen have bought two large dogs at eye-watering expense. Quite why they need the dogs is not clear ; it would appear their being the size of a polar bear is important. Just as some men like to smoke unfeasibly large cigars, these big-city boys want to impress people with the size of their dogs (and by extension, by the size of their wallets). We learn how much the dogs cost, when the poor animals keel over and (appear to) die. The gentlemen complain testily about the money they have lost, but they do not feel sad at the sudden demise of their pets. They do not worry about the dogs' welfare or attempt to find out what is wrong with them. They see the dogs merely as bling, as status symbols, as cool accessories that make them look good ; in the final analysis they see them as poor returns on investment, and move on without giving a further thought to them.

These tubby twins, the Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee of Tohoku, are not on the African savanna, but in many other respects they fit the bill as would-be big game hunters looking for some fun at some poor animals' expense. They may not be after lions and elephants, but these boys do want blood ; they want to see their bullets ripping into soft flesh. They want trophies to take home to show off to their family and friends. Their shiny new guns are ready and so are they.

Reader, you want to see these boys suffer, don't you?

Yes, please. And then some.

This is no modern twenty-first century morality tale. This story first appeared in 1924 in a collection aimed at children. The book did not sell. What made the author think that young readers in Iwate prefecture would be interested in learning about the fate of two eminently dislikeable hunters? Hunters who dressed in uniforms worn by officers in the British army? Would young readers in 1924 have had any inkling what a uniform worn by an officer in a foreign army thousand miles away might look like?

Why indeed should anyone today be interested in these two nincompoops as they seek to satisfy their bloodlust in the Japanese countryside? They are clearly not characters we will warm to.

This tale is a comedy, a comedy of errors. It is a tale of two vain and stupid young men with more money than brains. They feel smug and superior because they are from the capital city and they have come to this rural backwater, this god-forsaken corner of the country for a

bit of fun and games, a bit of blood and gore.

The author presents the reader with these two morally reprehensible characters with no discernible redeeming features, and allows us to join him in laughing at them. We watch them as they slowly strip off their expensively-assembled layers of clothing, too stupid to notice the danger they are in. As they shed their clothes, their tie pins and their cuff links, we marvel at their lack of common sense. Why on earth would anyone wear a tie pin and cuff links when out hunting in the mountains?

We marvel at their ridiculous conversation as they wonder which famous people they might meet in the dining hall. They think they are preparing themselves for dinner, and indeed they are. It just never dawns on them that they are the main course. The tables have been turned : the hunters are now the hunted. The Tokyo boys have stumbled into a Tohoku trap. They have been outwitted by the country bumpkins they look down on. And yet they are too stupid to see that something is not quite right until it is almost too late. Ironically it is the dogs they cared so little about that come to their rescue and save their cream-covered skins.

It is fricassee of farce and satire all rolled into one. The farce is played out in a long corridor, a production line of sorts, as the men get themselves ready for the oven step by step, all the while supposing they are about to enter a dining room where they will rub shoulders with the rich and famous. The satire is aimed at the metropolitan moneyed elite who see the world as their own private playground and who pride themselves of knowing the price of everything (but the value of nothing).

When the dogs they have bought at vast expense keel over, the men do not worry about the dogs ; no, they simply calculate what sum of money they have lost.

When the professional guide goes missing, the men do not show concern for his safety ; they do not even notice he has gone. It is as if his presence does not register with them. Like a royal prince who does not see the servants around him in a room, the hunters are not aware that their guide is no longer there by their side.

The men are so self-centered, so fixated on themselves and their own needs and desires, they find it impossible to think of anything but their grumbling bellies. Their hunger for food and for some 'prize' to make this trip worthwhile are the only two driving forces they know. They show no appreciation for nature at all, saying the mountains are a major disappointment because they have not provided them with a bountiful supply of animals to shoot at. In their eyes, nature is there to satisfy their needs, to provide them with things they want. Not only food, but also thrills and spills, blood and guts. An adrenaline rush. A bit of fun.

There is a clear undercurrent of sadism and cruelty running through this tale. The men want to watch their victims' flesh being torn asunder by their bullets. They want to watch as

the poor animals slump to the ground with their lifeblood pouring from their sides. The men will enjoy their kills and will enjoy watching the pain they cause. When it does not materialize, they almost feel cheated, as if nature is being a spoilsport.

This story is full of irony. The two hunters are said to be 'gentlemen' but they are clearly not. They aspire to being gentlemen, and in their eyes, the epitome of being a gentleman is an officer in the British army. So they dress the part. They assume the mantle of a gentleman, but they are anything but. They are not gentle ; they are not considerate of others. These two boys are bullies. And yes, they are not men, they are boys. They may have big bodies and lots of money, but their minds are the immature minds of teenage boys, full of their own self-importance.

These vain fools who think they are gentlemen because they can afford to affect the outward appearance of a British army officer (and a gentleman) are taught a lesson, but sadly they are so stupid, they do not learn from their experience. There is no moment of epiphany for them when they see how close they came to disaster and resolve to turn over a new leaf. They have a very lucky escape, but it does not seem to register with them. They do not become reformed characters who mend their ways ; they do not thank their guide or their dogs for saving their proverbial bacon ; they do not look at themselves in the mirror and think what fools they have been. No. They simply don their ridiculous clothes, before stopping off at an inn to buy some pheasants to take back to Tokyo as souvenirs.

The guide is the only other human we see in this story, and he does not affect to be something he is not. He is a professional. He knows what is important (wear the right clothing ; carry some provisions ; travel light) and knows the mountains well enough not to mistake them for a playground. He is a guide and he dresses accordingly, in a straw cape. He is not aping some exotic image of a soldier in a distant land. He is not a follower of fashion, a fan of frippery, but is someone who diligently and quietly goes about his job with a minimum of fuss. He does not have the time or money or inclination to worry himself with wondering what Western delights there may be on the menu or which wonderful A-listers may be dining here in this outré bistro tonight, one that caters only to the most discerning gourmets. He does not bring Western food with him, but Japanese dumplings. The dumplings will fill you up and give you energy when you are cold and tired and hungry. They will help you get down off the mountains when the fog has closed in and you cannot concentrate because your blood sugar is dangerously low.

The guide stands in clear contrast to the two gentlemen. He is a local and knows what he is doing. They are from the big city and think they know what they are doing, but in fact are totally out of their depth. Their ignorance and arrogance will put their lives at risk.

The gentlemen are young and portly and on their way to being served up as cat food to the Wildcat whose restaurant they have stumbled upon. They are dazzled by its aura of Western sophistication, encapsulated in the materials used : the bricks, the white tiles, the lacquer safe, the signs in gold ink. They read the signs and yet they do not pick up on their ambiguity and their sense of menace. The gentlemen are unable to read between the lines ; this inability creates a thrilling sense of dramatic irony as the reader quickly cottons onto what is going on, and is left to wonder if these numbskulls will twig in time what fate lies in store for them. Surely, but surely they must guess that something is up now when they douse themselves with vinegar, but no! They don't. They put it down to a waitress with a bad head cold making a mistake about which bottle to put out. As if bottles of vinegar and bottles of perfume would be kept in the same place in a restaurant! Their blind stupidity beggars belief, but it is also very funny.

Two city mice have come to the country full of their own importance and full of misplaced confidence, but they leave with their tails between their legs, having only just escaped from being eaten by a country cat.

They return to Tokyo looking like crumpled up pieces of paper. They have had the stuffing knocked out of them, and they look like shadows of their former selves. No matter how many hot baths they take, they will never wash away the memory of that corridor, those doors, all those signs. And at how close they came to becoming cat food. They will no doubt have told their circle of friends what a fine time they had of it in the mountains, but the two of them will know how close they came to being served up on a nice clean plate, covered in cream, doused in vinegar, and sprinkled with salt.