

“menrva/CASA”
James Deutsher

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Press Release:

The Eater Trilogy by S.T. Lore

Apertivo

Composing the gift card inscriptions had sorely tested his literary talent: a task he found, both poetic and shamelessly tacky. ‘Mystery is the essence of true romance. Surprise your sweetheart with our two-for-one weekend getaway.’ The coupons were designed hourly for hotel chains, day spa retreats and dim sum restaurants, yet despite his reservations, he persisted. It wasn’t until he was offered his latest opportunity that dormant ambitions truly swelled: ‘Media Communications Officer for Global Luxury Brand. Full-time appointment. Prepared to Travel.’ The interview went well and he was hired. On the first day, while he set-up his desk, an Italian chap sat down next to him: he wore a linen suit, leather shoes without socks, and put his feet right up onto the table in a brash demonstration of dominance and of ownership. Swiftly, the atmosphere became murderously competitive and infused with the scent of hideous cologne. The Italian swiped the desk clear with his foot and proceeded to speak loudly and fluently in Catalan. The screen of his large desktop PC was crowded with friends on the other side of the globe, as he leant back in his chair, gesticulating wildly with his arms for the benefit of the tiny video camera. His tanned friends wore expensive sunglasses and smoked cigarettes and a beautiful girl kissed the screen with her bright red lips. The weather was sunny wherever they were; a background of crumbling sandstone buildings; the high branches of a single palm tree against a blue velvet sky. And the Italian man kept saying: ‘Ciao, Ciao, Ciao’, when surely a single goodbye is sufficient enough. Another fifteen minutes of this tirade and Vincent could not listen anymore: there was no space for concentration. Editorial deadlines were spaced 40 minutes apart, and the whole time, executives were monitoring him: watching on closed circuit cameras; timing with a stopwatch; all the expectations of relationship building, evening drinks, and the shaking of hands. Determined to succeed, Vincent forced himself awkwardly past the Italian, and shuffled to another desk braced against the outside window. The skyline had darkened with rain clouds. He missed his friends and felt lonely without the comfort of people who were similar. But, he could never confess such weakness: much better to put on the brave face. ‘Look I have to go now. I can’t speak any longer. Please do not contact me at work.’ The walk home was pleasant enough. Fruit bats migrated limpidly across the night sky. He snapped a photograph of them on his phone but the resolution was too low and the image appeared small, blurry and pathetic: not something to share. When he arrived home, he turned the heater on, and speed dialed his phone: ‘Domino’s cheese pizza, please.’ ‘Yes the large, oh yeah, and a can of coke. Oh you only have Pepsi. That’s ok. Don’t worry about it. Just the pizza thanks.’

Primo

‘A lawyer! Of course!’ The Italian monitored defamation clauses within the company’s media releases and corrected the writer’s ‘weakness for fiction’ (as he called it).

Minerva, 4/111 Macleay Street
Potts Point, Sydney, NSW 2011
Australia +61 (2) 9357 3697
gallery@minervasydney.com
minervasydney.com



Vincent felt suffocated by these arrogant displays of power, but in order to live and survive, it was necessary to write whatever was required. Nothing could have prepared him for the rubbish of that first day. Never again! Anything but that! He had never considered himself a writer nor a journalist, but his script-writing tenders for commercial soap operas and 'public relations' had fallen flat, and though these media requests were performed adequately: it was the bullish nature of it all that hounded him. Weeks later, having barely survived the probationary period, he was soon on-route to Shenzhen for a conference. Four days in June: the height of the northern summer. The transfer from airport to hotel: seamless. The pace of the city: furious. His hotel room was opulent, but remained unoccupied by him for the first 18 hours: cleaners continued to clean the room, dusting around a single folded shirt and the unmade bed. All tasks were fulfilled regardless of necessity: unused towels replaced, water jugs re-filled, the marble bench top polished to a high sheen. The driver of his chauffeured service whisked him on the highways flashing high-beam lights to clear the lanes. Reflections issued above them from glass bridges and mirrored towers and gleaming poolside windows. His translator was female, twenty-four years old, and accompanied him on all his business appointments: hosting five-hour drinking sessions with bullfrog mannered factory owners; organising takeaway meals from street-side vendors. 'If you do not know what to say to the clients, look busy with your hands: eat, smoke, drink. Simply occupy your other senses.' The main client was an international jewellery chain who also manufactured various luxury items: belts, wallets, and handbags. Jewellery remained the largest portion of the market. People value natural stones and their heritage. The rarity. The flaws. The processes of a million years they wish to possess to increase their own status. Vincent was exhausted by the end of three days, but his translator, on her own initiative, had procured front row tickets to a dating show: exclusive and very difficult to get. The show was scheduled for his last night in Shenzhen. 'You must accompany me. It is an unmissable experience for a foreigner.' Having no other plans he naturally accepted. Her colleague was appearing on the show as the third contestant. 'It had been too long, that he had been alone' she said: 'He has never had the natural social skills to stand out amongst the crowd. No discernible style, no shine, nor magnetism.' She considered that he was too polite, too properly mannered for these times. 'I have dressed him and told him what to say. I expect him to succeed'.

Secondo

The studio was filled to capacity as the first video presentation appeared on the large screen. Each contestant presented three videos: heavily edited, scripted and composed. Vincent had been given a handheld device that translated the language and the content. 'Hello everyone! I'm from Shenzhen and my name is Liu Jun. I'm 27 years old and an assistant manager in a luxury goods company. I am a certified jewellery and diamond appraiser in China, the US and the UK. My Grandfather used to collect gemstones, so naturally I grew up loving jewellery and precious stones. I got my first certificate in gemology in college. I then went from jewellery to luxury goods. It was a natural transition as the two are quite similar. Luxury goods taught me about life: about staying low-key, about pursuing perfection and about honouring dreams.' Her young colleague was quaint and charming. He presented himself as elegant and understated and the television hosts had begun to comment on his suitability: 'He talks about luxury, but he dresses poorly.' 'No. You have misinterpreted his presentation. Times change swiftly. His fashion is European and wearing socks without shoes demonstrates his wealth of leisure. Working people cannot afford to be so frivolous.' The young translator smiled. The format of the show had differed in the last few years. No-one was officially allowed to ask about salary or status within the company. Wealth and ambition was to be demonstrated through subtler mechanisms. She leant toward Vincent: 'The grandfather remark cleverly emphasises family succession. A very important value to share with a

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woman looking for family.' She had not always been employed in the translation business. Not so long ago she was a student in Beijing trained in Communications and Digital Media. She then interned for a prestigious Advertising agency before gaining a full-time position in the photographic department. A single mistake soon forced her dismissal. In a terrible coincidence, while commissioning the front-page photograph for the annual State Opera brochure, the image had captured the owner of a major sponsor sitting in the third row with his mistress. It was distributed nationally and broadcast on all the news websites. The agency was sued for defamation and compensation for a large and public divorce. 'Something must be done!' The translator was humiliated publicly; her career effectively destroyed within the space of a single year. Since then, she relied on whatever work she could get.

Dolce

The final round: only three contestants were left out of twenty-four. For the first time in the process direct conversation was to be used and Vincent leaned toward his interpreter for a whispered interpretation: 'Contestant Number Six (Bank Project Manager): You mentioned your long-distance relationship didn't work out, if you start another one, what have you learned from experience that will help make it work? I'll work on communication. When two people differ in their views, or when disagreements arise, communication is a must. I'm not too concerned about a girl's appearance. I care more about how two people get on. Being close emotionally is key to a relationship.' The media training of her colleague had worked a charm. She had packaged, marketed and targeted cupid's arrow perfectly. Everything, even love, was proving to be an arena of competition. 'Bachelor Number Three. Do you have a final statement? 'My friends envy my appetite. They call me 'The Eater'. My record is 62 fresh oysters in one sitting. I felt fine and wasn't too full. I also have a quirk. Whenever I drink a can of coca-cola, I place the ring lid inside the can for safekeeping. This represents my view on commitment. Once together, people should never become separated.' Vincent reached inside his jacket pocket. He had been presented with an elegant pair of rose gold earrings from a factory owner: two small dumpling icons representing abundance and good fortune. His young interpreter had inspired Vincent. She had sacrificed herself for another's happiness; she had sacrificed her own words for his; she had admitted her vulnerability and her own mistakes. Vincent decided then and there, to leave the studio, and not to see the final result. He would place the earrings on his seat. No note. No gift-card. The geography of distance would soon render their connection obsolete. During the advertisement break, he quietly stood-up, but suddenly found his seat illuminated by a stage light. He was the only foreigner in the audience and his mistake was to attract attention. The host began to ask him a question and he did not know how to respond. But, once again, the translator had swiftly stood in his place: 'He is demonstrating his individual nature. He does what he likes. This is what our country is striving for, so please honour him with your applause, as he needs to attend some important business.' Vincent drank a single can of coke on his flight home. He watched a documentary on the food network and half a movie about gangsters. He paused the screen to get some sleep and the frozen image was of a couple holding hands. Suddenly gripped by sentimentality, he wrote some lines on the airplane napkin, and then closed his eyes for the rest of the journey:

If you are not sincere, then do not bother.

Retire at once to the tepid yellowness of your dreams.

Images of erotic violence will soon eclipse all remnants of your living material.

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*N.B. Altered pieces of translated dialogue appear in “Secondo” and “Dolce”. Excerpts from Chinese Dating Game Show: ‘Fei Cheng Wu Rao’ translated literally as ‘No Sincerity. No Bothering.’ Season 3. Episode 14.

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