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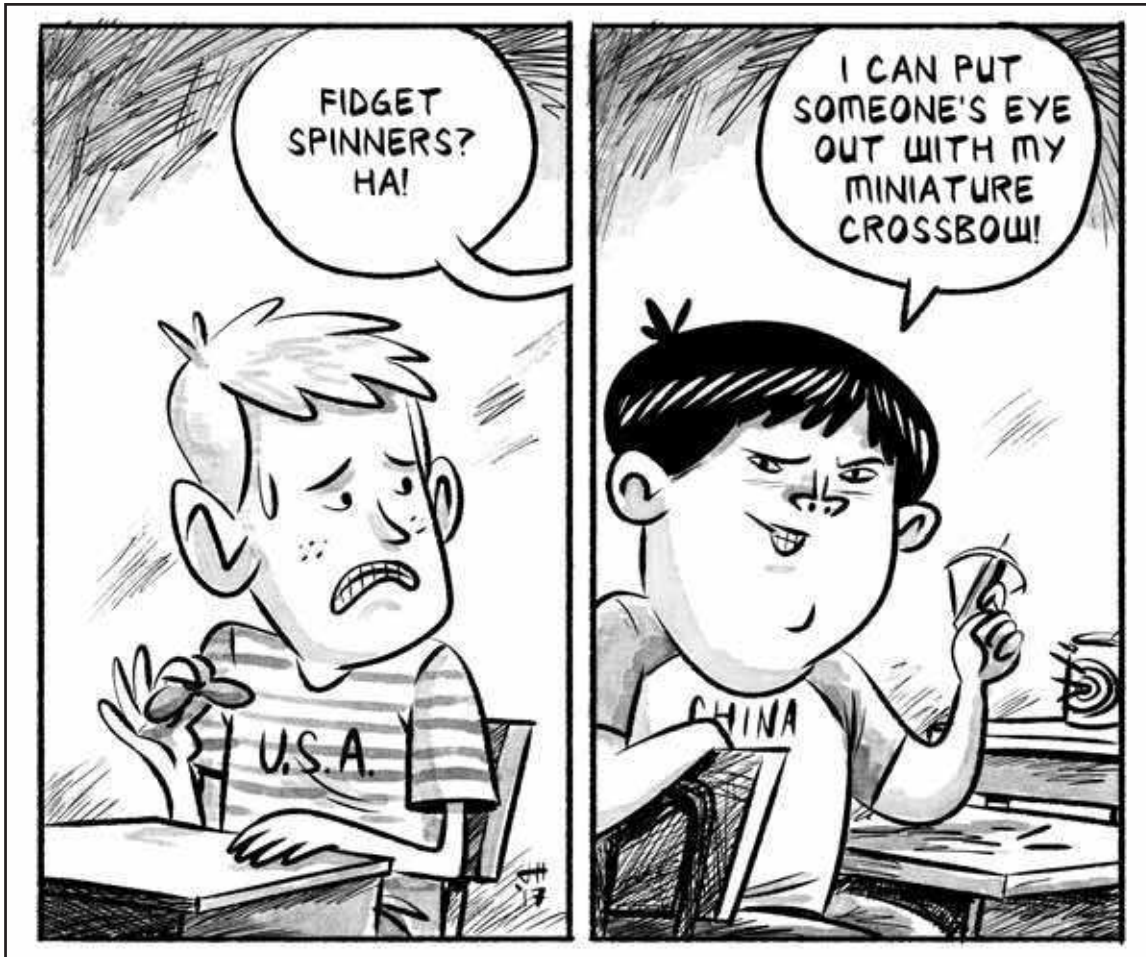
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MY TURN

■ Wayne Chan



There is such a thing as MSG withdrawal

I've heard that the symptoms of withdrawal can be dramatic, but it's only recently that I witnessed the effects in person. Just to be sure, I searched online to better understand some of the symptoms.

The typical signs I found were depression, insomnia, irritability, social isolation, and anxiety. Did these match up with what I noticed? Let me see ... check, check, check, check, and check.

Let me provide a little background. The person I observed going through withdrawal was my brother-in-law Remington, who travelled from Beijing to the United States to attend a training course. The withdrawal he suffered wasn't due to what people normally associate with withdrawal. No, it was Chinese food.

You might say, "That's ridiculous! How can anyone go through withdrawal just from a lack of eating Chinese food?" Look, I agree with you. But, the fact of the matter is, I saw it with my own eyes.

The first couple of days after Remington arrived were easy. In fact, he didn't even want Chinese food. After all, he lives in Beijing. Why on earth after flying 14 hours would he want to eat Chinese food?

When we asked him what kind of cuisine he wanted to try while he was here, his eyes lit up and he said "Mexican!" We proceeded to a place teeming with Mariachis, overflowing bowls of chips and salsa, and a seemingly endless supply of refried beans. Now, before anyone starts schooling me on the fact that it isn't really "authentic" Mexican food, in my defense, number one, I knew that's what he was looking for, and number two, we can save that for a future column.

After polishing off a taco, burrito, and enchilada, we went back home. Remington laid down on our couch with a rounded belly and an expression on his face as if he had just sat through a marathon viewing of the movie *Manchester by the Sea*.

"That was a lot of food," Remington mumbled. "I'm going to skip dinner."

The next morning, I drove Remington to the hotel where his three-day training course was held.

The hotel, which will remain nameless, is in a part of town I'm pretty familiar with. It's an area with a lot of hotels and convention halls, and it's primarily geared toward people travelling on business. Since he didn't have a car during the three days, his only dining options were those within walking distance.

Basically, what that meant was that no matter which restaurant he decided on, the only question the server asked him was, "What else would you like with your hamburger?"

Three days later, I picked him up from the hotel to bring him back to my house before he headed back to Beijing the next morning. I could tell immediately when I pulled up that something had changed. He was not the same person.

Remington wasn't the "happy-go-lucky guy who is up for anything." He wasn't even the guy thinking "I'm engorged with food so just leave me alone." He was another person altogether.

He was standing next to his suitcase right outside the lobby. His eyebrows were furrowed. His lips were pursed. His left foot was tapping the ground anxiously.

"How was the training?" I asked, foolishly. Remington replied, "It was awful!" He seemed irritated I had even asked.

After a few more minutes of tense conversation, it became clear what was going on. In fact, the training went well. He learned a lot and the certification would help him with his work back home. But the food ...

Three days of hamburgers! I can't take it anymore! Every place I went, all they had were hamburgers! The one meal that wasn't a hamburger was lunch, when the hotel brought food for us during the meeting, and that was a sandwich, which is basically just a cold hamburger! If I have another hamburger, so help me!

At this point, I decided that jokingly offering to take him to the Hamburger Factory in our neighborhood likely wouldn't go over well, and probably wouldn't be good for his health, or mine, for that matter.

I headed straight for a restaurant nearby called the Tasty Noodle House. It's one of my favorite Chinese restaurants. I drove there like I was rushing him to the emergency room.

When we arrived at the restaurant, I saw an immediate problem — no parking. I glanced around the lot to make a beeline for anyone walking out who looked like they were about to leave. After a few minutes, a group came out — just in the nick of time. I was afraid Remington was about to get out and pull one of the other cars out of a spot on his own.

So we finally sat down to order. To give you an idea of how much food he ordered, I was seriously considering whether we would qualify for the banquet discount of 15 percent after he was done. The only thing left was waiting for the food to be served.

What is taking so long?!? It doesn't take this long in Beijing! What do I have to do? Go back there and cook it myself? What is going on?!?

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