A Posthumous food story

I had entered the restaurant with some obvious trepidation. To those that knew me, that would have been a surprising revelation because I'm usually a confident if not over confident alpha male who dominates the environs I enter. But this was different. Very different. I was in alien territory .

I was in Japan, actually in Kyoto, not just in the Gion area of Kyoto but in the Yakuza district of Gion. I had been invited to dinner at the Kaz Rui fish restaurant by an important person, a very important person. When I entered, I scanned the room. I noted every customer was male, all had shaven heads and all were covered in tattoos. I was in Yakuza territory.

I knew I was taking a risk. I knew that but I just had to - there was £1million at stake. But there was a hurdle to overcome first. A test and I knew I had to pass the test before being considered for the assignment. I had been told that I would be offered fugu to eat and despite its inherent danger and most people's reluctance to consume it, a rejection would be seen as a slight to my host, my very important host.

Fugu known in the West as puffer fish is infamous as it contains tetrodotoxin, a neurotoxin that is 1,000 times more potent than cyanide and has no known antidote. For this reason very few people would eat it, despite its amazing taste. It is only served in restaurants where the chef has undergone a rigorous three year apprenticeship with extensive specialized training and then passed a strict licensing examination before being allowed to prepare it, because a single mistake would be fatal.

After greeting my host with the customary deferential ojigi greeting, I sat on the floor by the traditional zataku table which was covered with an array of sushi, sashimi, tempura, tonkatsu and yakitori dishes. All were beautifully presented and by each place was a

square wooden sake cup. Three Geisha women immediately appeared and served sake from earthenware vessels to each of us at the table. The very important person, the Kumicho, his senior lieutenant the Saikō-Komon his assistant the Wakagashira and me. The Saiko Komon offered the traditional Kampai toast to the Kamucho. We all raised our cups and drank the saki in one gulp.

Then the fugusashi, **t**hinly sliced raw puffer fish arranged in a chrysanthemum pattern on an ornate plate was served to me with translucent chopped green onions and spicy grated radish with the ponzu citrus-soy sauce on the side. There was only one plate of this dangerous delicacy and it was for me. I bowed my head and with some dread picked up the chop sticks and looked at the faces of the others at the table. With inscrutable expressions they sat and watched me eat. They said nothing. They touched nothing. This was the test, the initiation ritual. I ate; they watched. Everyone knew that even if there was a small trace of the toxin still in the paper thin fugusashi I would be paralysed within 15 minutes and dead within an hour.

It was a short while after I had finished the dish and laid down the chopsticks when they all smiled and toasted me. 15 minutes had elapsed since I had started the dish and I was fine and smiled and bowed again. The three of them bowed in response and the Kamucho nodded at me. This was a sign that I had passed the test. Nothing was said but the bond had been made and the contract sealed. I now knew that the £1 million would be mine after I had performed the hit. A simple assassination to undertake, all in a day's work.

As I left, at the restaurant door I caught the briefest glimpse of the finely polished steel characteristic of a Samurai sword.

My intended target had obvious been ahead of me, in more ways than one. I just lost my head!

Jeremy Hosea

675 words