

Takeaway

A word to the wise.

Tony Ballantyne

Stephanie stretched the phone cord to its full extent and leant around the doorway, gazing into the tiny kitchen beyond.

"There's a customer on the phone wanting two sweet-and-sour porks delivered."

Mr Ho shook fried rice from his wok, expertly filling a silver container.

"Why you telling me that, Stephanie? Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I know, Mr Ho, but the customer wants the order delivered to the anthill on Stonebreak Lane."

Mr Ho frowned. "Ah, that is unusual. Ants usually prefer lemon chicken. Tell them ten minutes."

Stephanie looked at Mr Ho. It wasn't like him to make jokes. It wasn't like him to do anything except to cook and to chastise her for not working hard enough.

"Are you winding me up, Mr Ho?"

"No, Stephanie."

Stephanie held his gaze for a moment, then she shrugged.

"Ten minutes," she said into the phone, and put it down. Mr Ho began to lecture her.

"Your trouble, Stephanie, is you lazy. Think too much about boys and not enough about work. Tell me, you learn speak French at school?"

Stephanie came into the kitchen and leant on the counter as Mr Ho rinsed the black wok under the tap. Steam hissed up.

"Learn French?" said Stephanie. "Why should I when I can run Transl-8 or Lebab or Syntactix? Who learns languages nowadays?"

The wok was already back on the flame.

"Wise people. Look at me. I come to England, I learn to speak the language properly. I don't use computer or headset every day. I want to be treated as Englishman, not foreigner."

"I don't see what that's got to do with the ants."

"How you think they speak English?" Mr Ho dropped a handful of onions and pork into the wok. "You think ants learn for themselves?"

"No. But I didn't think ants could use computers."

"Of course they can't. But software is context sensitive. If you learned languages, you would understand. Words aren't enough, need context too. Like when you say to me 'nice shirt, Mr Ho', the other day. You being sarcastic girl, think I not realize."

"No I wasn't..."

"You think I not clever because I speak with accent. But translating software know about accent and everything else. Context is everything. And context get bigger and bigger. Not just tone of voice, but facial expression, set of body, the whole environment. What called the frame. And so translating software need to do more than just listen to voice, but also to read body language and look at whole environment. Ants part of environment. Small wonder software start to translate movements straight into phone message."

"But why are ants ordering Chinese food?"

"Because my food very tasty. I good cook. Very popular takeaway. You think they want to eat Mr Mahmood's horrible curry? Rancid ghee and chilli powder."

"No! You know that's not what I mean! Why aren't they out hunting for leaves or whatever it is ants eat?"

"Why don't you go out and hunt or farm for food? Takeaway is easier. And tastier. And more efficient for ants. Nest is thriving. Is now 100 yards across!"

"What? How come I didn't know about that?"

"You lazy girl. Only think about boys. Ants nest on television, you not see?"

"No! But... where do they get the money from?"

"Ant nest is near computer assembly factory. Ants ideal for manipulating small parts. Cheaper than machinery too. Ants don't ask much money. Only get enough to buy tasty Chinese food."

"That's ridiculous!"

"No it's not. Is animals adapting to new ecosystem. You not listen to biology either? Too busy speaking to boyfriend."

Mr Ho dropped a handful of pineapple and pepper into the wok. He shook it in a hissing of steam and rattle of frying.

Stephanie bit her lip. "Are all the animals ordering takeaways, then?"

"No. Most animals lazy. Won't move with times. Like relatives who stay at home and not grasp opportunities of Western world."

Mr Ho picked up a ladle and, tossing the contents of the pan all the while, spooned three lots of red sauce over the ingredients.

"You're winding me up, right?" said Stephanie. "You're seriously telling me that because translation software looks



at the whole context of language, it has enabled communication between species, the results of which are that whole ecosystems are changing due to animals exploiting new opportunities. The result of this is that an ant's nest is now ordering takeaway food bought using money it earned by working in a microprocessor plant, this being a more viable means of existence?"

"Elegantly put. See? You clever girl when you want to be."

"So why does that mean I should learn French?"

"Ants not know language properly, not know wider context, so just respond to need. Get exploited. All that work in computer plant, and only get paid enough to buy takeaway."

The sweet and sour pork was ready. Mr Ho expertly divided the contents of the wok between two silver trays.

"All done," he said. "Feed hungry ants. Very good customers. Ah! Here come delivery girl!"

"Delivery girl?" said Stephanie. "What happened to Adam?"

"Too expensive. And lazy. Prefer spend time chatting to you than delivering tasty food. Delilah more reliable."

Stephanie looked down at Delilah as she trotted into the little kitchen, tail wagging. She was very good, eyes to the front, not stopping to sniff anything. Mr Ho bagged the order, putting the handle into her mouth.

"Good girl," he said as the dog trotted out of the shop. "Work very hard."

Stephanie watched her go.

The next day, she signed up for French lessons. ■

Two of Tony Ballantyne's most recent stories appear in *The Year's Best SF 13*, edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer. His next novel, *Twisted Metal*, is published in May by Macmillan.