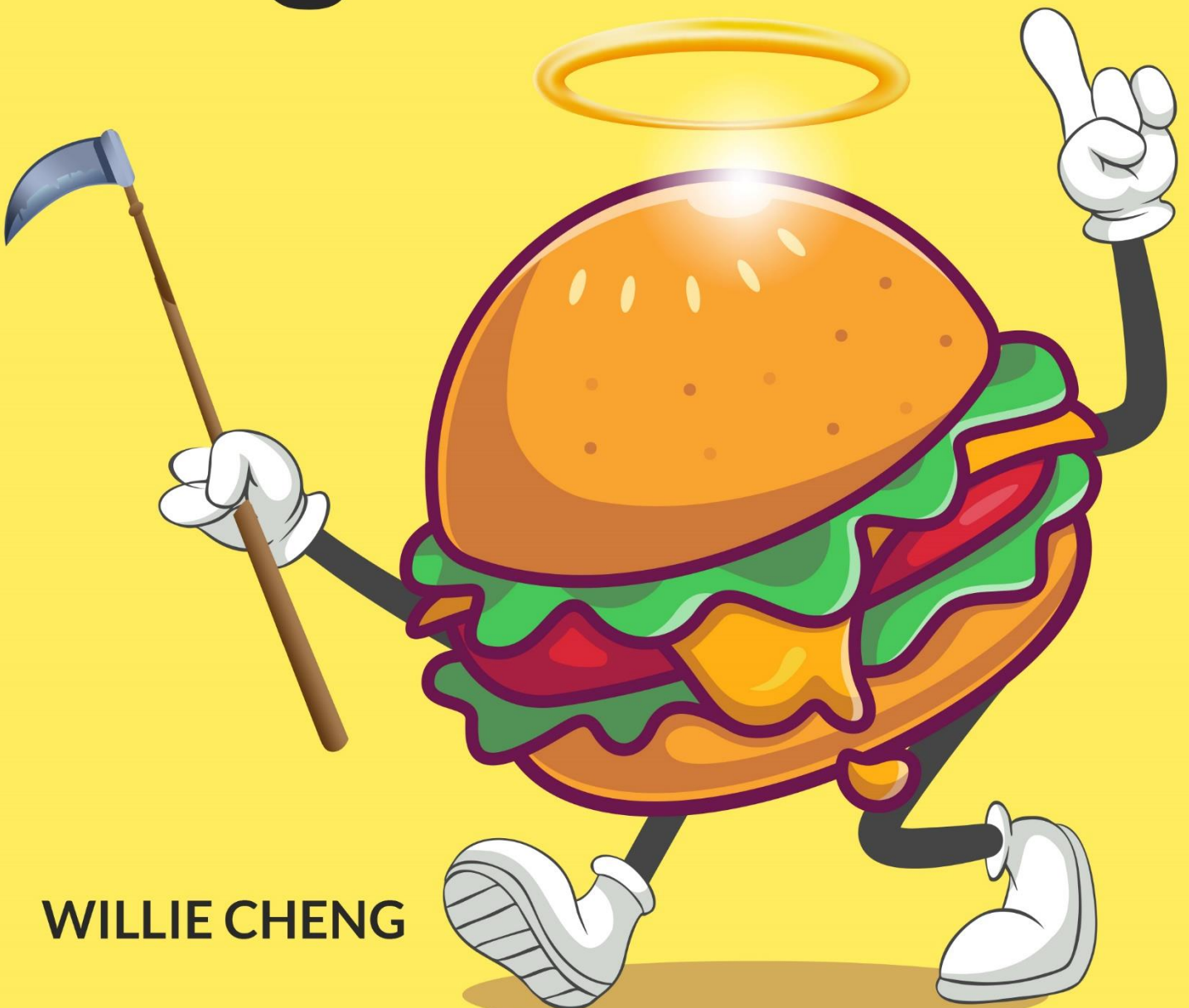


THE BUSINESS TIMES

The ~~Expialidocious~~ Burger



WILLIE CHENG

Part I

Inspired by the headlines on plant burgers and unicorns, this fiction piece explores where meatless meat alternatives could take us and the related ethical implications.

JOANNA Johnson had not expected the meeting with her big boss, Patrick Green, President and CEO of Inkredible Foods, to be productive given his confrontational tone when she entered his office in Little Rock, Arkansas. “What’s so good about the morning?” he had curtly countered when she wished him “Good morning”.

Used to his moods, Joanna ignored his retort and made her way to the huge polished mahogany meeting table. She lowered herself into an ergonomic black mesh chair, stacked the sales charts neatly in front of her and cast a worried glance at Patrick as she waited for the meeting to start.

She was worried, not so much for herself. She could deal with the blip in the sales numbers, the delays in the product launches, and even Patrick’s notorious temper. After all, she had received the award for “The Person Who Can Best Stand Up To Patrick Green” at The Truly Inkredible Awards, a satirical ceremony on the sidelines of the company’s annual dinner and dance.

Rather, she was worried for Patrick. *He’s due for a heart attack at this rate*, she thought as she watched him pace the room.

She was even more worried for Steven Hawk, the Chief Scientist of Inkredible. A meek and mild-mannered man, he was nicknamed “Steven the Dove”. Today, the Dove could be mauled by Patrick in his current tense and intense mood.

Patrick had instituted these monthly update meetings with her and Steven ever since their business competitor Rojak entered the US market six months ago.

“Where’s that dork of a scientist?” scowled Patrick as he took the seat across from Joanna.

“Steve should be on his way. I saw him in his lab as I passed by. He’s probably trying to get you the latest analysis on The Expialidocious Burger.”

“When are you all going to find a way to counter that unpronounceable Singaporean concoction? I pay you to rev up our sales and that propeller-head to come up with a superior alternative to Rojak’s meatless patty. Not to be trumped by an upstart, a newcomer at that. You are all dead meat if you can’t deliver.”

Joanna nodded, indicating that she had heard him, not that she agreed with him. Patrick was inclined to gross exaggeration when he was in a foul mood. But she did understand how he felt. Sales of Inkredible’s alternative-meat products had nosedived in the last two months. Its market share was primarily captured by Rojak’s meatless offerings, which had taken the market by storm.

“We should easily be able to beat an Asian upstart on our home turf. For goodness’ sake, America is the home of the burger! To be beaten by a newcomer, without even a proper strategy...” Patrick rumbled.

“Why do you say that Rojak has no strategy?”

“Do you know what ‘rojak’ stands for?”

“Isn’t it a Malay word for a traditional fruit and salad dish popular in Singapore and Malaysia? I have to say the name is quite apt for a company focusing on plant-based diets.”

“More than that. ‘Rojak’ is also their colloquial term to describe a mixed, aimless way of doing things,” sneered Patrick. “As I see it, that captures how Rojak creates its products. They simply mix ingredients on a trial-and-error basis and see what comes out. That’s *not* strategy. That’s rojak!

“I thought they had a strategy. They started with a core focus on plant-based replacements for Asian foods. You know what they call them? Mock Satay, Mock Shark Fins, Mock Shrimp Dumpling. I am not mocking them, but frankly, I cannot fathom why anyone would ever want to eat some of the stuff they produce. Even if they are plant-based and not the real thing, can you imagine eating pig intestines or chicken liver or duck tongue?”

“I have tried those Rojak products, Patrick.”

Seeing the questioning arch of Patrick’s eyebrow, Joanna said defensively, “I have to. I am the Head of Sales and Marketing. I need to know our competitor’s products. You should try them too.”

Patrick’s incredulous glint turned into a cold, hard glare.

“Okay, you don’t have to,” she sighed.

“You are a market of one,” Patrick said, thrusting forward his square jaws towards her. “There’s no demand for that kind of stuff here in the US or Europe or anywhere else, except Asia – which would have suited us just fine if they had stayed there. But because they have no strategic thinking, they have now created a product that they, themselves, cannot fathom as to what it’s a substitute for. So, they gave it a nonsensical name, put it on an American dish – our beloved burger – and launched it here, in our stronghold.” “We will fight them, Patrick. I have initiated discussions with McDonald’s on creating an Inkredibly Happy Meal. I am also working on a campaign to re-launch two of our star meatless products – Inkredible Ham Sandwich 5.0 and Inkredible Steak 3.0.”

“What we need is a Steven Hawk 2.0! That wastrel is not just late for meetings. He’s not been able to find out the secret to Rojak’s patty after all this time.”

“Patrick,” she said in a soothingly admonishing tone, “Give Steve a break. He and his team are already working in overdrive on the revamped versions of the Inkredible Ham Sandwich and Steak.”

Joanna decided to jump into what she came to present, to distract from the scientist's delayed entrance. "We should put the sales numbers in perspective. The segment on plant-based meat substitutes is less than five per cent of our total sales revenues. Thanks to you and your acquisitions, Patrick, our other food product segments are doing extremely well. Whatever the outcome of this war with Rojak, it will only have a marginal impact on our total sales revenues and profitability."

"You don't get it, do you?" growled Patrick. "We are the market leader in meat alternatives. We cannot cede this space. It's how Inkredible Foods was built. We cannot let a wannabe from Singapore outdo and undo us. Damn it, with its latest round of funding, Rojak is now a unicorn."

"Patrick, Rojak's just a five-year-old startup. It may not ultimately realise its valuation. That's how it is with venture capital. We are an established, publicly listed company. We are worth more. Much, much more than a unicorn's one-billion-dollar valuation."

Patrick ignored her. "Do you know that they invited that young punk from Rojak to be a keynote speaker at the World Food Congress next week?"

So, maybe this is what it boils down to – two relatively young CEOs jostling to make their mark on the global stage.

At 41, Patrick Green was only three years older than Wong Ming Wei, the founder and CEO of Rojak. The difference was that Patrick had inherited Inkredible Foods. His father, Ethan Green, had founded the company. Plant-based meat substitutes and then cultured meat produced by in-vitro cultivation of animal cells had been the consuming passion of Ethan Green. Whereas Patrick had no time for such ideals or emotions. To him, it was about success, and he enjoyed the cut and thrust of business.

To Patrick's credit, when he took over, he leveraged on the high valuations of the company's early success in meat alternatives to acquire and integrate mainstream food

companies. It would be a long while before Rojak could come close to Inkredible's scale as the world's fourth largest food conglomerate, if at all.

The annual World Food Congress was another thing altogether. It was the "Davos" of food. Anyone who was anyone in the global food and beverage industry came to discuss food-related issues, but mostly to network and cut deals. One of the keynote speeches was going to be delivered by the President of the Culinary Institute of America. However, she had taken ill at the eleventh hour. Given the hype surrounding Rojak, the organisers had decided to invite Wong to take her place.

I suppose Patrick feels he should have been asked to deliver that keynote.

"You know what it is about hype," Joanna sought to soothe Patrick. "It doesn't last. Fads come and go. Once the hype over The Expialidocious Burger dies down, we will be back on top. Give it time, Patrick. I am sure Steve will create a better product. Then we will launch Inkredible Burger 4.0."

Just then, Steven Hawk burst into the room, looking frazzled, with his thick glasses perched haphazardly on his nose. Steven had never cared about his dressing and appearance, and fortunately, it suited him. Joanna thought of how much more comfortable Steven had looked in his white laboratory gown. Now, he had hastily thrown a worn-out jacket over a crumpled dark blue shirt with a polka dot tie askew. None of these matched each other or went with his grey pants and brown canvas sneakers.

Joanna had always found Steven refreshingly unpretentious in the harsh glare of the corporate world. That he was brainy was without a doubt, but he never flaunted it. He always takes the effort to patiently explain his theories and formulae to anyone who cared to listen. However, his explanations were often lengthy and can leave his listeners in a tizzy. He occasionally stuttered when he got excited or nervous – which happened a lot when he was around Patrick.

“Oh look, here’s the devil himself. You’re at least 20 minutes late, Steven,” bellowed Patrick. “You’d better have good news for me.”

“I am not sure if t-t-the news is good, sir. But I thought you should get it as soon as possible. My team is working t-t-to confirm the hypothesis.”

“What is it then, quickly,” said Patrick, impatiently checking his watch.

“Well, as you know, sir, we reverse engineer t-t-to create our meat substitutes. We first break down t-t-the meat into t-t-the micro-ingredients that give it its t-t-taste, t-t-texture, colour, smell, nutrition. Then we find the plant-based extracts to substitute for t-t-them. For example, with Inkredible Steak, we ...”

Oh no, Steven’s going into an exposition of the secret of producing a plant-based substitute that looks and tastes like a real juicy, bloody steak. Joanna had heard it multiple times before: how Inkredible’s lab was able to isolate the components of the myoglobin protein – the pinkish liquid that many people mistake for blood in a rare steak – and substitute the critical heme compound in the myoglobin with a lab-enhanced plant compound equivalent. While she had always found Steven’s explanations endearing no matter how many times he went through them, now was not the time to test Patrick’s patience.

But before Joanna could find a way to move Steven on, Patrick had cut him off. Towering over the scientist, he barked, “Steven! I already know all this. Can you just cut to the chase!”

“Yes sir,” said Steven as he reeled back, petrified. He looked up apprehensively at Patrick and resumed. “S-s-since Rojak did not say which meat its burger was based on, we started by isolating t-t-the various micro-elements of its patty. It took a while. T-t-then we tried to determine which plant or plant extract t-t-they may have come from...”

Patrick was now almost yelling at Steven, “I said ‘quickly’ and ‘cut to the chase’. Don’t you understand English?”

Joanna’s heart went out to the hapless scientist.

“Steve, Steve,” she said as she laid her hand gently on the scientist’s shoulders, “Patrick’s asking for the bottom line. What did you and your team find?”

“T-t-the Expialidocious Burger, Joanna,” said Steven hesitantly, “It is a plant-based substitute for – human flesh.”

Part II

Continuing the story of the corporate rivalry between two unicorns on the otherwise humane pursuit of producing meat alternatives to save the earth, a rivalry that could now lead to the demise of humanity.

HOWARD Harper was feeling on edge. He was anxiously waiting for his guest to arrive as he sat on the maroon leather sofa in a cosy meeting room at the Ritz-Carlton in Washington, DC.

How did I land here? he asked himself. He had formerly been a medical doctor and then Professor of Medicine and Health Policy at Duke University. Lauded for his role in bringing health projects to the attention of public administrators, he quickly rose to prominence in the university hierarchy. After more than 30 years in academia, Howard had been pleased to be appointed the US Commissioner of Food and Drugs at the age of 65. As Commissioner, he was concurrently the Head of the Food and Drug Administration or FDA. But it did not look like the role was going to be a cushy one.

Less than six months into the job, he started to realise that the politics and infighting in academic departments were nothing compared to the fallout from corporate wrangling. Never mind the political bureaucracy and legal minefield of federal and state legislation, it was the industry players who really played hardball.

Howard now found himself sandwiched between two warring CEOs, both young enough to be his sons. His medical and academic background had not prepared him to deal with this sort of commercial conflict, with its tangled web of social and cultural nuances. He had once attended an extra-curricular course at the university on interest-based mediation. How he wished that he had followed up with the practical stints offered. The mediation skills would come in very useful now.

It had been a rough-and-tumble week for him since he received the explosive phone call from Patrick Green, President and CEO of Inkredible Foods. Plant-based meat substitutes and lab-cultured meat were to avoid the unnecessary rearing and slaughtering of animals to satisfy the hunger of man – but at what cost? It would seem that the dark side of human nature is perverting this noble enterprise of producing meat alternatives to save the world. All because of the brutal competition between two companies – Inkredible Foods, the dominant US food conglomerate, and Rojak, a Singaporean startup – to be the winner in this field.

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” Patrick had demanded after explaining what Inkredible’s scientific investigations had found of its competitor’s bestselling product, The Expialidocious Burger. “If you won’t do what’s necessary, I will.”

Patrick had not detailed his threats. Neither did Howard want to hear about them. It would be unwise for the Commissioner of Food and Drugs to be seen to buckle under any threats from the industry. But he accepted that Patrick had a point. Any news report that The Expialidocious Burger replicated the taste of human flesh would be a nightmare for him – and the rest of the world.

It had taken him a while to calm the man down. He assured Patrick that he would look further into the matter without any promise of what he would do exactly. In any case, he had no clue then about what he would do about it.

“Commissioner, Mr Wong is here,” his personal assistant interrupted his thoughts as she ushered in Wong Ming Wei, CEO of Rojak. Howard observed that Wong looked just like he did in his photos: spiky hair, bright smile, thin and lanky build. He was wearing an unbuttoned grey-flannelled jacket over his signature black round-necked T-shirt and designer jeans. I should not have put on a tie, thought Howard.

Howard had read up as much as he could on Wong in the last few days. Most of the articles were written after the launch of The Expialidocious Burger.

As far as he gathered, Wong had gone through a difficult childhood. His father had left his mother when he was four years old, and she struggled to cope. Left to his own devices, Wong grew up a juvenile delinquent. He spent part of his youth in detention centres and halfway houses. His life changed when he was 15 years old, and his mother remarried. His stepfather, whom he adored, took him under his wing and treated him like his own son. Acquiring the confidence and assurance he never had, Wong began to focus on his studies and topped his class.

Like all young men in Singapore, Wong dutifully completed his two years of state military service when he turned 18. He then went to law school. Upon graduation, he joined Anandan & Fernando LLP, one of Singapore's top criminal law firms. His career was on an upward trajectory. He made partner in record time. However, all this ended abruptly when he embraced religion as a Buddhist and became a vegetarian at the age of 32.

Wong soon left the legal profession to be an entrepreneur. He set up the company, Rojak, to promote vegetarian fare, including meat-free alternatives. Rojak's focus had been on Asian cuisine until this year when it grabbed the headlines with its meatless patties. Single and unattached, Wong was described by the media as one of Singapore's most eligible bachelors. It was not just down to his new-found wealth, as one magazine puts it, but also his good looks and charisma.

Suddenly conscious of the greying hair around his temples, Howard stood up. He self-consciously straightened his tie and smoothed his jacket before stretching out his hand. "Welcome to DC, Mr Wong. Thank you for meeting me."

"It's my honour to meet you, Commissioner. Please call me 'Ming'. Thank you for arranging the meeting at this hotel where the World Food Congress is being held."

"Not at all. You can call me 'Howard'," as he gestured to Ming to take a seat.

Ming sat down on the sofa with both feet planted firmly on the thick carpet. His right elbow perched comfortably on the couch's arm, he leaned forward towards Howard. A

hint of a colourful tattoo peeked out from beneath the right sleeve of Ming's jacket, a reminder of his wild youth.

Howard decided to start with small talk before going onto what was uppermost in his mind. "I wanted to meet you, Ming, because of – let me see if I can pronounce it right – The Expialidocious Burger?"

"Yes, you got it right."

"Well, congratulations to you, Ming. I understand that consumers are going wild over it. Tell me, how did you come about developing this unique taste?"

"Frankly, I should say that its success has surprised all of us at Rojak, Howard. It wasn't part of any grand plan at all. The discovery, the naming and the marketing were really all down to – what you Americans might call – 'serendipity'."

"You are modest, Ming. Good fortune is usually enabled by hard work."

"Yes, we believe in hard work, but we had plenty of luck too. You know, we put all our lab innovations through several layers of taste tests. The products were rated on our 5-point 'Shiok' Meter. That's like the top half of the industry's 9-point Hedonic Scale."

Howard knew all that. He had read about Rojak's process in the media interviews Ming had given. He thought Ming was beginning to sound scripted and detected an underlying smirk behind the man's demeanour. But he let Ming continue.

"You know, 'shiok' is a Malay word for 'highly pleasurable'. The mix that eventually went into the patty of The Expialidocious Burger just blew everyone away. We confirmed and double-confirmed. Never before had we had a product that consistently scored 'Wah Shiok' and 'Damn Shiok'. That's the top two levels of our Shiok Meter."

One of our lab guys die-die must eat that patty every day. The whole affair felt so, so crazy that when we were brainstorming its name, the marketing folks suggested we go with a crazy, nonsense name. You know the final name was from the song, ‘Supercali-fragilistic-expialidocious’ in Mary Poppins?”

“Yes, I have heard about that.”

“And the tagline for the burger – ‘Inexplicably Delicious’ – just popped out from that nonsense name. In fact, we almost wanted to change the name to ‘The Inexpialidocious Burger’ because of the tagline. But many of our folks felt that the word was already too long, so we left it as it is. Besides, our legal team had to confirm that we wouldn’t be breaking any copyright laws. At the same time, our marketing people had to check that we wouldn’t be accused of cultural appropriation. Who would believe that so much work had to be done, just for a name? Sometimes, it makes you wonder ...”

“Great story, Ming. The question is: what meat does The Expialidocious Burger actually replicate?”

“We don’t know, Howard.”

It doesn’t ring true. How could he not know? That is the basis of a meat-substitute – to substitute specific meat.

Howard stayed silent. He would give Ming the opportunity – and rope – to explain.

“Does it matter?” Ming asked. “People love the taste. It’s all plant-based – we can attest to that. In any case, all our ingredients are printed on the food label. What with all your American rules and regulations.”

That, of course, was not strictly correct. While it was true that food manufacturers were required to list all ingredients on the food label in order of predominance, some

ingredients could be listed collectively as “flavours”, “spices” and “artificial flavouring”, without naming and detailing each and every one. This was partly why Coca-Cola and Kentucky Fried Chicken could claim to have “secret” recipes. The FDA could require more details upon filing on each product’s ingredients and food processes beyond what was on the food label. But focusing on that now would be going off on a tangent. So, Howard decided to stick with his main line of questioning as he watched closely for Ming’s reactions.

“The essential point here, Ming, is that you are selling the patty as a meat substitute. So, can you tell me what meat it substitutes?”

“Well, I suppose you could see it as a combination of meats. It’s like chopping up beef, pork and chicken, and blending it into a patty for the burger. There’s no single meat that we can point to, Howard.”

Was he trying to pull a fast one here?

“Well, are you saying that it is a plant-based substitute for a mix of beef, chicken and pork, then?” asked Howard.

“I can’t say. You know, our approach to creating these meat substitutes was to try different mixes of plant-based ingredients. We haven’t worked backwards from target meats as some of our competitors do. Once we find a taste that works, we experiment to see what meat it most resembles. Then we sell it as a substitute for that particular meat. But truth be told, for this particular creation, we just couldn’t figure it out. Then one of our marketing gals had a brainwave. She said that since all this was so crazy, so nonsensical, let’s give it a nonsense name instead of saying it’s based on some actual meat or some combination of meats. So, the truth is that we really don’t really know.”

Ming rattled all this off while his eyes trained unflinchingly on Howard. He’s able to say it with a straight face. Howard decided to come straight to the point.

“I am afraid that there are people who say that they do know.”

“Know what?”

“Know what meat it substitutes.”

“And what meat is that?”

“Human flesh.”

There was a pregnant pause. Howard studied Ming’s face for any sign that he had known, or at least thought, that it could be human meat. However, Ming remained inscrutable. His brow furrowed in a frown as he seemed to process Howard’s input and searched for an answer. *It looks like he genuinely had not heard or even thought of the possibility that it could be human meat before.*

Finally, Ming said, “You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I am not. I have been reliably told that The Expialidocious Burger is a substitute for human meat.”

“By whom?”

“Does it matter?”

“How can anyone tell? The only way is to be able to taste human flesh itself. You’d have to kill someone to prove the case.”

“Can you prove that your product is not a substitute for human meat?”

“Isn’t it the law in this country that you are innocent until proven guilty? Can you prove that it is human meat?” Ming said slowly and deliberately, with just a hint of irritation.

“I am not saying that you are guilty of anything, Ming. I am only saying that it cannot be proven – or unproven – that the patty in The Expialidocious Burger is a plant-based substitute for human meat.”

“So, that settles it. It’s just a wild accusation that will not stand up in any court of law.”

Old habits die hard; the lawyer in him is coming out.

“It is not the court of law I am concerned with, Ming. It is the court of public opinion. With the mere allegation that it could be human meat, the media would have a field day. It would create widespread panic and condemnation. The knives would be out for you, for me.”

“Then, don’t mention it. Don’t put it out there.”

“We do not intend to. I do not want to. But it is not up to me. Let’s face it, the merest hint, and it would be impossible to keep this allegation under wraps.”

Howard felt it was time to play his trump card.

“You should know that it was Inkredible Foods that provided us with the information – that it could be human meat. I would say that Inkredible’s lab report seems credible, despite its incredulity. In fact, the report goes as far as to suggest that your patty replicates the composition of the flesh from the human thigh. Inkredible had threatened to leak the report and its allegations to the media.”

There was a long silence as the two men stared at each other.

Ming narrowed his eyes. As he fixed his glare on Howard, his smile turned into a scowl, enough to make Howard shiver slightly. *Would he actually lose his cool?*

“Trust me, I will sue Patrick Green and Inkredible Foods if they go public,” Ming said in a quiet, menacing tone. “This corporate rivalry has gotten way out of hand. If the FDA is foolish enough to back the claims by Inkredible Foods, I will make sure the world’s media gets to know how US protectionism works to snuff out the little guy.”

He is really agitated now.

“Son, we are on the same side.”

“I am not your son!”

Howard realised that he must have sounded patronising and needed to make amends.

“I apologise, Ming. I meant that in a fatherly way. Why, I would have been proud to have a son like you. In fact, my daughter is about your age. She was a doctor who left the medical profession to be an entrepreneur too. Believe me, I understand how you feel.” Howard continued calmly, hiding his discomfort at Ming’s threats.

“Let us be clear. I am not protecting or intending to protect Inkredible Foods or any US company. My job is to protect the food industry, and I am trying to protect you. Can you imagine the adverse publicity and negative energy that would be generated from this allegation and the ensuing controversy? As long as you cannot prove that your plant-based substitute is not a substitute for human meat – rather than anyone proving that it is so – the fact that it tastes so good and could be human meat raises a whole host of ethical questions.”

Howard decided to use what he had learnt of Ming’s articulated leanings on corporate social responsibility, climate change and sustainability.

“Look, Ming, I hear that you are passionate about moral capitalism and the need for corporations to focus on – what you call – ‘values versus value’. Well, this matter is about transcending the economic value of your rising sales revenues and tempering it with the values that make us human – and humane. It is about the ethics of selling a plant-based substitute for what could be human meat. It is about the values of selling a product that supposedly tastes like human flesh. Not just tastes like human flesh, but tastes very good, better than any other meat.

“This is about the morality of encouraging a leaning towards cannibalism. I need not tell you that cannibalism could eventually lead to a fate worse than climate change – the very existence of the human race. Why, some scientists believe that cannibalism may

have caused the extinction of the Neanderthals, for example. Is this the route you wish for us to go down, Ming?”

Howard drew in a sharp breath of air when he finished speaking. He felt like he had just delivered a convocation address. But his speech was not scripted. The words just came out and flowed. That was because he had internalised the issues. The arguments had been playing in his mind for several days. He had not realised until now how deeply he had been troubled by the revelation by Patrick Green.

There was another and longer pause as Ming stared hard at Howard.

This time he appeared to digest what Howard had said. For the first time, Howard noticed that Ming shifted in his seat, just very slightly and uncomfortably.

Ming then asked softly, “What do you suggest I do?”

He is thinking through his options but does not want to show his hand.

While Howard felt he was making progress, it was not yet time to get any concessions from Ming.

“Before I suggest anything to you, let me tell you what the FDA intends to do. We are not looking at this as a problem of The Expialidocious Burger. It goes way beyond that.

Even if you stop what you are doing today, another company could have a similar offering tomorrow. For a start, we are going to introduce a new regulation – that meat substitutes need to specify what meat they are substituting.”

Ming raised his eyebrows, a slight trace of a smirk playing on his lips.

“Well, in that case, we will say that our patty is a substitution for the meat of a unicorn. As you know, unicorns are mythical creatures, so no one can prove whether our patty tastes like unicorn meat or not.”

“Sorry, we did think about that. The second part of the regulation is that you need to prove to and satisfy the FDA that you are indeed substituting the meat as claimed. This means we can require the manufacturer to provide and cook the actual meat the plant is substituting. It would then be compared to the same dish using the plant-based substitute by an independent panel of judges. Otherwise, you will not get FDA approval. Other country regulators will likely follow our lead.”

There was another long silence as Ming processed what Howard had said. He shifted in his seat again.

He is less the confident, self-assured man that came into this room.

“Alright, you got me there, Howard. I can see it makes sense. All this talk about human meat is unhealthy. I don’t like to see any of us go there.”

“Good, we will take a few months to roll out the regulations. In the meantime, I am asking you to stop all selling and marketing of The Expialidocious Burger until the regulations are in place.”

“Hold on!” Ming almost jumped up from his seat. “Why can’t I use the window before your new regulations kick in to maximise the sales of my product?”

“Because Inkredible had made it clear that it will go to the press unless you stop immediately. You can use your speech at tomorrow’s World Food Congress to announce it – make some excuses for stopping the product.”

“This will have a negative impact on our investors. It would cripple us,” Ming said, sounding desperate.

Ming paused for a moment, then looked up sharply at Howard and said slowly, “Can I have your agreement that in exchange for stopping immediately, you will expedite our application for approval of our revamped products?”

“What revamped products?”

“Well, my thinking is that we tweak the ingredients of The Expialidocious Burger 2.0 to taste like some combination of chicken, beef, pork, fish or whatever other meats that would do the trick. This will take some time because it means going back to the drawing board.”

Ming had spoken in a slow and measured manner, thinking as he spoke. But his pace picked up as he became visibly excited sharing the plans for his new products.

“However, we have two other related products that are nearly ready to launch – The Supercali Hotdog and The Fragilistic Omelette. The tagline for The Fragilistic Omelette is ‘So Screamingly Fragile, So Shiok’. We had originally thought of modelling it after the

Chinese Fried Oyster Omelette. But the dish we came up with tastes even better, and I think we have found another meat to associate with it. You will like the tagline for The Supercali Hotdog. It's very American – 'Doggone, It's Hot'. This one was easier in pinpointing the meat for which it substitutes. You know, if the FDA can expedite the approval of these two new products, we can launch them to make up for halting the sale of The Expialidocious Burger. And of course, I ask that you later expedite approval for The Expialidocious Burger 2.0."

Howard thought hard. *This boy is a consummate negotiator, after all.* However, Howard recognised that the patty for The Expialidocious Burger was already approved. He had no reasonable way of stopping Rojak immediately until the new regulations are in place, and that would take some time. Meanwhile, he could not tell what Inkredible would do if Rojak did not stop. It would be a small trade-off.

"Okay, Ming, I can agree to it as long as you promise that none of them will end up being human meat substitutes – or even hint at it."

"Of course, you have my word on that."

"And you have my word that we will give these three products – your Burger 2.0, Omelette and Hotdog – top priority to obtain approval. But only these three. The rest of your products go through the regular channels."

"Sure, I agree. I'll announce at tomorrow's Congress that we have to stop production of the patty for The Expialidocious Burger due to a shortage of two key ingredients. I'll say that we will be coming back later with Version 2.0. And, I will also mention that we will be launching two new and even better products: The Supercali Hotdog and The Fragilistic Omelette."

"That's fine with me."

“Let’s shake on that,” said Ming as he stood up and almost grabbed Howard’s hands. “You are a fair man, Commissioner. You do your job very well. I’m sorry that I accused you of being a protectionist earlier.”

The boy is now contrite for having been brash. Good, he is learning to respect his elders.

“Not at all, Ming. We say things we do not always mean in the heat of the moment. Thank you for being so understanding.”

Howard was grateful that Ming had not been the aggressive hardnosed businessman one magazine article had painted him to be. He reckoned that he had achieved the best outcome for the FDA and the food industry. Howard was so pleased that he felt that he could not wait to try Rojak’s two new products.

“By the way, what meats are being substituted in your Hotdog and Omelette?” he asked as Ming was walking towards the door.

Ming turned his head, his hand on the door handle and said with a straight face, “Dog meat for The Supercali Hotdog. Monkey brains for The Fragilistic Omelette. See you at the Congress tomorrow.”

— END —

The writer is a former managing partner of Accenture.
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