

Wind Over Heaven

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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* * *

Coming into the restaurant early one Monday morning, Eric found Sutherland in the main dining room. One of Sutherland's massive arms rested casually, heavily on the open door of an antique china cabinet, and Eric could imagine the delicate hinges tearing out of the wood. Sutherland was examining the porcelain inside. No one had touched those porcelain pieces since Eric's mother had died and he had inherited them.

"What are you doing here?" Eric said.

Sutherland smiled. In the full moon of his face, the smile seemed tiny, as if his mouth were two sizes too small for him. "Hello, partner," he said. He handled the porcelain casually, turning the pieces over as if looking for a price sticker. When he picked up a little gold-rimmed demitasse, there was a moment when Eric imagined he was going to swallow it.

Eric stepped forward, took the demitasse from Sutherland's doughy hands. "This cabinet's supposed to be locked," he said.

"It was locked," Sutherland said. "I found the key in your office. You know, Eric, antiques aren't exactly an efficient use of capital. You could decorate a lot less expensively."

Eric felt the heat rise in his face. "In the first place, how the restaurant is decorated is part of what makes it a success. And in the second place, those pieces are part of my personal collection."

Sutherland smiled again. "Come on, Eric. You can't start sheltering assets after the fact. If it's in the restaurant, it's part of the restaurant. I think we need to talk about how we can cut overhead, reallocate our resources. If we make full use of all of our equity"-- He reached into the cabinet and removed the demitasse-- "then maybe we can get this cash flow turned around."

"You want a court fight."

"Of course not. That would ruin The Tarragon Leaf, put a lot of people out of work. I just want to run an efficient business. Maybe if we can't agree on that, you should let me buy you out. You could start fresh somewhere else."

Eric said nothing. He was thinking about Sutherland's neck, about how it would be impossible to get one's hands all the way around it. You'd need a rope. Or piano wire.

"Here's my offer," Sutherland said, "and, believe me, it's better than your recent numbers warrant. I'm being generous."

* * *

In the kitchen, after Sutherland had left, it was quiet. Monday mornings were always quiet, since The Tarragon Leaf wouldn't serve dinner again until Tuesday evening. Eric had thought that this would be a good time to come in and think about things, a time when he could expect Sutherland not to be in the restaurant.

Now, at least, he and Gero had the kitchen to themselves, and Eric, watching the stove's blue flame, could hear the hiss of the gas.

"Sutherland's a parasite," Eric said. "Why didn't I see that before it was too late?"

"Parasite," Gero said. He turned up the flame. "You think that is bad."

Eric forced a laugh. "Could it possibly be good?"

Gero didn't answer immediately. He was searching among the unlabeled jars that cluttered his shelves. When he squinted, the Asian slant of his gray eyes was more pronounced than usual. The water in the saucepan began to boil vigorously, but Gero ignored it until he had found what he was looking for-- a jar of bright yellow powder that was probably mustard. But perhaps not. On those rare occasions when Gero wasn't in the restaurant, Eric would sometimes examine the contents of the jars, sniffing this, tasting a pinch of that. Some of the ingredients were spices that he recognized, but many of them remained mysteries. Gero's stock of ingredients was like his ethnicity-- exotic and impossible to name.

Gero turned the flame back down, tapped some of the yellow powder into the water, then pulled at his reddish Magyar mustache as he searched through the jars again.

"Some parasites, you would not *choose* them," he said, "but once you have them..." He shrugged. "In Thailand there is a pickled fish that is so white, so firm." He kissed his fingertips. "You want to taste things. At least once. Well, this fish has a price for tasting. In his flesh, there are cysts. Tiny. Once you eat, the cysts break, and in your liver, in a little while, there are worms. Maybe in *my* liver. I don't know. Just a few are no trouble."

Gero's accent, Eric decided, sounded Russian today. Slavic, anyway. But it could shift. Sometimes it sounded Chinese.

Gero was showing Eric his smallest fingernail. "Not even that big, these worms. Flat, like that. I just eat the fish one time, no problem. Parasites are not so bad, then. Everything is balance, yes? I keep explaining to you. *Balance*."

"Balance, right," Eric said. "Every time we have one of our little business dinners, Sutherland hits me with another surprise. But I should find some way to *balance* him. Sure."

Gero took down another jar. This one contained a woody root suspended in alcohol. It looked like a smaller version of the roots that Gero had hanging from the ceiling, up there with a wreath of bay leaves, the long strings of peppers, and the bunches of bulbs that looked like garlic, but weren't. Gero spooned a little of the alcohol into the boiling water and re-sealed the jar.

"You are impatient," Gero said. "When you are sick, you think only of cures."

"Well, of course!"

"First you must think of the sickness. Its nature."

"Okay, look," Eric said, "so maybe parasite isn't the right word for him."

"Sounds perfect," Gero said. "Business is good like always, but something is happening to money. Poof." He was adding a pinch from this jar and a pinch from that one to the boiling water. He turned down the heat. "Your partner is like tapeworm. Restaurant brings in same as before, but is getting skinny. How skinny? Little bit isn't bad. Most people, if they have tapeworm, they don't know it. Tapeworm isn't so bad."

"What I'm talking about," Eric said, "is embezzlement. Mismanagement. All these decisions he forces down my throat."

"And what *I* am talking about," Gero said, "is balance." He strained the contents of the saucepan through a paper filter into a ceramic carafe. "Wind over heaven."

"What?"

Gero tapped one of the Chinese books stacked next to his jars. "The ninth hexagram is wind above, heaven below. The Taming Power of Small Things. This is no time to act. Be subtle. Observe. Seek balance." Gero poured a few ounces of the amber infusion into a teacup. "You are agitated. Too much worry is too much bile. Drink this."

Eric opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He accepted the cup with a sigh. It was no use trying to decline Gero's remedies. Gero would pester him until he drank it. In any case, the brews seemed harmless enough.

"Be patient," Gero said. "Don't make another mistake. He is your partner, now, and that was your choice. Now you want him out. What do you have to do to get him out? If you have a tapeworm, you must take poison enough to kill tapeworm, but not to kill you. How much poison must Tarragon Leaf swallow to get rid of this partner? How sick you are going to make my restaurant?"

Eric sipped the concoction. It was slightly bitter, but not bad.

My restaurant, Gero called it. Technically, it was Eric's restaurant. Well, Eric's and Sutherland's, now. But Gero was right in a way.

* * *

There were times, Eric thought, when it all seemed a little surreal. Twelve years ago, when The Tarragon Leaf was struggling in its infancy, when Eric had a splendid atmosphere to go with not-yet-splendid food, Gero had shown up. Two days earlier, the original saucier had quit. Clutching a battered satchel, Gero was vague about his training and references, and his accent that day was generic pidgin. "I know sauce," he said. "I know food. Let me show."

What the hell, Eric had thought. He picked three sauces from the menu-- a cerleriac remoulade, a lobster chiffonade, and bearnaise. "Make these."

In the kitchen, Gero looked over the spice racks, muttering and shaking his head. Eventually, he opened the satchel and set its contents on the counter-- jars of dried powders, roots, mushrooms. There were two books, too, their leather covers stamped in gold with Chinese characters. But Gero didn't consult these. He worked by tasting his base, adding an infinitesimal trace of some powder or another, and tasting the base again, so that he was absurdly slow, and Eric already knew the answer would be no, sorry, we have no position for you.

Until he tasted the finished sauces.

They weren't what the restaurant had ever served before. They weren't, Eric was almost certain, what *any* restaurant had served before. It seemed like magic.

"Not magic," Gero said. "*Balance*."

His sense of balance, as it turned out, extended to more than sauces. Though he always insisted that he was a saucier and only a saucier, he was soon giving advice to others in the kitchen about everything from perfectly timed creme patissiere to deftly positioned garnish. He was subtle about it. Balanced, you could say. He managed to offer compliments that planted only the tiniest hint of dissatisfaction, the barest clue that he had available some advice to offer about how something that was nearly perfect could be nearer still.

And if Gero's area in the kitchen grew a little strange, with its drying herbs and spices hanging here and there, its unlabeled jars filled with the unknown, if it became, in fact, a little spooky on the days when his suppliers-- often speaking no English-- appeared in the kitchen with jars wrapped in brown paper, that was easy enough to overlook. The food, the reputation, the growing success of The Tarragon Leaf more than made up for the dreamlike witchiness of the saucier's shelves.

Besides, Eric liked the man. How could he fail to like him? The Tarragon Leaf had been Eric's dream, but it seemed that Gero dreamed it, too. He was nearly always there, even on Mondays, rearranging his things in the kitchen, experimenting, and often giving Eric a taste of something new, something divine.

Sometimes the herbal remedies that Gero dispensed for imaginary maladies he had diagnosed as "bad humors" or "overbearing yang" were a little hard to swallow. But they seemed a small price to pay.

* * *

The table in The Tarragon Leaf's private dining room wasn't small, but Spencer Sutherland's bulk at one end made it seem that way to Eric. "There are certain economies we need around here," Sutherland way saying, his words muffled by a mouthful of salad.

Eric said, "What do you mean?"

Sutherland swallowed. "Like this salad." He took a bite that was too big and chewed it impatiently. Eric wished that he'd paid attention to how Sutherland ate before he had agreed to the marriage of their restaurants. Sutherland's first bite of anything would be careful. He would consider as he chewed. Then, once he had passed judgement, he would eat the rest too fast to savor. Once he knew what something was, he ate only to absorb, to acquire.

"What about the salad?" It was Belgian endive and fennel, with a very light vinaigrette, a palate-clearing course between appetizer and main course.

"We're importing this endive." Sutherland took another wolfish bite. Eric had hardly started on his own salad, and Sutherland's was nearly gone. "I mean, it's salad, Eric. And you're ordering from Europe? They grow this stuff in California, now. Cheap."

"It's called Belgian endive for a reason." Eric pointed with his fork. "See how the stalk has this closed shape? Around Brussels, they grow it underground, in heated soil. Growers in California don't take the same care."

"I know all that," Sutherland said. "But it tastes the same."

"The presentation is different."

Sutherland rolled his eyes.

"The reason this restaurant has the reputation it does," Eric said, "is that we take pains with detail."

"Yeah, well, it's a little hard to keep up with detail that you can't pay for." Sutherland pushed his plate aside. "I mean, you want to keep The Tarragon Leaf afloat, right?"

Eric's jaw clenched. "We're doing as much volume as ever," he said. "I don't see where this cash crunch has come from, unless you're doing less business at Southern Exposure."

"My place is doing fine," Sutherland said. He always spoke about The Tarragon Leaf as *our* restaurant and the Southern Exposure as *mine*, Eric realized. That wasn't the only inequality. He insisted on changes for The Tarragon Leaf, but wouldn't listen to the suggestions Eric had made for Sutherland's Southern Exposure steakhouse. The partnership was supposed to be collaborative. Advisory. At least that's how they had talked it out before signing the papers.

"You've got to understand," Sutherland was saying, "that there are certain administrative costs built in to the partnership."

"This merger was supposed to save us money. Both of us."

"And it will, eventually," Sutherland said. "Look, you yourself admitted to me that accounting issues weren't your strong suit, right? That's why we're in business together, to benefit from each others' strengths."

How could Eric *ever* have trusted him enough to tell him that money was the one thing he had trouble with? Not that there wasn't plenty coming in. The Tarragon Leaf was a success by any measure. But Eric had always found keeping track of money such a headache. It was the food he cared about. The food, the presentation, the atmosphere...

"It'll be all right. Trust me on that. But for now, I'm trimming your budget."

"Trimming my budget?" Eric said. "You can't do that!"

"Eric, read the agreements. You're in charge of operations. I'm in charge of budget and accounting. If you don't like it, sell out to me. You've heard my offer."

Eric's hand closed around a butter knife. He brandished it, then looked at it and put it down. "I'm bringing in an auditor."

Sutherland froze for half a second. He looked at Eric as if reappraising him. "You can't do it. We can't spend on something like that. We have to *economize*."

"I can do it. I am doing it."

"Eric," Sutherland said, "we're *partners*." He shrugged. "But I see you're going to insist. All right. At least pick someone good."

"I have. His name is Webber."

"Richard Webber?" Sutherland's teeth were big and white when he smiled. "I know Dick. He'll do a fine job. A fine job. Then you'll feel better. And you'll see that I'm right about cutting back a little, just temporarily. To keep us in the black." Sutherland lifted his wineglass and drained it. "Where's that waiter with the next course?"

* * *

The dinner rush had begun, and Gero had the makings for three white sauces started in three different

pans. In a fourth saucepan was an inch or so of mud-colored water. Eric watched it bubble. "That audit was a waste of money," he said.

"You don't trust the accountant?" Gero said, stirring and tasting each sauce in succession. He opened a jar.

"I trust the one I finally hired," Eric said, "the one who Sutherland didn't know. But he couldn't find anything." Actually, that wasn't entirely true. The auditor had made a stink about the records for Gero's purchases of ingredients. The saucier's suppliers did not furnish adequate invoices. Sutherland, with obvious pleasure, was insisting that Eric do something about this, but Eric wasn't up to broaching the subject with Gero now.

"Your kidneys are rising."

"Rising kidneys," Eric said. That could only mean that the roiling liquid on the stove was intended for him.

Gero tossed a whole mushroom onto the oily surface and cut the flame. Then he stirred the sauces again. "So the partner, he is an honest man," Gero said. "Not parasite. Something else."

"No. I know he's pulling something, but he's clever. And he *knows* he's clever. God, I hate that smile of his."

"Parasites are not always bad. I told you. Tarragon Leaf can have a parasite and still be Tarragon Leaf."

"It's not just the embezzlement, Gero. He keeps insisting that I cut expenses, buy cheaper ingredients..."

Gero looked up. "Cheap? He wants you to buy cheap for Tarragon Leaf?" Gero shook his head. "To have the best is expensive."

"Yes."

"If it is not the best, is not Tarragon Leaf."

"That's how I feel about it. He'll bleed us to death. Bit by bit, we'll give up little pieces of what we do, and the restaurant won't be The Tarragon Leaf anymore."

"So he *is* a parasite, this partner." Gero started straining the liquid. "Still," he said, "if we are patient, he will learn. He will not be so bad."

Eric didn't think that was likely.

"If he doesn't learn, end the partnership."

"The only way to do that is to buy him out," Eric said. "I don't have the money. Especially now. He's going to ruin me. I can feel it."

"Smart parasite does not kill his host."

"Not all parasites understand that, Gero."

"Kidneys are rising," Gero said, handing him a steaming cup. "Drink."

Eric sipped the steaming brew. Whether his kidneys fell back into place or not, he couldn't tell. In any case, he didn't feel any better about the prospects for his restaurant.

* * *

"I'd take a big loss, selling," Eric told Gero. It was a Monday morning again, and they were alone, watching water simmer in a pan. "But I probably can't get more out of him than he's offering, and the partnership agreement ties my hands. But it's not a dead loss. I'm thinking we can start over. Sutherland insists on a non-competing covenant, so we'd have to move to another city. It'd have to be a small restaurant to begin with, but I'd take along any staff who want to make the move..."

"Not me," the saucier said. "I will not leave Tarragon Leaf."

Eric didn't know what to say. Finally, he told Gero, "It won't *be* The Tarragon Leaf, even if you stay."

"Listen for example," said Gero. "You have a good friend. You are always together drinking, talking. You love this friend like your brother. Like twin. You are balancing to each other. Understand? Then he gets sick. He changes. He is not so interesting, always sick. So, Eric, you leave him? When he needs you?"

The saucier looked at his arrays of jars, then shook his head. "If you are thinking like this, the problem is your heart. Bad faith. There is no medicine I can give you for it." He turned off the burner and poured the steaming water down the sink.

"Well what would you suggest, exactly?" Eric said. "I don't have a lot of options."

"Patience. Let me think. It's a matter of balance. Suppose you are right, and he is a bad parasite. A bladder worm. You know bladder worm?"

Eric shook his head.

"Tapeworm babies," Gero said. "Larva. They hatch from eggs inside your stomach, dig into intestine walls, then into blood, yes? All through your body, even your brain. In a few years, they start to die. Dead ones swell up in your brain like little balloons."

Eric rubbed at his temples. Dead worms in the brain. He thought of Swiss cheese. He felt a headache coming on. "And then what?"

Gero made a gesture of expansion with his hands. "Pressure in brain. Epilepsy, shaking, fits. Maybe, you die. But you don't know about these worms until too late. That is what kind of parasite you selected to be your partner. Now we know what he is, but Tarragon Leaf already swallowed him."

Eric had a fleeting vision of Sutherland as an enormous worm. He felt sick. "If this is supposed to make me more hopeful," Eric said, "it isn't working."

"You are not going to sell the restaurant. We do not abandon sick friend."

"I don't know," Eric said. "If Sutherland is a bladder worm, I think our sick friend may be terminal."

* * *

Although Eric was filled with thoughts of doom, the restaurant was hardly showing symptoms. Eric knew that would change. He concentrated on running the dining room and avoiding Spencer Sutherland when Sutherland tried to see him.

Finally, after a week of this, Eric took one of Sutherland's calls. "A house divided against itself cannot stand," Sutherland said. "Let's have a meeting over dinner. Get your boys to broil us some steaks. I like mine well done."

"Every time we talk," Eric said, "it's bad news. I don't want to hear any more."

"I'm going to make it worth your while," Sutherland said. "And if you ignore me, I can make it hurt. Read your contracts. I can just about close you down."

* * *

In the kitchen before the meeting, Gero said, "Drink this."

For once it was a cold concoction, not a steaming one.

"What do I have?" Eric said. "High kidneys? Rising yin?"

"Heart problem still," said Gero. "Bad faith. You are thinking of selling." While they talked, he was making two sauces. Two brown sauces. Around them was the usual kitchen racket, but it wasn't up to its frantic pace. The evening was early, and the restaurant wasn't yet half full. "You will not sell, all right?"

"Depends on what he offers."

"Drink."

Eric took a sip, then made a face. Of all the brews Gero had ever made for him, this was the worst. "Are you poisoning me?"

Gero looked up, his gray eyes thoughtful. "That would keep you from selling?"

"Sutherland would still get the restaurant."

"Then what is the advantage to poisoning you? Drink. You are having serious bad faith. It's getting worse, I think."

Eric held his breath and drank the stuff. There was grit at the bottom of the glass.

"Let this partner offer you the moon and stars," Gero said. "Don't sell before you talk to me." He turned back to the stove. "I am making a wonderful sauce for the steak tonight. Something new."

"We can't..." Eric looked around the kitchen, then lowered his voice. "We can't poison him. Don't think I haven't thought about it, but we'd never get away with it."

"We need balance," Gero said. "Takes time. You are going to be patient. Meet with your partner, enjoy a good dinner. *Relax.*"

* * *

Dinner should not have been relaxing, but it was. By the time the main course had come, Eric was, if not in a state of bliss, at least profoundly calm. A little sleepy, in fact. He could not have said why. Certainly, Sutherland's eating habits hadn't suddenly improved. There was nothing calming about seeing the man belt down his appetizer and salad after only one preliminary, appraising bite of each.

The steaks arrived-- well-done for Sutherland, rare for Eric. The waiter put them down wrong initially, and Sutherland started cutting into his. "Hey," he said, "I like mine cooked!"

The waiter apologized and exchanged the plates. Then Eric watched as Sutherland cut one modest bite. "Oh, this is marvelous," he said. "Perfectly marbled. It melts."

"So that's one thing you think I'm doing right," Eric mumbled.

Sutherland laughed. "Not at all," he said. "Serving this to your customers squeezes your margin. I can get almost as good for considerably less. I think both restaurants ought to use the same meat supplier."

He carved his next bite, an enormous chunk that he hardly chewed before swallowing. Eric supposed that Sutherland's choking to death was too much to hope for.

At least Eric had the satisfaction of enjoying Gero's steak sauce. It was nouvelle Mexican, a sort of *mole*, but lighter on salt than one would expect. There was more chile than chocolate, and on the whole it had Gero's distinctive *wholeness*. It was, as Gero would say, balanced. But Sutherland probably wasn't even tasting it any more.

As soon as he'd swallowed the last piece of meat, Sutherland reached into his pocket for a packet of folded papers. "I'm making you a take it or leave it deal," he said. "Better price than before. We want to resolve this, right? I think it's too late to mend fences."

Eric glared.

The price Sutherland quoted was an improvement. He shoved the papers across the table for Eric to look at.

"All in all, this is simply an unfortunate falling out," Sutherland said. "It happens sometimes." He offered Eric a pen.

* * *

Gero had another glass for him like the earlier one, but Eric refused to drink it.

"Is better if you do drink," Gero said.

"Forget that," Eric said. He unfolded the papers. "Everything's drawn up already, see? He's eager to be rid of me. That increased the price."

"You signed?" Gero said.

"You said I should talk to you first," Eric told him, "so I'm talking. But it's a better deal. Enough better that I'm thinking *you* might reconsider. Gero, think about the struggle it would be here, to hold together a restaurant while Sutherland is trying to break it up into little pieces he can sell."

"I will not go."

"Well I might." Eric held out the papers. "I *will*."

"You are forgetting your friend who is sick. You are turning your back on Tarragon Leaf."

"Gero, The Tarragon Leaf is a terminal case. Whether I stay or go, Sutherland is in the picture, and that means that the restaurant you and I know is already history. He's a bladder worm, remember?"

"Ah, yes. A bladder worm," Gero said. "Better you drink this." He offered the noxious drink again.

"Look, forget that nonsense," Eric said. He picked up the drink, walked it to the sink, and poured it out.

Gero took a deep breath. That was the most extreme expression of exasperation Eric had ever seen him make. "All right," Gero said, "I will show you."

He looked around the kitchen. It was late, but the other chefs, the pot scrubbers, the dish washers were all still busy. No one seemed to be paying particular attention to the conversation. "Restaurant has a parasite," Gero said very quietly. "What is a better treatment for parasite than another parasite?" He produced a jar. Inside was something that looked like a long, curled shaving of wax. Even without knowing what it was, there was something about its appearance that made Eric's stomach turn.

Gero tapped the side of the jar. "Tapeworm pieces," he said. "Proglottids. Fresh. Ripe. Full of eggs." He reached among his jars and produced a second and third jar with similar contents.

Eric thought he felt something twitch in his intestines. The kitchen air suddenly seemed very stale.

"I had to get several. I had to make sure I would have many eggs. It must be a big infection to make sure the bladder worms get to the brain."

"Where..."

"From Mexico, from pigs," Gero said. "I have sources, yes? I tell them it must be fresh."

"But I mean, where..."

"In the steak sauce, remember? In your partner's steak sauce, not yours. The eggs are too small to see, though, so I worry, just a little sauce on a spoon is bad. Or the waiter makes mistake."

"Bad. Yes." And the waiter *had* made a mistake. Had Eric's steak knife perhaps touched the sauce on Sutherland's steak? He tried to remember. Surely, if there were bladder worm larvae in Eric's stomach, he couldn't *feel* them. Surely that crawling sensation was his imagination.

"But now, all we need is patience," Gero went on. "In four years, your partner will not be running any restaurant. Maybe we will buy Southern Exposure. We will make two fine restaurants then, Eric. With balance." He smiled. There was light in his gray, Sino-Ugrian-Russo-Mediterranean eyes. "What did I tell you? Wind over heaven. The Taming Power of Small Things. Your partner is a man out of balance. Big body, big appetite, very big greed. With something small, now, we tame him."

"The drink," Eric said. His mouth felt dry. "Some kind of herbs?"

Gero shook his head. "Herbs for some things, for subtle things, are fine. But for killing worms, making sure you are not infected, we need the best poison. Quinacrine hydrochloride. Makes you vomit sometimes, so I put in some catnip and phenobarbital. I will make you another now."

Eric, still looking at the worm pieces in the jars, thought he saw one move. He rushed to the sink and leaned forward.

Gero stood watching him for a moment. "Recipe is not balanced," he said. "I think, this time, more phenobarbital."

Eric rose to breathe, then leaned forward again.

Gero sighed and shook his head. "It is difficult. This is not something I can balance by taste." He opened a jar full of pills, and he shrugged.

"After all," he said, "I am not a doctor. I am only a saucier."

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