

**Journey to the West**  
by Everett Griffiths  
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"Journey to the West" is an animated film inspired by the epic Chinese saga of the same name. The protagonists are three animals, each representing a broad religious philosophy: Floyd the Rooster (representing Christianity), Vivian the Cow (representing Buddhism), and Max the Pig (representing nihilism and agnosticism). Each character has an epiphany which enlarges his understanding and enables him to make a sacrifice. The story revolves around the characters' spiritual developments and ultimately presents the lesson that spirituality and grace supercede religion and form. In order to make the message more relevant to today, the transformations occur against a backdrop of satirical and sometimes Orwellian parodies of Western society.

**On the Farm**

On a stereotypical family farm, common in rural Europe or pre-industrial America, naive animals mill about in their contentedness. A young rooster, Floyd, is indignant that he must eat scraps while a lush garden grows within plain sight. Although it is fenced off, Floyd sneaks in and soon fills himself with forbidden vegetables. The farmer's wife discovers Floyd's trespass and punts him rudely not only out of the garden, but out of the barnyard as well.

Although Floyd is now free of the barnyard fence, he is also completely unprotected, a fact which does not go unnoticed by a couple of the farmer's dogs. Vivian the cow watches Floyd in his moment of duress and her motherly instincts quickly goad her to take action: with fearful resolve, she kicks the wooden barnyard gate to splinters and stands guard over the rooster, forcing the dogs to retreat.

Vivian's interaction saves Floyd, and it creates a new opportunity for the other animals. Some of them exit the barnyard timidly to explore the world beyond the fence. The animals stay close to the barnyard, with three exceptions: Floyd the rooster, Vivian the cow, and Max the pig. Floyd is adamant and idealistic like young Siddhartha and has no plans to return to the sheltered life. Vivian is steeped with bitterness of a place that has taken her offspring and milk. Max perceives that staying on the farm will ultimately result in his becoming pork rinds, but for the time being he is more concerned with stealing mouthfuls of barley from the field where Floyd and Vivian happen to be. Without deliberate conversation or ornate plans, the animals realize that their decision to leave the farm has already been made, and they begin their journey into the world unknown, setting off towards the setting sun.

The animals walk through the night; they can see the farm in the distance and hear the farmer and his dogs searching for them like prison guards searching for escapees. The animals flee higher and higher into the hills, eventually finding shelter in a cave where a horse sits in front of a fire. The horse is old and wise, and at some time in his past, he too escaped from the farm. Great is the matter of life and death, he tells them, while pouring them each a steaming mug of tea. The animals are concerned for their safety, and this horse seems to hold the key. He knows that escaping the farm is only the

beginning of their enlightenment; true freedom comes from within, and only spiritual growth can procure it. If they want to meet this end, the horse explains, then each of them must seek the holy scriptures that lie to the West. Only by finding them can one inwardly awaken and become genuinely free.

Before sending them off, the horse gives each of the animals a gift that will aid them in their quest. The gifts are simple, and at this moment, it is not entirely clear what purpose they might serve. Floyd is given a small glass vial, which contains the “wind of protection.” Max is given a small burlap bag of rice, “to feed his soul.” Vivian is given a coin, which can “summon help.” The horse has done all he can for the traveling animals – he is there to help them on their quest, not to do it for them. He bids them farewell. With a great breath, he blows out the fire, sending the animals crawling and coughing through dust and sparks.

### **The City of Piety**

The animals crawl toward a piece of twilight and find themselves on a cobblestone street surrounded by Spanish style buildings. In the distance, a bell tolls. It is early morning, and the town is empty except for a young girl, Maria, who is startled to see animals on her walk to work. She is immediately concerned for their safety and shuffles them to the restaurant where she works in an attempt to hide them from "the gray robes." While at the restaurant, the animals catch a few glimpses of these mysterious hooded figures. The townspeople are terrified by them and the power they wield.

After work, Maria hides the animals in a cart and takes them to a nearby barn, where they are more or less besieged on all sides by the presence of the hooded men. At night, Maria brings the animals dinner and drops off a small girl, Esperanza, who also sleeps in the barn from time to time. By talking with the young girl, the animals get a more detailed picture of the town and they can infer that Maria works at night as a prostitute with several other women from the restaurant. One night Floyd sneaks out and confirms this: the hooded men force many of the waitresses to have sex with them as part of their rent payment. As dawn approaches, Floyd realizes how vulnerable he is on the streets; he steals a gray robe hanging outside Maria's room, puts it on as a disguise, and runs back to the barn.

Floyd shares his discovery with his comrades back at the barn. Vivian is concerned, but cannot understand Floyd's obdurate reaction to it. Bad things happen all the time, she reasons. The animals do not realize that the man who was in Maria's room has imprisoned her after finding his robe missing. When Maria doesn't show up to bring them food, Esperanza goes out to look for her, but she doesn't return either. Concerned, Floyd dons the robe and goes out to find out what happened. He returns with a basket full of eggs, saying that it was all the food he could find. He learned the fate of Maria and Esperanza from the other girls at the brothel. Floyd grasps the severity of the situation more than his companions; he knows that their fragile hiding place won't last. The hooded men will come for them, it's only a matter of time. Floyd has a sleepless night, troubled by his thoughts. Max doesn't pick up on Floyd's distress; he's more upset by having such a slim dinner.

The hooded men come early in the morning, bearing torches. Floyd barely has time to awaken his companions before they break the door open. They say they are

looking for the rooster, and Floyd boldly presents himself to them, partly to keep attention away from Vivian and Max. Max, however, in his fear capitalizes on the confusion. He slips into the spare gray robe, and merges unnoticed with the crowd of angry hooded men leaving Vivian and Floyd to their fates. He catches only a glimpse of Vivian and Floyd as they are bound and led away.

Terrified, Max runs blindly through the streets. In a panic, he seeks an escape from the town. Unfortunately, he runs directly into the path of an eighteen-wheeler. It slams on its breaks, but hits the pig squarely. A wiry man with a short white beard climbs out of the cab, checks the pig over, then carries the unconscious animal into his rig. Inside the truck there are clocks of various sizes and shapes in place of the speedometer and fuel gauge. The man puts the truck back into gear and lumbers on.

### **City of Consumption**

After dark, Max awakens in the cab of the semi and asks the man where he is. "Not where you were," is the glib reply. The man's name is Tim, but most of Max's questions produce vague answers. Outside, a storm is raging, blowing the rig from side to side. Tim reaches into a vest pocket and checks the time: almost 12 o'clock. He tells Max that he's almost there, slows the truck, and then tells Max to get out. He says it so forcefully that Max obeys and steps out of the truck into the whirling dust. The truck pulls away, and Max stumbles towards some lights in the distance. As he nears the lights, the storm eases. He comes into the eye of the storm, perhaps ten miles wide. On all sides are black clouds and countless tornados, some solid like massive pillars, others spindly and crooked like pubic hairs. In the middle is a great glowing city on the plain.

Max enters the city and is surrounded by crazed opulence. Every inch of every surface is covered by flashing neon billboards and advertisements. Cars are everywhere, and Max can barely avoid them. The scene is like a cross between an L.A. highway and downtown Tokyo.

In the parking lot of a store named "Mart Mart," huge and fat people trundle to and fro from oversized cars pushing overfilled shopping carts. Bewildered, Max walks inside. He grabs a handful of food and is shepherded to the checkout. The clerk quickly realizes that this pig has no money, so Max is called into a back room. There, a clean cut white man in a pressed shirt and tie is flanked by two beefy goons. The corporate looking man speaks cordially about making sure Max can get everything he needs. He even instructs the goons to get Max some more odds and ends for his grocery sack. The goon returns with a quart of oil, some pills, condoms, a fashion magazine, and some candy bars, which Max eyes hungrily. The corporate man urges Max to eat, which he does, and speaks of the benefits of opening an account with Mart Mart. Max unwittingly signs the document that's pushed in front of him. The mood changes suddenly as soon as Max signs the contract. The corporate man says something about protecting their investment as he forces a smile and leaves. One goon violently forces Max's head to the table as the other uses a large surgical implement to crudely insert some sort of tracking chip into the nape of Max's neck. Max spits out unswallowed food as he screams in pain. The goons throw a nauseated Max to the street with his sundry groceries; offended shoppers complain loudly about the nuisance of this dirty pig; some even kick and spit. Max manages to crawl into a nearby alley where he passes out.

Two Hispanic janitors returning from work at Mart Mart chatter away in Spanish. One of them sees Max, and they offer assistance. They are poor people, not members of the elite consumer class, so they still have a sense of social duty and sympathy about them. They comfort Max in broken English then hoist him up, putting his arms over their shoulders to support his feeble walking. They walk back to their home, gaily singing some Spanish drinking songs.

Pablo and Jorge, as the custodians are called, bring Max to a dirty shantytown that looks like something out of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The sounds of harmonica and guitar drift through the nighttime noises. Max's hosts give him some beans and tortillas to eat, cooked over an open fire. Max is inwardly troubled. He wonders what happened to the others. The feeling is amplified when he sees Pablo's young daughter and her strong resemblance to Esperanza. As the fire dies down, the camp gravitates toward bed. Max is given a spare cardboard box to sleep in.

In the morning, Pablo and Jorge introduce Max to Peter, who has agreed to help Max look for some work. The process is simple: workers write their skills on cardboard plaques and wait at street corners to be picked up (i.e. "hired") by passing corporate people in need of cheap labor. Peter also has a debt to pay off, much larger than Max's. He is focused primarily on providing a better life for his family. He explains some of the workings of the town. The poor workers toil away to support the fat consumers across town. The government-like men that Max met in Mart Mart are referred to simply as "the Corpocracy."

Soon, a military style truck pulls up, driven by a man with a physique like the goons at Mart Mart. A slender man in the passenger seat leans out the door and points at the laborers he wants. Max and Peter are selected, so they scramble into the truck. Peter is excited. He explains to Max that sometimes he waits days before getting a job. Max asks what job they just got hired for. "Who cares?" answers Peter. "As long as we get paid."

The truck drives to the edge of town, to the rim of a canyon. Below is a landscape of refuse, stretching all the way to the tornados that surround the town. The men in the truck, including Max and Peter, are instructed to unload garbage trucks that have pulled up to the edge of this great pit. Max is confused because most of what they are throwing in – cell phones, Barbie dolls, garden equipment – is still packaged and perfectly good. "Throw it in," is Peter's response. While working, a shot rings out. A woman who was rummaging through the landfill below lies dead. One of the workers that was on the truck with Max and Peter reloads his rifle – it was clearly he who fired the shot. "Why did he shoot her?" whispers Max. Peter looks confused. "Because she stole a package, I'm sure. That's illegal. She should have known better... stealing hurts us all." His tone implies that the shooting was not only justifiable, but that it was helpful and good.

Max has no lunch, so when the rest of the crew is on break, he wanders up a nearby hill. He sees a huge gathering near the pit edge. Green banners and lights line the event. An older man hailed as "Chairman Green" addresses the crowd of fat consumers with mythic predictions and slathering praises of "the Greatest City in the World." The meeting culminates with several outstanding comrades driving their brand new SUVs to the edge of the pit, then pushing them in. The crowd cheers, some are moved to tears by this patriotic sacrifice.

When Max returns from his hard labor, he is shocked to discover that he has made only a few cents, but it is enough to buy some food on the poor side of town. This routine continues for days. One day he checks his balance and receives another shock: the balance has gained substantially in interest. He now owes over a thousand dollars. As if to reinforce this, Max is periodically bullied by goons from the Corpocracy. “You haven’t made your minimum payment,” they say. They then proceed to mug the pig. On the first occasion, he protests “you can’t just take my money like that!” The men laugh. “News flash, Porker... who’s going to stop us? If the Corpocracy wants your money or wants you dead, do you really think a piss-ant like you can do anything about it?” They laugh while beating him black and blue.

The menial jobs continue, but Max steadily declines. He loses weight and becomes introverted. While working, he sees men lose arms in accidents, then watches helplessly as they are thrown into the street and a fresh worker is brought in to eagerly take his place. While back in the shantytown, he sees that women’s breasts are tattooed with the emblem of the Corpocracy; at this, hungry infants suckle.

Max takes to eating his meals alone at a nearby train depot. On one such evening, he watches a fiery Hispanic man with a thin mustache and a tattoo of a Chinese character on his bare arm. The man pauses in front of a Corpocracy propaganda poster proclaiming “things to fear.” The cholo unzips his pants and urinates all over it with dramatic arcs and sways. The man zips up and steps back to admire his work, then notices Max eating. He tries to talk Max out of his dinner, but Max refuses. The cholo promises that if Max gives him dinner, he will do something in return for him: he will get rid of the tornados that surround the town. Peter had told Max of a local myth that a dragon could destroy the tornados, so Max sardonically replies “I thought only a dragon could do that.” The little man protests that he *is* a dragon, which thoroughly convinces Max of his insanity. Max finishes his meal and walks away. Max doesn’t notice that the man’s eyes flash yellow for a moment and his pupils become vertical slits.

Eventually Max’s health is so bad that he is no longer able to work. Every day he has witnessed further selfishness. He is particularly shocked that Jorge, one of the janitors who picked him up on his first night, has stolen Pablo’s money in order to move across town. Pablo’s young daughter (who looked like Esperanza) was forced into begging, but on this night, Max learns that she has starved to death. When Max goes to buy some food at the local hut, he finds that it has been replaced by “Arches,” some slick looking corporate job which has prices Max cannot afford. In an effort to make some money, Max cuts off his beard and sells it to a shop that makes brushes, but the money earned isn’t enough to buy a meal. Instead, Max goes into an odds and ends store and buys all that he can: a bar of soap, a lump of coal, and a razor.

He moves slowly and deliberately now, sensing his end is near. With it comes a quiet dignity. He bathes himself in a bucket of rainwater, then shaves both his balding head and face. He starts a small fire with the lump of coal and boils some water in a coffee can. It has come to this: Max pulls the small burlap sack that the horse had given him, and cooks the handful of rice. He watches the flame in a trance. When finished cooking, he removes the pannikin and prepares his chopsticks.

Instead of eating, he walks to the train depot and offers the steaming rice to the short cholo man. The cholo asks “Vato, are you finally making me dinner?” Max answers quietly “I’m sorry I didn’t give you something sooner,” then walks away. Max

has realized that he would rather die today with some vestige of compassion than live till tomorrow because of selfishness. As he walks away, a wind picks up. Sheets of newspaper come careening down the street thrown by great tentacles of dust. As the wind tensely lulls, the forlorn look leaves Max's eyes. His pace slows, and he looks back towards the depot in its eerie silence. In a heartbeat, an explosion of light and wind rocks the area, hurtling Max backwards through the air. Like a scene from Akira, windows implode, doors shear from their hinges. A serpentine white tornado forms in the center of the depot, and it levels the town. The destruction is complete: even the microchip in Max's neck burns out of its place.

The sky clears for the first time, and from the ashes of the city, children creep out into the sun, their faces bright. The cold blue light of the previous days is gone, revealing a city surrounded by prairie and sand with mountains beyond. With some of the children, Max collects food strewn throughout the streets. Now walking on two feet, Max heads westward out of town.

### **Vivian and the Village of Ignorance**

Max journeys on foot for a long time after escaping the City of Consumption. He greets each day as a gift. He eats fruit from trees, drinks from streams, and sleeps under stars. Eventually the day arrives when he can see the vast ocean, blue on the blurry horizon, with a village hugging its shores.

The pig is not greeted by enthusiastic onlookers when he arrives in the town. People merely go about doing the things they've always done, and they take little notice of this visitor. Most of them are fishermen, myopic and uninterested in what lies beyond their village borders. No one asks Max a single question – not his name, where he is from, or why he is there. The villagers sit around smoking and talk about catching “soma fish.” Max discovers that no one has actually caught one for years, so he asks “Why not catch some other kind of fish?” One younger man screams and waives his cigarette around, insulted. “It's what we've always fished for!” Knowingly, Max answers that tradition is no justification, but this comment upsets the men even more. Most of them leave, muttering under their breath at the stupidity of this pig. Only a couple older men remain, silently repairing their nets. For the first time on his quest, Max asks whether anyone has heard of the sacred scriptures. The old men hadn't, but they know a cow that had come searching for them. They point Max towards her house. Clearly surprised at news of a cow who must be Vivian, Max bows and heads in that direction.

Max approaches the house slowly. He stands in front of the door for a long time before pulling the bell string. He steps back and sits cross-legged on the porch. The frail movements of an aged cow open the door. It's Vivian. She has aged considerably since Max saw her last. Where a spark of severity once burned in her eyes, only dark sarcasm remains. She studies Max for a while, but when she recognizes him, she slams the door in loathing. Max had anticipated this, and he remains seated. He waits all afternoon, and all evening, but Vivian does not come out. At one point, she throws a can of refuse out of the upper window and curses at Max. “Get out of here!” But Max doesn't move. His resolve and purpose are clear.

On the evening of the second day, Vivian opens the door to the house and glares at Max from the shadows. “What do you want?” she asks venomously. “To talk,” Max

answers. "To you." "I have nothing to say," Vivian retorts. "I'll wait," answers Max. Vivian stands in the shadows for a long time. It is a pregnant moment. Resignedly, she whispers "come in." Max rises and brushes the slop from him and enters the open doorway. Vivian is in a corner, watching a pot of water over a low fire.

"You left us," she says. "I've hated you for that." Max answers that he is not looking for forgiveness. He is looking for the scriptures. "But some of us have taken the quest more seriously than others," Vivian chides back. "We all walk different paths," answers Max. Vivian is insulted. She haughtily proceeds to tell him what happened after Max snuck out of the barn.

## **Flashback**

Max dons the gray robe and blends into the crowd of gray figures. Floyd and Vivian are bound and lead away to a temple. There they are tied with ropes to pillars along with Maria, and Esperanza at the front of the building. They are forced to stand trial, but it is a mockery of justice; the accusations range from the ridiculous to the impossible. Floyd stands up to the men's asinine accusations, but it is to naught. They are condemned to be stoned.

As the death sentence is pronounced, Floyd is determined to do something; he cannot stand the fact that he and his friends are going to die when they have committed no crime. As the stones begin to fly, the horse's gift to Floyd becomes apparent; the glass vial breaks open and releases a gust of wind. Feathers blow off of Floyd, and magically, each becomes an identical copy of the bird, and each is dedicated to save Vivian, Maria, and Esperanza from the injustice they face. Rooster after rooster leaps in front of the flying stones and bird after bird is mauled and killed. In this moment of bloody horror, Vivian pulls on her bindings in a massive display of strength. She frees herself and the others. Because of Floyd's sacrifice, they are able to escape.

Once outside, an old man wearing a white robe appears. Unlike the men in gray, he does not cover his face with his hood and seems genuinely kind. He offers to help Vivian, Maria, and Esperanza escape the city. Before the confusion spreads from the temple, they leave; he harnesses Vivian as a beast of burden to a cart. Maria and Esperanza hide in the back while the man in white drives.

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To Vivian, Floyd's sacrifice is tangible: it is what allows her to live and function. To Max, any such action is useful only as it teaches a lesson for him to follow. Max points out that "in one sense, Floyd merely showed you how to save yourself." He makes an analogy with a honeybee: "What good does it do her if she finds honey and does not tell the hive about it?" "It's as if the hive were the animal and the bees merely parts of a greater creature," Max says. "This purpose surpasses the output of a single creature."

Hearing Max speak in this way produces a visible transformation in Vivian, and she admits her disbelief. She breaks down and pours out her frustration of how the same bad things have happened to her all her life and how she never believed that things could change. Her children were always taken from her, and she struggles with overcoming the bitterness of her past. Max reminds her that the only thing one can really have is grace,

and no one can take it away. Vivian puts on tea, still confused inwardly, and they talk into the night.

Vivian arises before dawn. She gently tucks a blanket over Max, who is sleeping in front of the fireplace. She pulls a heavy piece of paper from behind the table where they talked the night before. She looks at it knowingly, and sets it on the table. Then she quietly makes her way outside.

Stars are still visible, and Vivian takes the time to breathe full breaths and examine the beautiful things around her. A breeze blows towards the ocean, and Vivian gazes across it with a look of peace on her face. She walks towards downtown and finds some tall buildings. When she spies a pay phone, she feels the old horse's gift around her neck. She removes the coin and places it in the phone. The call is brief, and she names the nearest street intersection. Vivian hangs up, then looks towards the fire escape on the tallest building – perhaps eight stories high. She pulls herself up and climbs to the roof. There she can see even more of the area's beauty. She thinks of Floyd, of Max, and the scriptures. Her aged appearance is softened by a glint in her eye. Just as the sun rises behind her, Vivian leaps off the building to her death.

Max wakes up to the sound of knocking. A delivery man has a package for him, which he accepts in confusion. He sets the box down on the table, next to the thick paper drawing. His sleepiness fades quickly when he realizes that what he's pulling from the box are pieces of leather, sinewy ropes, and other items made from a cow. A thought enters his mind and he looks around the room for any sign of Vivian. He glances down at the drawings and sees that they are designs for a hot air balloon, made entirely from cow parts. He realizes that Vivian has sacrificed herself so that he may cross the final ocean. "To this end it has come," Max says. "And it is up to me to make myself worthy of the sacrifices made for me."

From Vivian's body parts, Max builds the balloon. Carrying only its parts, he walks down to the beach and inflates it using a small fire. There is no fanfare or people to see him off, only the crying of seagulls. A wicker basket hangs below the black and white leathery balloon. Beneath hangs the swollen udder. Max climbs into the basket and blows across the great ocean.

Max drifts for an unknown amount of time, but before the balloon reaches the other side of the ocean, it dips into the waves, and Max must swim the final leg. He pulls himself onto a beach that has a familiar quality about it. It is inside a cave, and a light from a nearby opening shines in front of Max. He walks toward the light, pausing briefly to lean on the doorway before stepping out of the cave entirely. There are pictographs on the walls that seem to watch him go.