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Goodbye, Shanghai

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Goodbye, Shanghai

Valerie Foo

Hot Sour Noodles

Just as I was about to fall asleep, a ray of sunshine slid through the crack of the blinds and pierced into my eyes. I rolled over and checked the time on my phone. The screen read 2 p.m. *What a great way to start the New Year*, I thought as I trudged down the stairs with my pounding headache. After my last trip from China, I was jet-lagged and hungry. So I went to make a quick meal. I lifted the paper flap and sniffed the small gust of seasoning powder that rose into the still air. As the boiling water flowed into the Styrofoam cup, the steam fogged up my glasses, stinging my eyes.

I guess this is what déjà vu is, I thought as I somehow found myself not in front of my Cup Noodles but a steaming bowl of hot sour noodles in a crowded food court with loud Chinese chatter, fluorescent images, and blurred Mandarin characters.

“And now you’re leaving too? Just like everyone else I suppose,” Renny murmured as she let out a long sigh.

“Well, it was bound to happen sometime soon. My dad’s working contract ended and I’m moving back to Malaysia.” I smiled stiffly while looking down at my noodles. I had rehearsed this line so many times. From the side of my eye, I peered to my left to see Renny, my good friend since the ninth grade, lifting her hand and wiping her glasses. Perhaps it was the sweat that trickled down her forehead, or maybe it was a tear.

“Just as I’ve gotten used to catching up with you every year, distance and time will finally separate us,” Renny said, her voice trembling. My chopsticks’ grip on the slippery glass noodles loosened as her words struck my heartstrings. It had been five years since we’d gone to high school together. Yet China remained our sole meeting place, to smile and laugh about good times, both in the present and past. As the phrase goes, it takes two to tango, and so this too shall pass. “You could still come back to China and visit me! And once you get here, you could stay with me and my family! Actually, I’m not sure how that will work but if I ask...”

As Renny blabbered on, my mind began to wander as I slurped my noodles with spoonfuls of the hot red soup. A numbing sensation spread from my lips down my throat and to my head. The fatty pork pieces, roasted peanuts, chili oil, and Sichuan peppercorns caused me to space out. Not long after, all I heard became white static noise. While everything in my peripheral vision blurred, my eyes locked onto something of great importance: the cilantro and chives that I specifically asked the server not to add. Didn’t he know that I despised cilantro and chives? It was a simple matter, yet he chose to mess up. Why...

“Hey, you should finish your noodles before they get cold,” Renny said with one eyebrow raised. “After all this time, you still have the attention span of a goldfish.” I looked down at the broken strands of noodles that floated in the oily concoction, and I held on to the chopsticks so tightly that my knuckles turned pale. Weren’t the noodles fine a minute ago? The soup that I had savored in my mouth turned strangely bitter.

As I swallowed the lump in my throat, I loosened my grip and let out an awkward reply from sealed lips: “I should probably get to it then.” I bent over the bowl of hot sour noodles and my glasses began to fog up, stinging my eyes once more. When I blinked, I was back in the kitchen, standing in front of my Cup Noodles that had now become cold and stale.

Beer

“Don’t you think that kombucha weirdly tastes like beer? After all, they’re both fermented drinks,” the stranger next to me remarked as I spaced off in front of the drink section at Fred Meyer’s. The rainy weather in Portland didn’t help my mood either.

“Sure, I suppose,” I replied with a quick nod. How could a glass bottle of fermented tea (which tastes terrible) be compared to a refreshing drink of barley and hops? Especially after a long day of...

After being out in the bustling and smoky city of Shanghai, I got home, kicked off my shoes and removed my fluffy coat. I quickly gravitated toward the fridge then plopped myself next to my brother on the couch to crack open a cold one.

“Qingdao beer? Great choice, eh?” my brother said sarcastically, revealing his opened can. I smirked and reached over to clink his can with mine. As I took my first sip and the foam gathered on my upper lip, the cool, mildly bittersweet taste danced on my taste buds and slid down my parched throat. Naturally, I looked out the window to the view below. It was two in the morning, and yet the roads were

still lined with cars, wandering people and flashing traffic lights. As I shifted my gaze, I noticed a familiar street. I nudged my brother and said, “Remember when we used to ride our bikes on that street?”

“And how you rode so slowly you were better off if you walked?” my brother joked. I laughed and took another swig of beer.

“Or when we walked down the other street for thirty minutes during the summer because you wanted a green tea McFlurry at McDonald’s?”

“Well, if I had taken two left and one right turn on the street with the rusty metal gate to get to Family Mart, we wouldn’t have gotten lost!”

The conversation spiraled into a playful competition to determine what was the best steam buns shop, if bus 98 was the quickest route to Thumb Plaza for midnight lamb skewers, or which was the fastest metro route to the Sketcherboard bar. The swigs of beer made our faces flushed with glee. As the beer swished in our cans, the times we roamed the streets of late-night Shanghai swirled in our pool of memories. Before we knew it, both cans were almost empty.

“Darn, you can never finish a beer.” My brother shook his head disapprovingly. “Alright, I’m going to call it a night. Do you want me to toss your can?”

“No, I’m good. I still got lots of beer left.”

As he shut his bedroom door, I sighed and looked down in my can. There was only foam left, yet I still peered into the darkness in search of more. “Well, it was good while it lasted,” I said under my

breath. In one swift motion, I gulped down the remnants. The seafoam of memories drifted away from the present. What remained was the lingering, bittersweet taste.

Rice Ball

I almost chuckled at how the polluted sky matched my state of mind. At 4 p.m., I sat in the back of the taxi with Mom and Dad. Through the silent car ride to the airport, I looked out the window and watched the tall, narrow buildings squeeze alongside each other.

While I was deep in thought, Mom squeezed my hand and I turned to look at her. Mom was an open book. Her small smile and the creases around her eyes gave it away. “Call us when you’ve safely reached the airport in Portland. We’re still in the process of moving out of Shanghai, so let us know what to keep,” Mom said, her eyes full of concern.

“Got it, thanks Mom,” I replied in a monotone and turned away. I felt guilty, but I wished for her not to see my teary eyes. Suddenly, I felt something warm on my lap. I looked down to see a black, round rice ball.

“Your father wanted you to have this. To fill your stomach before the long flight. Eat it before it gets cold!” Mom whispered in my ear. I looked over to see Dad awkwardly adjusting his jacket and clearing his throat. I tore open the glossy wrapping and bit into the crispy seaweed and the warm, moist rice to the shredded, grilled salmon within.

After all these years, Dad hadn't forgotten. Just like how I never forgot the time I shared the same rice ball with Nicholle, my best friend, during the summer before we left for college. We sat on the stone steps of our high school courtyard and swore to embrace new changes, and that distance and time would never keep us apart. Three years flew by and I never saw her again. A small rice ball symbolized a big turning point in my life.

I chomped down on my rice ball. With every bite, my mouth struggled between fighting for air and mashing up the food. I couldn't tell if the saltiness came from the salmon or from the tears that trickled down my face. When I was done, I wailed for the embrace of Mom and Dad. How much I wished that time would slow down as my old life fell behind the taxi. And yet it moved closer towards the airport and into the future.

While the rice ball was no longer there, it made me full. But the feeling would not last forever. My stomach would digest it. Soon I would crave more food, perhaps different and wholesome. In the midst of all the grief, a strange surge of calmness filled me as I settled into my seat on the airplane. Perhaps change was not bad. Change could bring new, exciting flavors into my life. But I wouldn't forget and abandon what was once comforting. I would embrace my past as my identity while being open to new experiences. For at the end of the day, the familiar was what made me who I was, or what I ate. I looked out the airplane window and watched as the familiar city grew smaller and disappeared.