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Fill My Cup Half Full: Boba Stories

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in

Asian American Studies

By

Steven Hanyun Cong

2016



# ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Fill My Cup Half Full: Boba Stories

By

Steven Hanyun Cong

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Victor Bascara, Chair

Fill My Cup Half Full is a series of three stories that document how boba milk tea - as expressed through the drink itself, the spaces through which the drink is produced, and the social relationships through which the drink is understood - manifests in different contexts with different roles to constitute a continual process of self-definition and meaning-making through the lives of disparate individuals whose paths intersect at Lu Tea House.

The thesis of Steven Hanyun Cong is approved.

Lucy Burns

Valerie Matsumoto

Victor Bascara, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

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## *Try New Things*

Tim is usually the only customer in Mrs. Lu's boba cafe, and maybe that's why he's so comfortable there. Maybe that's why it's the place he goes to for a real sense of home. In his one-size-too-large hoodie and long-out-of-style baggie jeans, he can huddle far into Lu Tea House, knowing only Mrs. Lu would occasionally look at him. And when she did, she smiled. She didn't smile because she was laughing at him, like those kids at school, but because she noticed something good, or funny-in-a-good-way, or likable about him. Like white people's moms would. Or like Tammy.

But today, she noticed him choking on tapioca pearls, which isn't so good.

"Are you okay?" she asked, a look of concern darting onto her face. Tim told her he was, but then hacked out a few more coughs, the boba slowly, finally sinking down his throat. He blushed. How embarrassing. Tim the Dim, making a fool out of himself again. Yes, he can be creative, but just not at the right things. He can find more creative ways to humiliate himself than trip on a banana peel, and less interesting ways to not get the girl he wants than to ask her out and be told no. Like just not asking her at all.

A week ago, Mrs. Lu said the key to getting Tammy is to say yes. Tim asked *say yes to what?* Mrs. Lu didn't bother sighing, or rolling her eyes, or shaking her head at this dim-witted boy. She just answered his question. *Say yes to anything.* Tim's face then twisted into a pictograph of what *huh?* would look like if it were a pictograph. *Anything?* Mrs. Lu nodded. *Anything. If she asks for money, say yes. If she asks for a cup of boba, say yes. If she wants you to stay when you have somewhere to go, just say yes.*

But back to Tim choking on boba. Mrs. Lu started walking over and offered him some water. He said no, he didn't need any. Mrs. Lu asked again if he felt okay, and he said yes, he's



fine. Not impatiently, though. He just gives responses that feel curt because one or two words is usually all he has to say. But other kids think it's because he's a loner who doesn't know how to talk to people. And maybe he's that, too.

"Be more careful next time," Mrs. Lu said in a soft voice. Then, she continued, "If this is a matter of being careful."

He looked up. "What do you mean?"

Mrs. Lu has a way of saying things. Like she doesn't want to just say whatever she wants to say. Like you have to think about it, work for it, and then get it. But the moment has already passed when you finally get it. And then you feel stupid. Or at least Tim does.

"People wouldn't choke for no reason," she explained with another smile on her face. A gentle, *oh-you* smile. "They don't do anything for no reason. Sometimes, they're going to do what they just need to do."

Tim scratched his arm. He took another sip of the milk tea. He frowned. *What does she mean*, he wondered, chewing laboriously on another pearl that he was careful to beat down into flattened bits and pieces of honey and starch before swallowing. *People don't choke for no reason*, he repeated slowly in his head. It was such an obvious statement. Why did Mrs. Lu bring it up at all? *You're asking a good question*, Tammy would say if she were here with him. Other people would have called it a dumb question and called him stupid, but not Tammy. That one you're-on-the-right-track comment is sometimes enough to actually get him on the right track. And what would she say next? He imagined Tammy looking patiently at him, smiling as if he already has the right answer. *You're so interesting*, her voice popped into his head. *The only right answer is the one you need*. Of course she would say that. Tammy's always thinking about what everyone else needs. *And what does Mrs. Lu need?* As Tim sat in the empty boba cafe

drinking powder milk tea that no one comes to buy anymore, he felt the answer sink into his stomach like a boulder. *She meant they choke because they don't like how it tastes.* Oh no.

“That’s not what happened,” he blurted. “I just drank too much at once, that’s all. I love your boba. I mean, I buy one every day. It’s actually kind of bad, actually. That I do that.”

Mrs. Lu laughed a reassuring laugh and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m just teasing. But it’s good to hear that someone still likes the boba I make.”

Tim nodded. Her words were grim, but it’s a subtle kind of grim that flew over his head. Instead, he just thought about how it sucks that he’s probably that *someone*, and that he and Tammy can’t really be sitting here right now, together, being those *someones*. Jeff from farther down Irving Street has a girlfriend already, and he wears glasses. Jonathan, who picked his nose in third grade, has been with Elizabeth from the Outer Richmond for two whole months. And worst of all, Tammy’s still single, not even interested in anyone, and is already friends with him. And he still can’t ask her to even hang out with him at Lu Tea House, which is what he imagined himself doing almost every single day, the words hanging on his lips, and then disappearing, becoming faker than Aladdin and those Disney movies and love and blah blah blah. Even though Tammy would probably just smile her signature and genuine smile with her almond eyes and say *Tim, you’re sweet. Of course I’d want to go. Chinese school can wait.*

He blinked. San Francisco can be really lonely sometimes. The tourists and hipsters who hang out in the windy downtown skyscrapers don’t know how lonely it can be when you actually have a community that live here. It’s 2011 already, and no iPhone upgrade can make him feel more connected with the people around him. In fact, looking at his Facebook friends list of under 100 people can be pretty depressing. Especially since Jonathan, who picked his nose in third grade, already has more than 250. Oh well. *I’m used to it, I guess.*

He rose and put on his backpack.

“Your boba is amazing, Mrs. Lu. I love your milk teas, too.”

“Hah. Guess powder *can* work for people,” she said absently. Mrs. Lu probably has no idea about the dramatic two seconds Tim just had in his head, but it’s okay. If Mrs. Lu knew what kind of thoughts he was having, it would probably make her see him like everyone else sees him. And that would crush him.

“It can,” he agreed firmly. “I have to be somewhere right now, but I’ll probably be back tomorrow. Thanks again for the drink, Mrs. Lu.”

She gave Tim a smile that wasn’t meant to be sad. But his look of confusion made her wonder if even this innocent little boy knew that her eyes and lips weren’t saying the same thing. It’s true that she was never good at hiding what she felt from the people she cared for. Especially when they’re walking out of those Lu Tea House doors. Maybe to never come back. Or maybe to run from trails of milk tea that can do much worse than make a person choke.

“Take care, Tim.”

Danny was surprised to find that San Francisco can actually be really cold, pretty much during all parts of day. Like almost Mercer Island cold. It doesn’t ever take a break from the wind. Especially not in the downtown area, where Danny and Jasmine sat in a coffee shop with layers upon layers that didn’t do much. Danny couldn’t help it. He folded his arms and tried to sink deeper into his coat, the open door of the coffee shop letting in bursts of wind that almost whistled. Or maybe that’s the sound of all the cars passing by, sometimes interjected by a honk or two. People are understandably busy in the Financial District, and busy can mean impatient.

“I really hate it when they mess up your order and won’t make another drink,” Jasmine complained. To Danny, she basically snarled.

She ordered a vanilla latte, but got matcha instead. Jasmine has a point, but coming from her, it still sounded grating. Because it's not just that she really hates it when this order got messed up. She also really hates it when a lot of things happen. Like when he asks her if she wants to go to Irving Street in two days because a really hyped up bubble tea cafe is opening up and she just *complains* about how they already went to Chinatown. And how they're only here on a four-day trip and the journey back to Mercer Island is on the morning of the fourth day instead of at night, which she finds really annoying.

"Matcha's pretty good, though, right?" he asked carefully. "I wouldn't mind trying something different if I've never had it before."

"You're missing the point," she said, clearly irritated. "I like matcha stuff as much as the next person, but when I order vanilla, I expect vanilla. I mean, I'm the one that's paying for the drink, so you're basically robbing me if you don't serve what I paid you to serve."

*White people*, he found himself saying in his head. It was never a neutral utterance. It's always accompanied by an imagined head shake and *harrumph* that Jasmine never sees or hears. Why would she? Being a white person, she just never believes that she can be the one people are shaking their heads and *harrumphing* at. She would never be the one that's out of place. And especially not here. Not with all the hip and hipster coffee houses that are all *fresh brewed!*, *organic!*, and charming in ways he finds to be so pretentious. That never feel real. One time, he made the mistake of trying to tell Jasmine that. And of course, she asked him why. That's when Danny realized he can't explain the caution in a waiter's eyes when they greet you at the door with a plastic smile. Not if you're the only one who receives it.

They bickered a bit more about trying the matcha latte. She asks him why he's not drinking his latte, he answers he doesn't like caffeine, and she says he should have just gotten

decaf. The snarkiness of that last comment made his stomach crawl, his veins pop, and his nails bite into his jeans. Not in real life, of course. He never explodes or does that anything that dramatic in real life. He's just cool, composed Danny. The chill guy who only gets irate in his head. And that would've been the case this time, if she didn't have to cap it off with another one of her excellently aimed, timed, and always-on-the-mark daggers to the heart.

“But then again, I wouldn't count on you to know what to order in these places.”

He fumed.

*Well, I'm really fucking sorry, Jasmine,* he thought as he breathed extra slow. *Mom and dad didn't raise me with a cup of Starbucks in my hand on the way to school every morning.* In fact, he was sometimes the only person who didn't have one in class. He would sit in first period every day, watching streams of blue-eyed, blonde-haired jocks, cheerleaders, Breakfast Clubbers, and honor roll students flock into Room 103 with cappuccinos and Americanos and whatever other insert-coffee-here-nos that he never understood.

Because his family never drank that, and he wouldn't have it any other way. They would instead drink the regular tapioca milk tea at a local boba shop on their Saturday trips to the International District. The one with a large mural of Taiwan hanging on its wall. He tried to ignore most of the weekdays spent as “that one Chinese kid” at school, but he could never push aside a sense of excitement every time Friday rolled around. And every time he walked up King Street and saw a group of young Asian Americans sipping tapioca smoothies and matcha milk teas out of their own drinks, he wouldn't feel so different. That is, until young Asian American *hipsters* started rolling into the ID from who knows where, some clutching hands, some clutching cell phones, and some even walking in with their guitars. Their whiteness is inescapable. Like how Jasmine is inescapable.

“Maybe not,” he snapped at her, “But you didn’t exactly get what you wanted, either.”

His retort surprised him. And he gulped.

Cars continued to whiz by outside as the sun slowly set, painting the blue sky orange, then pink, and finally dark blue. Dots of small white lights trailed the skyscrapers in the downtown area, contrasting beautifully with the red and yellow of car lights. The music in the coffee shop seemed to be louder now that it was nighttime, and he wondered if Jasmine even heard him over Rihanna. He hoped not.

But her eyes narrowed, and she looked down at her matcha latte. A brief moment of silence passed before she spoke.

“No, I definitely didn’t. And you can bet this place is going to get another one-star Yelp review,” she said as she rose and picked up her bag, checking her phone again. “Let’s go. We don’t have to waste time at places that aren’t worth it. We only have two more real days.”

He forced a smile but grimaced inside, torn between annoyance at her reminder that their trip is so poorly planned because of him and worry over how he snapped at her. Snapping at Jasmine is inconceivable. Kids who don’t belong don’t talk back to people who don’t even know they exist. This logic has become so ingrained in him. When he was younger, he might have wanted to go on an hour-long tirade full of *fuck you*’s, and anger, and maybe a cup of matcha latte thrown in Jasmine’s direction, all so he can vent. But high school was years ago, and he’s realized that those outbursts won’t earn him the respect he’s only been getting from himself.

Instead, he just replied apologetically, “Of course. Next time we’ll get you your vanilla latte.”

“So how are things going with that girl?” Mrs. Lu asked. She scrubbed the counter some more as Tim sat across from her, sipping his boba.

His shoulders tensed and rose as he asked a question he already knew the answer to.

“Who?”

“The one that you always leave behind to come here. Tammy?”

Of course, he thought. Who else do I ever hang out with? Mrs. Lu’s words *could* have hurt him, and if Tim wasn’t so fidgety about having to think of himself *and* Tammy in the same sentence, he *could* have been upset. But it turns out he was thinking of himself and Tammy for a good reason today. One that kept him absentminded for the past half hour, the only sounds in Lu Tea House being the subtle *scrub, scrub, scrub* of Mrs. Lu’s towel moving across a counter that was never not clean.

Tim usually walks with Tammy after school and they talk about everything except, well, how they feel about each other. Or how he feels about her. And each time he works up enough guts, or courage, or whatever it is to get the words on the edge of his tongue, they come to the point where he usually waves goodbye. And when things have a “usually” attached to it, not doing it would be weird. It’s partly his fault. He’s never able to catch on to the unspoken words behind Tammy’s hesitation, her comments about how nice the day is, or her asking him if he’s been to her place before. He just goes on autopilot and waves goodbye as he gives a curt response. Making it a usual thing.

He’d then walk by himself into Lu Tea House, only to have Mrs. Lu look up and ask *where’s your friend?* She normally goes back to scrubbing counters, or counting tills, or whatever else she can do to avoid awkward eye contact after his *she went home* response. But one day, she told him *you don’t have to come every day. Just hang out with her sometime.* It caught Tim by surprise. His eyes asked the *why?* that his lips couldn’t find. Mrs. Lu heard it, though, and told him you can only run away so many times. That’s how Tim realized Mrs. Lu

wasn't just being polite each time she asked about Tammy. He sucked on his boba straw so he wouldn't be smiling like an idiot. *Mrs. Lu actually cares. How are things with that girl* isn't just conversation filler.

"Tammy? You mean my friend Tammy?" Tim tried to ask innocently. He couldn't keep the excitement out of his voice. "I don't know. Why? We're good."

They're more than good. Things were different on their after-school-walk today.

Tim and Tammy had come to the intersection of 19th and Irving, and he knew they were only three blocks away from Lu Tea House. He had felt so nervous, like his heart was going to stop, drop, and roll, forcing him to follow suit. He nodded when she talked about Scratchy and how he likes to lick almost every stranger they pass on their 5pm strolls. Tim gave nervous giggles when she talked about feeling bad for Mrs. Thompson because their teacher never noticed the booger hanging under her nose in 5th period. But he was only half listening. Today had been another one of those days when he just felt that urge to say *something*. It's a *something* that Mrs. Lu always told him to say to Tammy. *Do you want to get boba with me?*

"Tim, why do you go to that boba place every day? Are they that good?" Tammy had suddenly asked, stopping him in his tracks.

She paused when she noticed he had stopped walking, giving him a curious look.

"I like their drinks."

"You like their drinks," she repeated. The light turned green, and they both started to cross the street. "I wanted to ask you, do you want to come over to my place, instead? My mom bought my little brother a Wii, but I like playing it, too. Just, my little brother's still not the best at any of the games, yet. Ha."

"Hehe," he laughed uncomfortably. "I don't know. Today -"



“You don’t have to come,” she interrupted, “I mean, it’s just a Wii. I was only asking. It’s not even my Wii.”

They were now two blocks away.

*What would Mrs. Lu do*, he asked himself. It’s what most people ask about Jesus. Except Jesus has a whole book on that. Mrs. Lu just has stories about people Tim always mixes up. He’d say *you mean John?* Then he’d realize he meant Joseph, and quickly look down and suck up some tapioca pearls. *What would you say to Tammy right now*, he imagined himself asking Mrs. Lu. She would probably stop scrubbing her counter for a bit, give that sagely I’m-at-least-50-years-old-so-I’m-wise look, and talk about John. Or was it Joseph? Anyways, it’s the brother who’s no longer around for some reason. And then she’d say she wouldn’t know the answer to that. It’s how she usually ends her responses to his *what would you do* question whenever John is part of the answer.

Tim bit his lip, and noticed that his walking slowed. He was a half-step behind Tammy at that point. Just outside her peripheral vision. Hopefully. He thought long, hard, and carefully about how he would say yes. Should he just jump into it and say *Tammy, of course I want to play Wii with you, and hang out with you, and have fun and be better friends or maybe more than friends or maybe I don’t know?* Is that too much? Or should he just try to seem nonchalant? Like say *maybe. I mean, I have a lot of work, and then I have to hang out with, you know, that guy in third period. But yeah, probably?* He peeled his eyes from the ground and glanced up at Tammy, who was giving him a concerned look. He then realized he’s been silent for what was probably an hour. Or at least a minute.

“Sure,” he replied.

And that's how he got to this point of being absentminded in Lu Tea House, sipping aimlessly at his taro milk tea until he heard the gurgling of air trying to rise through the straw in an empty boba cup. Mrs. Lu's words could have hurt him. Unintentionally, of course. They could have been a reminder of how he's always so close to telling Tammy how he feels, only to interrupt himself with his own waves of goodbye as the two of them part ways. But today, it's different. Today, he got as close to telling Tammy as he possibly could have. And they are going to play Wii together. Who knows, maybe he'll even bring her to Lu Tea House one day.

Mrs. Lu checked her apron to make sure it was still clean. "My shop used to be full of people, you know. When we started, it was the first time anyone in this town had seen tapioca in their drinks."

"And no one else can make it as good as you," Tim added.

Mrs. Lu nodded wryly. "They definitely tried. And I can't say we didn't let them get to us."

He looked at Mrs. Lu. She began refilling an empty plastic jug with powder milk tea. He noticed her grimace as she bent to store it in the mini-fridge underneath the counter. The apron reached for the ground as she bent, and it seemed to hang around her neck like a noose. When she was done, she met his gaze with a smile that made him wonder if the grimace was ever there.

"But the good old days did exist. Things used to be whole," she continued. "People used to have a home here."

"I still do," Tim barely whispered, looking to the side. He was still lost in his own world, thinking about Tammy. Tammy, him, and Mrs. Lu, almost like a family he built from scratch. He thought about Mrs. Lu making them both a cup of milk tea, and Tammy's face beaming after

Mrs. Lu asks her if she likes it. They'll get along so well. One was basically a younger version of the other. His lips did the unthinkable and smiled as he thought of them both.

Mrs. Lu paused in her scrubbing. She studied Tim's face, wondering what his glazed-over eyes meant as her own eyes did the same. She knew that some things are inevitable, whether sealed in stone or in contract, and brushed off Tim's last words as empty politeness. The glimmer of hope she refused to feel subsequently vanished.

"Thank you, Tim. I'm glad to have had you as my customer."

It's day three of Danny and Jasmine's Grand San Fran Adventure, and Danny would've grunted and snickered at the idea that it was anything grand. It's funny how the little things build up. He wanted to go to Empress of China for lunch, but she wanted Ike's, instead. He wanted to visit Clement Street, and she wanted to hit up Valencia. He wanted to take a picture together at Chinatown's Dragon Gate, and she complained about all the people walking by. Which didn't seem to be a problem when she screeched in excitement and dragged him by the arm to one of the Union Square hearts for their picture. He never said it, but he knew he was mad because she whitewashed this trip.

"Cheer up, you look like you just threw up on a cat and is about to faint 'cause barf breath," she said with a chuckle.

"Shut up," he muttered.

If there's ever a moment that screamed the universe shook and fell out of line, that was it. Jasmine suddenly stopped walking, turning around to glare at him. Her azure blue eyes seemed to sharpen into icicles on the verge of exploding, like sudden cracks on a frozen lake that was about to give way. If he had shocked himself at that coffee house, this is bringing him to the point of needing CPR. Calm, collected Danny would have told himself to evaluate his options,

figure out what he wants out of Jasmine, out of life, and would have quickly apologized. But he just met her glare, calm and collectedly. Something is wrong with this Danny.

“Did you say something?” she asked sweetly.

“I told you to shut up,” he answered softly.

For a moment they said nothing, Danny feeling his head throb with pressure as he tried to make his will firm, all to keep his eyes fixed on Jasmine’s. This struck him as the perfect place to have a standoff, the two of them by themselves along a quiet trail in Golden Gate Park. The depth of the park pushed out the whir of cars and the chatter of people to the sides. Only a bird or two occasionally flew by.

“Is this because you’re jealous?”

“What?”

“You’re jealous,” Jasmine repeated. This time it wasn’t a question. “I see you looking at me that way all the time. Up and down. Checking out my style. Drooling over my hair. Thinking about how beautiful I am.”

“Well, that’s because -” he was about to say *I have a thing for you*, because that’s the usual cover. But it only works as something people are made to suspect. Declaring it would be just weird.

“Because you’re gay?” she finished for him. His leg gave a slight shake. That was the truth. A truth Danny would rather not think about.

“You don’t think I know?” she continued, “We’ve been *friends* for what, five years? Since sophomore year? If you liked me, I would’ve sensed it, and you probably would’ve asked me out already. I would have said no, just so you know.”

“What? Because you’re racist?”

Jasmine seemed to take a step back. “Huh? No, you idiot. There’s a lot to not like about you, not just your race.”

Danny clenched his fist. “So race is one of them.”

“Okay. You’re taking this too far,” Jasmine went on, suddenly defensive. “You always think life’s about being Asian, like Asian this, Asian that. You’ve got to drop that. Like, if you want to be us, then *be* us. Nobody talks about being white all the time. It’s so tiring to hear you scream matcha latte, Chinatown, Bruce Lee like twenty-four seven.”

She actually seemed hurt. Like she was a victim. Danny felt the emptiness of a numbed rage push out his capacity to think. He just observed. Just watched her go on for minutes, slowly turning this into a thing about her, into a thing where he was the bad guy for, what the hell, just being him. All because he said *shut up*. And she never even bothered to *think* that maybe there was a reason he said that. That there was a very real reason for her to just *shut up*. He suddenly imagined her as one of those cars he’d spit a ball of tapioca at back when he was in middle school. And he let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. *White people*.

“I hate -” he began, cutting her off in the midst of her rant.

His head still throbbed. He couldn’t think. Danny’s legs felt weak, quaking when they had no reason to. *What do I hate?* He asked himself that, and couldn’t get an answer. Cool, collected Danny is really only something his colleagues see. And they probably only see that because it’s just easy to stick this role onto someone who’s got dark hair, dark eyes, and yellow skin. And he thought about being different. Whether it’s because of the urge to sing some Mariah Carey song in the shower and pressuring himself not to, or if it’s coming back from Seattle Chinatown and feeling sad because he felt alone, felt all by himself in a crowd of faces he has no interest in getting to know as anything more. That he couldn’t just go and make friends with all

the white kids in class who laugh at his lunch and pull their eyes back. The eyes that his mom always said were his most beautiful feature.

“- me,” he finished, and a tear crawled past his nose, trickling down his lips.

His legs stopped shaking, and whatever kept his eyes steady on Jasmine flickered away as he looked down. It’s how he usually holds himself in a town where he used to be “that Chinese kid.” It’s the reason all he typically sees are the desks, the floors, the grass, the steps, and so on. It’s so tiring to be that one *gay* Chinese dude who sucks balls out of a cup while everyone else drinks Americanos. He sat down on the dirt path and crossed his legs, letting himself cry like a stereotypically gay person would.

He felt so pathetic.

“I. Um,” Jasmine ran a hand through her blonde curls. “I didn’t know. Danny, I’m sorry.”

She slowly walked over, all the victimhood, melodrama, and self-centeredness momentarily gone. She took careful, tiny steps, and sat next to him. Which is not what he needed. Then, she wrapped her arm cautiously around his back and hugged him, resting her head on his shoulder. Which is not what he wanted. She squeezed his shoulder with her hand, and it made his skin crawl.

“You wanted to go to that one place that just opened yesterday, right? I mean, *IdentiTea*?” she asked without looking at him. He didn’t answer.

“Why don’t we go there right now. Or whenever you’re ready. My treat.”

He’s not sure he cared.

A “Grand Opening” banner hung under the signage for *IdentiTea*. The signage had replaced what had once been the storefront for *Lu Tea House*. The beckoning cat that greeted all of Mrs. Lu’s customers disappeared. The empty counter that she always scrubbed, even when no

one was around, was now filled with drinks that people Tim had never seen before came to grab. Gone are the bland, gray walls that made Tim feel so comfortable, replaced with jade and white paint that made the place glisten through lack of memories.

“Huh,” Tammy muttered. She looked at Tim with concern. “Are you sure we’re at the right place?”

“Where is Mrs. Lu,” Tim barely breathed.

He played the Wii with Tammy at her place the week after, and they started hanging out twice a week, then three times a week, and eventually most days of the week plus the weekend after that. And he had so much fun. He could say anything to her, because she didn’t judge. She laughed at his bad jokes and was quick to change the topic when awkward silences came. She even gave him the same smile that Mrs. Lu gave whenever he beamed at getting his boba. Gradually, they started taking another route to her place that was faster, and he almost forgot about Lu Tea House. Until one day, when he randomly thought about how Mrs. Lu was doing. And if she missed him. And he grew excited at the idea of a makeshift family of him, Mrs. Lu, and Tammy, and asked Tammy if she wanted to try that boba place he always went to. He did so effortlessly, and felt such glee when she said yes just as easily.

Tammy put a hand on his arm.

“Tim, are you okay?”

He kept staring at that IdentiTea sign, as if staring at it long enough would make it not real. As if his memories of Lu Tea House, of the home that it became, can pop up in front of him again if he just kept staring.

“Tim,” Tammy stepped in front of him, trying to look into his eyes. “Maybe we can go somewhere else for a while. Figure out what’s going on.”

“Where is,” he whispered, his chest being sucked into itself as the breath he held struggled to escape.

Tammy started to open her mouth, wrinkled her brows, looked to the side, and thought of a better response. She’s heard a lot about this Mrs. Lu. About how her brother just ran away and left her to be this Superwoman who started her own boba shop. Poor thing. But how can she just do the same to Tim? Tammy almost blurted out that last part, but realized it’s not the right time to get a gold sticker for drawing connections. Or to even suggest that maybe this lady’s just gone.

“Hey. Hey,” Tammy squeezed Tim’s arm, “It’s been a while. Maybe we should check to see if it’s on another street? Or. To see if it moved, maybe? Probably? We’ll be boba detectives.”

Tim barely heard her last words. He looked past the windows of this IdentiTea place, past the long line of hip, twenty-something Asian and white people in clean-cut jackets and skinny jeans, and felt like his second home had somehow been ripped out of reality without his knowing. Like the tourists and hipsters all came and uprooted Lu Tea House, walking happily to a dumpster on the side and tossed it as they talked about the latest food trend in the Financial District.

He stared at a chandelier gleaming inside IdentiTea’s pristine space as people who never came to the Outer Sunset chatted with each other over cups of matcha lattes and milk foam green teas like they’ve always been here. They never even noticed that Tammy and him were on the other side of the street, made to be outsiders looking in. He just thought about Mrs. Lu scrubbing those counters, lifting those jugs of powder and premade teas by herself, her face wrinkling into a smile each time he walked in, sometimes looking in his direction before he even pushed open the door.



He realized he had stopped being just a customer when she gave him advice about talking to Tammy. Or maybe it was when she asked him about his family, and shared with him genuine sadness after he said his mom left when he was young. That was definitely the moment. Or it could be when they both secretly smiled after he told her the sign for Feng's Shanghainese Cuisine was taken down. Mr. Feng was a mean old man who looked like a frog that never became a prince. But whenever it was, Lu Tea House had become a home where he didn't have to worry about a world of eyes undressing him, taking him apart, inspecting all the ways in which he's awkward, out of style, have no friends, or whatever. All because Mrs. Lu cared.

"She's gone," he said to himself.

Tammy slowly nodded. She let her hand gradually fall from his arm and placed it by her side. She sensed what he was feeling, and pushed back her words of comfort because she didn't share his experience, and knew they wouldn't be enough. She started to look down, but jerked her head back up in surprise as he moved.

Tim turned to walk away. He paused when his eyes met Tammy's, and they flinched, faltering between confusion and despair. He opened his mouth to say something, but froze as his eyes rapidly blinked a couple of times in succession.

His shoulders finally dropped as he whispered, "I'm sorry."

Danny can't help himself. He wanted to stay angry at Jasmine, but stepping into IdentiTea pushed her to the side. It almost felt like one of those trips to Seattle's Chinatown, where there were young Asian Americans like him, sipping balls through a too-large straw. He felt a surging giddiness at seeing Asian American kids just drinking and chatting as if it was the most normal thing in the world, where a sideways look of curiosity would never be attached to what they were doing. It was almost exactly like those trips to the ID, except for the trendy

jackets and boots that made these Asian Americans seem more like the Breakfast Clubbers in his first period high school class.

Still, he felt like he was at the center of this world, until he turned to look at the still-happy, still-pretty Jasmine. Her eyes darted quickly from person to person, watching how they poked the straw through the plastic seal, how they took a sip or two, ran the boba through their mouths, chewing deliberately, and did the same. He felt the center shifting as some crowds of Asian Americans all glanced at their one white friend, asking how they felt, what they thought, and if *they* liked it. Embarrassingly enough, that was about to be his first question for Jasmine.

He instinctively glared at her before forcing his brow back up, realizing that he was supposed to appear grateful for her apology, now that he had calmed down. She turned to him, taking a few more sips of her matcha latte with boba, not knowing how he felt.

“This is actually kind of good,” she laughed, “It’s almost fun. Like I’m just chewing starch, but it works.”

Danny snickered in his head. Through her forever-happy blue eyes and plastered-on smile, Jasmine was probably complaining about all the calories in pure starch. “Would you come back if you’re ever here again?”

“Of course!” *Lies.*

“Cool. Glad you like it, then.”

He turned his head to the cash register and frowned as he watched a skinny white dude with glasses running out of the kitchen shouting *taro milk tea with rainbow jelly, number 109!* An Asian American girl scurried up and took the drink, thanking him with a kind smile. The exchange felt so natural, so unearned. He suddenly felt bitter at this white guy in glasses, this white guy who just strolled into this shop as a maker, and not a drinker, never having to feel

weird in a space that's not his own before finding out how to belong. Plastering "organic," "fresh brewed" labels onto every cup as if it's necessary for boba, when no one he knew ever cared if a cup of boba is organic or not. He thought back to those weeks spent at Starbucks when he still thought being accepted is a matter of knowing what's cool. That was when he tried a different drink every day, wanting to chat casually about the latest seasonal latte with AP kids who gave him one glance before continuing to ignore him.

As Asian American and white hipsters, techies, and tourists trickled in and out of IdentiTea, and Asian American and white workers rotated behind the cash register, something felt off. He saw an Asian American guy walk in with a guitar strapped to his back. The only other time he's seen that was back in Seattle. It made him realize that the ID was changing, too. And he realized why this moment doesn't *exactly* remind him of his childhood trips to Seattle's Chinatown. Why these Asian Americans aren't Asian American like him. That boba cafe in Seattle's Chinatown is run by a Chinese American family who spoke to him in rapid-fire Chinese and to others in cautious English. They knew him by name, and they knew his favorite drink. They asked about his life, and shared memories of China, a place he's never been. These are the things that made it feel like home, and the things IdentiTea didn't have.

He took another sip of his drink, and realized it felt empty. He took another sip, ran the milk tea across his tongue, and realized the "organic," "real" milk made his tea taste watered-down. It missed the strength of the non-dairy creamer he's used to back in that Seattle boba cafe.

Danny looked away to the street outside IdentiTea's windows, and saw an elderly Asian American woman laughing as she pointed at the IdentiTea sign to her friends. They carried groceries in their hands and talked among themselves for a bit before walking away. They were on the outside, and they didn't stay. But they reminded Danny of the older Chinese American

owners of that Seattle boba cafe he went to every Saturday, back when he's surrounded by Chinese American customers who didn't need to ask their white friends if they also liked their drinks. The drinks that were never this watered down.

He suddenly missed that place, and felt as if he was no longer at the center of this world anymore, like the center had just left him. Left him for Jasmine, making this her world again. That's when he turned from where the elderly Asian American women had been and saw Tim walk away from Tammy. Tim's shoulders dropped the way Danny's did when those AP kids ignored his comments about Starbucks. Tim walked in quick, little steps away from IdentiTea, like an angry version of how Danny walks towards Seattle's Chinatown. Tim didn't say anything when Tammy called after him, just like how Danny never says anything when his mom tells him that feeling so alone is just him thinking too much.

Danny watched that little kid leave, and saw for a brief moment that same emptiness in Tim's eyes.

## *Powder*

Raymond Lu tilted his camera and watched both men's photogenic smiles light up. *Snap*. The two of them are getting married, their honeymoon planned. Family gathered from both sides, sharing with the pair laughter and joy, both painted and real. They made a regal duo. Andy is a musician, and Kevin a novice professor in Literature. Raymond imagined them brimming with creativity. He held up his camera, wanting to capture both at their best.

"How do you like this one?" he asked, telling them to come over.

Andy immediately grinned, and looked to his fiancé, soon-to-be husband, saying, "I like your smile."

Andy is a guitarist, with moderate fame in the city. He likes the sound of subtle oohs and ahhs more than the chords he played. They only came in the pauses between notes, though. And usually on more melancholy nights. It makes him feel the crowd being there, like there isn't a fourth wall. He sometimes catches himself chuckling when he hears those sounds, and the next notes come easier.

The pub he played at on Pine Street used to be so different from where he spent the day. Low, dim lights, with the light smell of alcohol just teasing his nostrils. It's a contrast to the pink walls and large mural of Taiwan that hung in his favorite boba shop in Seattle's Chinatown. Tens of young, mostly white professionals clung to the bar seats in the first. Less than ten younger, mostly Chinese students gossiped in the second. Like night and day. It was away from those young, white professionals that he met Kevin, his other half, in a boba cafe.

"I want to hang one of those up. On the wall behind our bed. In a frame," Kevin said to no one in particular.

"Preferences?" Andy asked.

Kevin blinked. “It has to be that one.”

All three of them knew which photo Kevin was talking about. The newly hired, tenure-track assistant professor at SPU’s English department beamed. Kevin and Andy spent the night before cooking a batch of boba in a pot of honey, turning black tea to milk tea, starch to pearls. They didn’t need to explain that process to Raymond when sharing that wedding photo idea. He just needed to know they wanted one hand over each other’s waist, the other holding a cup of boba. While the lips of the couple had lifted into a smile, the lips of the photographer had quivered with unease.

“Where did you guys get the idea for that one?” Raymond blurted out.

“The bubble tea picture?”

“Yeah.”

Kevin looked to the side, failing to hide laughter. “Didn’t take a lot of thinking. It just made sense. You can almost say it’s part of just, us. The bubble tea, I mean. To our relationship.”

Raymond didn’t know what he meant, but he heard what the words wanted to say. He is an outsider looking in, as he is with all the couples he shoots, and some things are meant to stay as inside jokes or personal stories. Most of the time, these hints of a personal story remain as the uninteresting histories of strangers, but this one linked to his own. When the pair pitched the idea of the boba picture, he frowned. When they uttered the word *identity*, his stomach turned. The image of an empty, abandoned boba cafe is all that filled his mind.

His thoughts then went farther back to his mother, her eyes disappointed, his father a shadow in the background. He recalled memories that still carve scars, and blinked away moist eyes that had no reason to be anything but dry. He is happy, he tells himself. He is passionate, he is doing what he loves, and he is free and alone. Free to be alone. He could have been stuck

counting tills and ordering inventory at his parents' San Francisco boba cafe, living in the shadow of an uncle who isn't there. Instead, he flew away for hundreds of miles, crafting a wall out of distance. So he looked back at the happy couple before him and complimented them on that idea of a boba picture, whatever it means for them.

"It's a great idea," he said blandly. "Takes a lot of effort. Just to make all that tea and pearls by yourself. Might have been easier to buy some from the shop down the street, though."

"That wouldn't make sense," Kevin dismissed immediately. "I'm sorry, but you don't know the context. It's just that bubble tea's special to us. When we make it ourselves. Can't say that's like fate or anything, or just a story we put together, but, you know?"

*That wouldn't make sense*, Kevin's words echoed. It's what Raymond used to say to his mom. *Powder just makes you cheap, like the restaurant boba nobody buys*. It's just one of many things they disagreed on. Too bad he ended up being more right than he wanted.

"Right," Raymond nodded. He still didn't know what Kevin was talking about, but he could understand. Boba's *special* to him too, but probably not in the way they imagined. Mom and dad showed up in his head again, uninvited. And this time, they called for him to come back.

Raymond couldn't go back after how he left three years ago. He told mom and dad he was leaving after he already got off the flight to Seattle. After he had unpacked his bags to make an empty apartment home. He had walked around this new, quiet neighborhood after he hung up without saying goodbye, breathing chilly air without wind. The Northwest is still foggy and gray, but the green trees that hid sparse suburban homes were a welcome change from the clamor of Irving Street. As he walked, the lack of Chinese characters on storefronts made him smile.

That was three years ago. He rarely called his parents, but when he did, his hands tremble. And when he called, it was always his mom's number he dialed. It's easier to forgive all

that yelling, and stomping, and leaving when your feet are on solid ground. He's not sure his dad would, anymore, now that there's nothing there. No more Lu Tea House to argue over.

He stared at the phone and felt tension. His studio can be so quiet at night. Sometimes peaceful, sometimes lonely. At times when it's lonely, Raymond wanted to just sleep early. Those are the nights when he had insomnia.

He dialed his mom's number.

"Ray. How was your week?" she answered after one ring. "I almost thought we forgot to give you our new number."

He licked his lips. "Good. Took a few more photos. What about you?"

"Still here," she tried to laugh. "Your dad's out. Working."

Of course she brought Joseph up. Raymond hasn't spoken to his dad for three years. The last word he said to Raymond was a Chinese term for ingrate that gave it bitter depth. The last word Raymond said to his dad was *fucker*. His dad threw his camera out the window. Raymond grabbed a jug of premade milk tea and launched it against the walls of Lu Tea House. The jug met the wall with a *thud*. The milk tea dripped like blood. All because he wanted to be a photographer. All because he wanted to leave Lu Tea House as it aged. And now, they don't talk. Just because he spoke the truth.

He humored her. "A night shift?"

"Yes."

Raymond nodded. Now he can move on. "How was your week?"

"Mine or your dad's?"

"Whatever you want to talk about."



He felt his mom pause. “The same. Getting by. Said hi to a few friends. The ones who hadn’t already left.”

He winced. Her last six words throbbed with life. He pictured communities disappearing, erased, gone. The stories of businesses closing made his head spin. Lu Tea House joined their ranks only a year ago. He asked himself what would have happened if he had stayed to help out. To eventually take over. To fill shoes so big he could fall into them. He wondered if things would have been different.

Inside, he knew the answer was probably *no*. But he knows that for mom, it’s the leaving that brings pain, and not the loss that might or might not follow. Because the first time someone she loved had left her, keeping what she built changed nothing. *I guess I did fill someone’s shoes*, Raymond thought to himself. *Just didn’t want it to be yours, John*.

He whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” she sounded genuinely surprised. “Nothing changed.”

He shrugged. Though, of course, she couldn’t see.

“Tell me about the pictures you took this week.”

Raymond told his mom about Andy and Kevin, and how the two of them wanted to take a picture with boba. Then his face fell, realizing he can never escape this topic when he’s talking to her.

“Boba,” he heard her say. It was both a question and a statement.

“Yeah,” he answered uncertainly. “You would’ve liked some of those photos. Especially that one. You both might like that one.”

He heard his mom cover a cough. “We would. Your dad always liked all of your pictures.”

Again, the sly move towards his dad. Raymond's hand shook without his permission. He found himself tempted to just hang up, even though it wasn't her fault. She just wants a family that's whole. It's been her mission since she was forced to start Lu Tea House by herself. And maybe even before she had to do so. But the trail of milk tea on the Lu Tea House wall was a sign that it's too late. He wondered what felt worse to them. For the walls of their tea house to be covered in that trail of milk tea, or by the shadow of an unwanted chandelier?

Sometimes he wondered if what he really hated was boba, and if what really drew him is the camera. What did little inanimate tapioca pearls ever do to him? Besides being forcibly shoved into endless lines of plastic cups under the loud dictatorship of his dad and the silent one of his mom? He always chose to ignore the latter. Hating two hurts more than hating one.

Raymond couldn't help himself and smirked. "Thanks. I'm sure. How is he, by the way?"

"He wouldn't want *me* to tell you."

"Well, if not you, then who?"

"That's a funny question to ask," his mom replied. He tried to picture her smiling, being lighthearted. It didn't look convincing in his head.

"He wouldn't want to talk to me on the phone," he answered her unspoken request.

He's sure that's true. Because he wouldn't want to talk to his dad, either. Both pairs of hands pulled the lid over this coffin their relationship rested in. He awed himself at realizing its death. At how the lack of feeling can feel so strong. Like they weren't even father and son. He sometimes wondered if it's because dad knew. Knew that when mom looked at him, she wanted to see someone else. To see a brother who ran away and left her. A brother whose shoes Raymond's dad never filled.

Sitting on his bed, he knew tonight would be one of those lonely nights, and that the conversation was nearing its end. Another month, maybe two, would pass. Life would pick itself back up. His soul will stay in this lonely night, though. And not a word will pass between him and his parents. He gulped, blinked, and shot back a teardrop where only emptiness should be.

“So why don’t you guys come over?” he blurted. All in one breath.

Kevin had been late on their first date, years back. Andy had checked his watch when it was 2:01, thinking that being a minute late isn’t such a flagrant taboo. Maybe he was just stuck in traffic. And parking can be nonexistent in Flushing. His co-worker had pitched Kevin to him on the basis of their last names sounding the same. Living in Astoria, he’s learned to take that with a chuckle first and contempt later. Still, he can’t deny that any lead on a date is better than no lead.

“His last name is Li. L-I,” his co-worker had said. “Isn’t that cool?”

He didn’t really think so. “That’s interesting. I guess Bruce Lee wasn’t just trying to be an oddball.”

Four groups of Asian people had passed by between 2:01 and 2:05. A couple holding hands, a family discussing the meal they just had at Nan Xiang, two young men laughing loudly, a Mainland Chinese woman in Louis Vuitton. Andy couldn’t help but think about how different Flushing is from Astoria, and how it doesn’t seem self-aware.

He’d pluck away at his strings every night after climbing up the roof of his apartment. The N train would occasionally come, flushing out the sound of his guitar. But he continued playing after it passed, singing sadly and waxing philosophic about being an immigrant, but not feeling like he was from where he’s born. Wanting to move, wanting possibilities. Hoping for a place where he’s not questioned for being yellow. A Flushing with career opportunities.

“Sorry I’m late,” someone had said behind him.

Andy turned around. Kevin is lean and his smile shy. He looked uncomfortable with his back intentionally straightened. The lack of wrinkles on his button-up shirt said it was newly ironed. He held out his hand, and the two of them shook.

“It’s fine,” Andy smiled back. “I’m Andy. Nice to meet you.”

“Andy Lee,” Kevin repeated. And laughed nervously. “Like L-E-E.”

Andy’s smile faded. He gets enough of that from his co-workers. That’s one strike against Kevin, and he suddenly felt less interested. Kevin gulped, knowing the joke fell flat, but maybe not knowing why. This is why Andy hated the city. In any case, they’re here now, and he’ll try to make the most of this date. Just to not be rude.

He asked Kevin if he wanted to get drinks instead, thinking a bar makes more sense for a date than a boba cafe with teenagers in their backpacks and older women in their gossip. He watched Kevin’s eyes turn, scanning the menu as if he didn’t hear. Andy repeated the question, and felt Kevin flinch. That’s when the latter told him he didn’t drink, as if it were a reluctant revelation. Andy just responded with a disinterested *okay*. His co-worker had told him as much.

“So what do you want to get?” he asked Kevin.

“It’s not like San Fran,” the latter mumbled, looking at the menu.

“What was that?”

“Oh. Sorry. Just a taro milk tea for me. What about yourself?”

Andy’s eyes suddenly softened. These moments catch him by surprise. It happened after he had a fight with his mom. She told him if he wants to leave, he can. Just don’t come back begging if the guitar doesn’t sustain him the way a husband would. It had also softened when she made him taro milk tea on his birthday. Being Fujianese, she didn’t understand her son’s

obsession with boba. Being Asian American, he latched onto it like a part of himself. It was the best taro milk tea he ever had. Bits of taro chunks reminded him of why it tasted so creamy, his mom putting in just the right amount of tea and sugar. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but the complex taste said so much more. It spoke of her labor in grinding down the taro, brewing the tea, blending it together. It told a story of acceptance.

“That’s my favorite flavor,” he gave a light laugh, thinking back to the real taro that his mom brewed with the black tea. “Why do you like taro?”

Kevin didn’t hesitate. “Because most places make it with powder.”

Andy walked over to Raymond and gave him \$100. The wedding had just about wrapped up, and guests were starting to mill out. Kevin stuck around to greet family members who remained. Little ones chased each other around the table with leftovers of the wedding cake. Raymond took the \$100 without looking at it.

“Thank you.”

“You earned it,” Andy clapped him on the back. “I almost couldn’t recognize us from your pictures. That’s good, I guess. Now we’ll know the standard for special occasions. Ha. And of course, you let us take the one with the bubble tea.”

Andy held out another envelope.

“What’s this?” Raymond asked.

“It’s a recipe,” Andy answered. “Not really. It’s a packet of taro milk tea powder. I thought about giving you a recipe, but this might be more. More meaningful, at least.”

At the mention of recipe, a vein bulged on Raymond’s forehead. It’s the bulge that came with his father’s simple grunts of *not enough*, *too creamy*, or *always wrong*. Eventually, he went from a bulge to hands that shook when he held a measuring cup. He would cringe whenever he

heard the bubbling of brewed tea. It's what made the steadiness that came with holding a camera so appealing, so refreshing. Lu Tea House later used powder for their milk teas, and Raymond always wondered if it's because he put in not enough, made it too creamy, got it always wrong. A grownup part of him said it's because business wasn't as good and powder is cheaper. But the little kid whose hand shook stayed inside him and held the same doubts, no matter how many years pass.

"I'm. Um," Raymond stuttered. "I'm grateful. Thanks for this. It's an interesting gift."

Andy scratched his head. "I hope you don't think it's weird."

"Not at all."

"It's like closure, I think," Andy went on. "We didn't actually tell people we took a picture with bubble tea. It's just something Kevin and I would get. You're the only other person who knows. Because, you know, you took the picture."

Raymond stared at the envelope, and imagined the packet inside. Then, he pictured it turning into a taro milk tea, and found himself back in San Francisco with his mom and dad in Lu Tea House before it was bought out. The Lu Tea House: Heart of the City banner was still up. This was when they still had lines out the door. He also recalled one particular day, with shouting in the kitchen, a sign on the door that said "Closed" with the sun still out, milk tea dripping from the walls. The day when something clicked in his mind, and he realized he *could* run away. That maybe what his mom saw as loss is really freedom for the one who ran.

"Does this mean anything to you?" he asked, staring at the packet. The words sounded hostile, but there was no edge in his voice.

Andy gave a nervous laugh. "Yeah. Look, it's a long story. But basically, taro milk tea - taro milk tea was there when Kevin and I needed it to. I don't know if we'd be around without it.

Okay. Yeah, weird. Just think of it as an inside joke that's not a joke that we share to show appreciation."

Raymond's eyes were still blank. Andy watched this photographer being lost in his own world, and wondered why he asked that question. If maybe, taro milk tea is also important to him the way it is for the two of them. Andy had his first date with Kevin at a boba cafe, drinking powder taro milk tea. And his relationship with Kevin was saved through real taro milk tea. He wondered if it's doing something similar for this guy who took their wedding photos. He could not see how.

Before there was a marriage, there was a falling out. The falling out brought Andy to the other side of the United States in Seattle, leaving Kevin stranded in New York. Andy spent those first few days in Seattle in a hotel. He didn't know anyone there, nor did he have a lease lined up. He just knew that Capitol Hill has a thing for strings and songs, and that he needed to get out of the city. Sadly, Kevin didn't see it that way.

Kevin said that music isn't a career. Andy remembers the scene too clearly. For the past two days, he would replay that scene in his head. He tried to add a smirk to Kevin's face when he said it, or an evil laugh that allowed him to be hated. But imagination's too frail. Kevin said it like it was something he didn't want to admit, and that's how you know it's what he feels.

"I'm sorry," were the words Kevin said immediately after *music isn't a career*. "That. Um. That didn't come out right. I'm so sorry."

"It's not a career? You sound like you've thought this way. Since before today."

Kevin bit his lip. "No. I haven't. I mean, Andy, just think about it. It's hard for me. Jobs in academia, they're - they're a needle in a haystack. I really need to stay."

Andy knew his mom would just love Kevin so much right now. Other than that fleeting moment when she asked if a guitar would do more for him than a husband, she still talked about pretty girls who are not taken. Mrs. Qin's daughter who went to Stanford. Or Mrs. Kang's daughter who's a nursing student. Even that annoying Mrs. Jiang's bartender daughter who still doesn't have a real job. *Kind of like me. Right, mom?* When he saw her face after he brought Kevin to their house for the first time, he knew that his desire to leave New York is really a need. And now the plan is being turned on its head.

He packed his bag anyways, despite Kevin's pleas. He did things how he wanted, like he always did. And he ended up alone after, like he always did. Lying alone in that hotel room, he thought about how he walked out on Kevin after that argument. After Kevin told him that music isn't a career. He had stood up from the bed they shared and walked to their closet. He picked out some random shirt and shorts without really looking at them. He put them on, and picked up his key from on top of their drawer. He was about to walk out, but couldn't help having the last word.

"It's so easy for you. Thinking that only your path is hard."

*God.* He knit his eyes shut and chewed on his lip. He just had to have the last word. Before the door closed, he saw Kevin's look. If there had been hate, or anger, or any kind of *fuck-you* look, he wouldn't have given it a second thought. But he can't forget hurt. Hurt haunts.

Sitting up on the hotel bed, he thought about taking his guitar and going to the rooftop, but remembered the sign at the end of the hall that said it's locked. How did things get so bad, he wondered? When things picked up between him and Kevin during that first date, they really took off. Andy asked him why powder milk tea, and Kevin just fidgeted. He answered that it's because anyone can make it. That there's something charming about that. It makes the cafe



charming, and that makes the street charming. and that makes the town charming. It's why he always searches for a boba cafe with powder milk teas every time he travels. But Andy disagreed. They argued about the virtues of quality, then quality and men, and started laughing when both agreed there's hardly quality men anymore. That laughter lit the match, and his heart's been burning since. He even put that line in the lyrics of one of his songs. Just one of many he wrote for Kevin.

Then came a knock.

Andy rubbed his eyes, and got up to put on some clothes. The knock came again, but more gently. He hesitated, then threw on a T-shirt and walked to the door. He didn't want to hope. But looking through the peephole, he saw that it indeed was Kevin. His hand wanted to fly to the knob and wrest the door off the handle, but in real life, it did nothing.

When he finally opened the door, he saw that Kevin seemed tired. Their hellos were not quite awkward, just grating. Andy hesitated, until the hesitation became a pause, and invited Kevin into his hotel room. For some reason, he wasn't surprised that Kevin flew to Seattle. Like he's always known, that fire didn't just burn in himself. *Such a songwriter thing to say.*

"You're not going to say anything?"

Andy frowned. That's when he noticed the mug in Kevin's hand, filled with a creamy-looking, white-ish purple drink. Its meaning was almost too clear.

"Is that?"

Kevin hid a shy smile. "Try it."

Andy held the mug just under his nose, smelling the light aroma of what can't be powder milk tea. He took a sip, the creamy richness of the real taro bits sinking down his throat alongside brewed black tea and milk. It was just like how his mom made it. She made it on his

26th birthday. He chose to spend that one with just her, because it was a few weeks before he was about to bring Kevin over. Of course, she didn't know that. She made him taro milk tea with real taro. She, who couldn't watch ten minutes of his favorite movies, who forbade his guitar from being in her condo, who says no to his every yes. It told him how special that birthday was. For her.

"Real taro," said Andy. "Why?"

Kevin took a step into his hotel room. "Because that's what compromise can look like."

Raymond's dad lingered in the corner of his room while his mom walked around, inspecting everything. Joseph's face is hidden in shadows, but Raymond can imagine the years after years carving his look of disapproval into sadness. That transition is subtle.

The car ride from the airport was civil enough. It can be such an art form, picking his parents up, driving to his place, making conversation and showing them where he lived, all without eye contact. Ever since they entered his apartment, his dad held onto his suitcase and stood, leaving his coat on, standing in a corner.

"So this is where you live," Mrs. Lu said quietly. She peeked out the window of his studio and was expressionless.

Raymond tried to figure out what she was looking at and played around with his camera. Messing with it puts his mind at ease. He looked at her aged face and studied where the wrinkles began and ended. There can be so much hidden in the lack of emotion. It would make for a great photo.

"Yeah. What do you think?" he asked. "Pretty small, right?"

"Big enough for one person."

Raymond nodded. “True. I like it here. The people are nice, and there’s always a lot of weddings. Business is good.”

He watched his mom grimace. Business hasn’t been good for Lu Tea House in a long time. It’s been so bad it went out of business. In a morbid way, it gave Raymond a silver lining with her. While dad yelled, shouted, cursed for him to leave the opportunities he had in the Emerald City to return to Lu Tea House after college, his mom only ever gave silent looks of pity or disdain. Raymond wanted to hit him, and glare at her. When Lu Tea House was about to fail, both of their looks were gone. Hers grew empty, and Raymond’s grew compassionate. Compassionate and regretful. That’s when their calls started. He was the one that started to dial, and he was the one that kept it going.

“Thank you for inviting us,” she murmured.

He glanced away and nodded.

“Can I see the picture you were talking about?”

He nodded again, and showed her the picture of Andy and Kevin, both holding a cup of real taro milk tea. Their eyes gleamed with the light of, *what was it that Andy said?* An inside joke. Each time Raymond went back to that picture, something new seems uncovered. He eventually realized that their expressions carried open happiness and covered hurt, like the inside joke is itself a silver lining, too.

“They look like a happy pair,” she said hesitantly. “The picture brings back memories.”

He heard longing in her voice, and it jolted him. The word *memories* brought back times of trauma. Of shouting himself hoarse at his dad, of feeling glad when he bused away to college, of walking faster whenever he passed the college boba spot. These are the memories he connected to his parents. And yet she longed for them, and her longing brought him into her

world. A world where Lu Tea House was a time of joy. Of customers and friends. Of smiles. Maybe even of de facto sons she can idealize. And a brother she idolized. He quickly blinked these last thoughts away.

He suddenly felt edgy, as if he shouldn't be there. His hands were clasped together. His fingers squeezed each other and he felt claustrophobic with both of his parents in the room. He had felt too used to the loneliness he thought would be freedom. The loneliness that broke whatever illusion he had of running on that day he threw a jug of premade milk tea. His mom put the camera to the side and placed a hand on his shoulder. And his fingers loosened.

“You’re doing well,” she said. Did he detect pride? “I’m happy.”

“Thanks.”

She squeezed his shoulder and put her hand back in her lap. “And you were right.”

“About what?”

“Lu Tea House. We got old and fake like those powders we’d use. Can’t say we cared about kids being happy if our own son left. And look at you. With a roof over your head. Taking over our business or starting your own. It all led to the same thing.”

Now it’s Raymond who grimaced. A few days before he moved to Seattle, he dropped by Lu Tea House. That was the day his dad broke his camera and he tainted their walls with milk tea. He wanted to try again, to say one more time that this is about him and not them. But of course his dad wouldn’t listen. And his mom just watched. Just watched Raymond realize abuse for what it is, as he worried more about the what and less about the why. His dad said he’s a failure before calling him “fucker,” and he called them both fake and old, like the powders they started using as their favorite kiddy customers left. Long before they were uprooted by IdentiTea.

Raymond sighed, and walked into the kitchen. His mom didn't follow, and his dad just stayed in his corner. He came back with two cups, handing one to Mrs. Lu. She looked inside the cup, her expression unchanging. But her eyes faltered.

"What does this mean?"

Raymond didn't meet her gaze. He clutched the cup of powder taro milk tea in his hand, realizing the warmth couldn't stop his hand from shaking.

"It means I'm sorry, mom," he barely murmured. "I'm happy you caught me."

Mrs. Lu looked confused, and neither of them said anything.

She placed a hand on his knee. "Caught you?"

He sniffed, knowing the moist eyes that had no reason to be anything but dry had come back. She took a sip of the taro milk tea, waiting for him to answer. But how could he? To say she caught one of the two who ran would be to admit that he ran. That John ran. And he can't do that to her. So she didn't push. Instead, she paused, built up her words, and spoke.

"Is that other cup for you, as well?"

He thought about his answer, about what it would mean. About the man still standing in the corner, unmoved by the exchange. Two words battled each other on his tongue, fighting for air. And in the end, he chose the one that did not surprise her at all.

"Yes."

"Did you give it to him?" Kevin asked.

"What?"

"The packet. The powder taro milk tea. Did you give it to him?"

Andy blinked. "Oh right. Yeah, I gave him the packet. Have you ever seen someone that, I don't know, stony?"

Kevin frowned. “He seemed nice.”

Andy shook his head. He hated driving out of the city. Traffic made everything two lines of yellow and red that just reminded him of how far he still had to go. His mind wandered from the wedding to Auntie Zhang’s quip about kids to how the honeymoon would go. To him, the photographer’s already a thing of the past.

“Do you think it was weird?”

“Was what weird?”

“The powder milk tea, Andy. Where’s your mind been this whole time?”

“Uh. I don’t think so. But I do think you’re overthinking this a little,”

Kevin looked out the window. He didn’t know what came over him, wanting to thank the photographer with more than dollar bills. They bought a pack of powder milk tea mixes from the Uwajimaya in Chinatown when they both moved to Seattle. It was the same brand his dad used to make Kevin milk tea back when he came home from elementary school. He suspected it’s also the brand the local boba cafe used when he started hanging out there, instead of with his dad, as he got older. He had Andy give the last packet to the photographer.

Maybe it’s a West Coast thing, but drinking those packets in Seattle also reminded him of the taro milk tea from a boba cafe on San Francisco’s Irving Street. He always makes a stop there when he’s in the Bay. He had ordered their taro milk tea when he went to San Fran on the way to the Northwest. If his apology with Andy didn’t go well, at least he can say he had a good time in Cali.

It was one of the last places in San Fran that still made their drinks with powder. Something about seeing new boba and coffee shops he couldn’t remember from previous trips put up big signs that screamed organic, fresh-brewed, healthy made him think of death. Of how

things like powder die out. And how there's always a hand that pushes death forward. It gave him the idea for his apology when he found Andy in Seattle. An idea for how to withdraw that hand.

“Yeah,” Kevin muttered. “I’m probably just overthinking this.”

## *Siblings*

Opening a pearl milk tea shop is like a community giving birth. But Lu Yan Ping would still have to be the one who pushes the baby out. She held the packet close to her chest and walked in small, quick steps. It's important that this gets to Uncle Wang from the dim sum shop down the street. Not a single bill can be missing.

Uncle Wang is one of Yan Ping's parents' family friends from back in Taiwan. He came to San Francisco long before Yan Ping's brother John did, long after the Cantonese set their own foundations. He knows a guy who knew a guy, and that's how John got his own place on Irving after flying to America. And this same Uncle Wang apparently knows another guy who knows some other guy who can help her jumpstart Lu Tea House. As long as she can garner the money.

When Yan Ping found out that money was the problem, the first person she had called was Ba Ba. Halfway across the world, she still sought her dad's green light. Her eyes twitched, her body was not showered, and her fingers had aggressively twirled the telephone wire to let out pent up energy. Apparently it worked. Ba Ba must have felt her adrenaline thousands of miles away in Taiwan, because it was the only time he didn't ask questions before giving her something she wanted. He just told her she was brave, and that the money should arrive soon. *Don't forget to check your mail.*

Crossing the street on the way to Uncle Wang's, her stomach grumbled as the smell of Mr. Liu's fried donuts wafted over and tickled her nose. Out of the corners of her eyes, she noticed "Closed" signs becoming "Open," and shop owners slowly kneading dough inside their holes in the walls. Thanks to that school that opened years back, bright and hopeful students across Asia found another part of San Francisco to call their own, apart from Chinatown. It wasn't long before mom and pop businesses selling dim sum, Chinese pastries, and noodles



dotted Irving Street. Walking past the different smells of different foods quickened Yan Ping's step and steeled her resolve. She, too, would leave her mark.

Her brother had always been the protector, at least when it came to his little sister. When they walked home from school in the Taichung district in Taiwan, he would always walk on the side of the sidewalk closer to the street. At dinner, he never took the last piece, not if it's something he knew Yan Ping liked. And when it came to chasing wild dreams, he made sure he was the first to come to America. Or so he said. Yan Ping just nodded when he talked about America, trying not to feel jealous of something that's not even a person, a land that's not yet a reality.

"This is all," John had shouted when he picked her up from the airport. The city looked so bright, like its sun never sets. She gave him her suitcase, and he gave her an envelope.

"All?" she had laughed when she saw the cash inside. "You're giving me Gold Mountain itself."

"It's not enough," his words were firm. "You need to know that. But this is more than what I had when I came."

He just had to tilt his head down the slightest bit, look subtly to the side, and give his eyes a fleeting jilt to leave her with a haunting welcome to America. She remembered seeing the changes when they met at the airport. Gone was the gentle hand that rested on her shoulder when she ate a piece of beef from a customer's beef noodle soup back at their parents' shop. That gentle hand that said *I know, and I forgive*. Instead, she almost fell when he wrested her suitcase from her, his now strong arms bulging to carry the weight of her life in a box. Harsh lines carved into a face that aged too quickly, burying the confidence he wanted to act out when they were young. When he tried to be the tough, caring older brother he thought she looked up to.

Here she is. Uncle Wang's apartment complex. The rooms were small and square, just like in Taiwan. *Maybe Uncle Wang should open a pearl milk tea shop, get rich, and move somewhere with another room or two.* She laughed uneasily, out loud, not caring if any passersby noticed. Part of her thought saying the plan out loud would help to make it work. The apartment she shared with John is a maze of boxes that hardly gave them room to move. She wanted something bigger. John deserved something better. She wanted it so bad that she risked love.

But love was not lost.

"Would this help?" Joseph had asked. She had been seeing him for a few months when she asked him to add to the pearl milk tea shop money pool. He had held out a wad of tens and fives with a couple of hundreds hidden in between.

She had responded by giving him a kiss.

"It's too much."

"I'm happy it helps," he had looked away, nodding absently. "You're brave. And it scares me."

She remembered touching his cheek. "You scare easily. That's why it's good that I'm brave."

Yan Ping clasped her hands together as she waited for Uncle Wang. She squeezed the packet under one arm, the one with less sweat. She wondered if he would accept dirty money. She also wondered other things, like doubt, though they mostly belonged to John. *Are you sure, little sister? And America is cruel, little sister. And Don't let dreams blind you, Ping'er.* She squeezed the packet tighter, as if afraid it might be cold. *Then why did you come, big brother?*

The entrance to the apartment complex opened, and she saw a tired man with graying hair walk out. He waved at her, and she slowly waved back, holding the packet full of a community's money out in front of her.

Yan Ping wanted to tell her brother the good news. That the money is deposited, and the rest is in Uncle Wang's hands, at least for now. She wanted to jump and leap and hug him, whispering it into his ears. *Ping'er, be proud, but don't hold that nose too high*, she imagined him teasing her, like he did when they were kids. She knows it's ridiculous. They're not kids anymore. But the part of her that thought of John will always be fifteen years old, because that's when he left the family to cross an ocean. It's what happens when you don't get the chance to grow up together.

Those joyous thoughts ended when her brother dropped onto the wooden chair in their one-room apartment and moaned. Yan Ping's hands stopped, a momentary lapse in the *thump-thump-thump* of knife against cutting board.

"You're back," she said gently, continuing to chop the green onions. "Still alive to live another day. I'm making some tomatoes and eggs so you can do the same tomorrow."

Her jokes never truly worked on John the way she thought they did. He massaged his forehead, his fingers dancing with the *thump-thump-thump* in his head. He sighed, but softly so she wouldn't hear. She sounded happy, which probably means the transaction with Uncle Wang went through. She must be proud, and it made him frown. She always gets so easily proud. No matter how many times he told her to not hold that nose too high, she always just giggled and ran off, maybe more fearless than before. When he left Taiwan, he remembered watching his family's eyes before he left for the airport gates. Mom's were bittersweet, dad's were a dam waiting to break, and little Ping'er's were so excited. And that's what scared him.

“I’m tired, Ping Ping.”

She wanted to tell him *you work too much*. It would be the truth. “I’ll make you some ginger tea after. It goes well with tomatoes and eggs.”

John didn’t talk about work much. Or at all. It surprised her. Yan Ping expected him to fill her with tales of America’s riches and freedom and abundance. But it’s been a year, and he hardly mentioned what he did. He just left early in the morning before she woke, and came back long after the sun has set. They didn’t live with riches or abundance here, but that did not sadden her. It’s what his silence said that made her uneasy. The silence that said he’s aware.

John approached her and walked into the kitchen. “Ping Ping.”

She tried to smile with her back turned to him. “I’m here.”

“You didn’t lose all our money today, did you?”

“What do you think, big brother?”

She heard a shuffle, a pause, and then heavy breathing. She imagined him rolling his eyes with a wry smile, thinking of the right way to tell her this is not the time for jokes, but appreciating how she lightened the mood. A genuine smile now fell on her lips as she scooped the green onions into a small bowl and reached for the tomatoes. The *thump-thump-thump* continued.

“Well, I should have known,” he said dryly. “I guess it’s all over now. No Lu Tea House for you.”

“Sad but true, big brother.”

He walked in front of her, and she stopped chopping the tomatoes. Yan Ping looked up at him, and the smile disappeared. His face was serious. John had half-hoped that she wasn’t joking. That somewhere along the line, something failed. That Uncle Wang didn’t show. Or she

dropped that packet full of cash into a sewer on the way. But he knew it wouldn't happen. She always has a way of getting things done. No matter how many pieces of beef she steals from a customer's beef noodle soup, the soup always finds its way to the customer's table with a smile. These moments of realization surprise him, the one who usually worries. And now that she's succeeded, he can't turn back.

"It wouldn't be as sad actually," he began, carefully running the next words along his tongue. "Actually. If things didn't go as well today."

Yan Ping put the knife down.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about. Well," he hesitated. "I'm talking about being tired, Ping'er."

She raised an eyebrow.

"So tired, actually," he started to back away, "That maybe I don't want to do this. And I want to do Lu Tea House. Just Lu Tea House."

Yan Ping's mind rewound John's words and replayed them. And then she understood. Her eyes widened. He wants to quit his job. He wants to quit his job and run Lu Tea House with her, make Lu Tea House feed both of them, and keep them from living in streets where she couldn't even beg for money in English. And she felt fear. Her arms started growing tense, and soon her whole body couldn't move. She wanted to yell at him, to say *but we agreed! We agreed that Lu Tea House would just be something I do to belong. For me to get my foot on solid ground, not a threat to the ground we already stand on.* But as she opened her mouth, she saw the creases on his face. The muscles on someone who used to just be a scrawny boy, gentle with all things. And most of all with his sister. And all she could do was nod.

“Thank you,” John muttered, looking down. But he couldn’t hide his relief. “Thank you, sister, for understanding.”

He didn’t think that she really understood, but she must understand enough to just accept. He can imagine that nod being one of the hardest things Ping’er has had to do. And he put her on the spot. But he didn’t have time to think things through. He had been thinking about her on the way to work this morning. About Ping’er coming to America, and after a year, being so close to starting her own shop, having her own job, and being her own boss. And about how he’s spent years upon years lifting boxes, being shouted at, being told to throw away his lunch, twisting an ankle here, spraining a thumb there. And having nobody care, while the floods of Taiwanese professionals who came on H1B visas were all people talked about, all his parents compared him to. All that Ping’er probably looked up to.

And he decided to be impulsive.

On impulse, he met with Boss Feng this morning to quit. John knew the Boss would be unhappy to lose him, because people without papers and citizenship can be paid so much less. And they complain less, too. It would be a great inconvenience for him. Too bad he can’t use a bit more force to make John stay, what with his connection to John’s dad in Taiwan.

“One more week,” Boss Feng said again.

Ironically, that’s what John had been telling himself only a few months after starting this job. *One more week*. Because something about the soy sauce under his fingernails did more than just plaster his body with unwanted grime. And those boxes after boxes of condiments he carried did more than push his back into an unwanted arch. He found that waking up to less smog and more sun than he had ever seen excited him less and less. Because it meant standing in a bus for

forty minutes to break himself down in Chinatown. Eventually, the beauty of the city seemed to mock him. Because it was never what he saw during most of his day.

“I can’t,” he lied. “Ping’er already talked to our family friend to set things up, and our money’s all pooled together, and it’s now out of our hands.”

Boss Feng nodded absently. “Who’s the family friend?”

“You wouldn’t know him,” John wasn’t sure if that was the truth. “But he went to college with my dad in Taiwan. Wouldn’t stop talking about America when he calls. All the good things.”

If only his parents would believe him when tried to call about the other things.

“And who can blame him,” said Boss Feng. “So your sister, she’s liking America?”

John’s fingers involuntarily bit into his jeans. His legs tensed, and he narrowed his eyes without meaning to. It’s the look he gave Mrs. Chun whenever she yelled at Ping’er for being late with her order back at their parents’ restaurant in Taichung. He’d walk by, wrap an arm around Ping’er’s shoulder, and meet her confused look with a light smile. But only after giving Mrs. Chun a cold glare before apologizing and offering an extra slice of green onion pancake. And with Mrs. Chun, that’s all it takes to be forgiven.

“She’s adjusting.”

Boss Feng smiled kindly. “And you’re not going to introduce her to your work family before you go?”

“No,” that word came quicker and harsher than he had intended. John shuffled uncomfortably, thinking of those older Cantonese men who often talked about dads and granddads that rarely talked to a woman for more than a few minutes. And not for anything other than taking an order or apologizing for a strand of hair in some white family’s meal. Of times

spent being without family, without wife, and without money. Even now. Boss Feng was still smiling, and John slowly let the breath crawl out past his too-dry lips. He's sure that the Boss knew his shame, that the Boss meant to provoke.

"That's a shame," Boss Feng finally said, leaning back in his seat. His suit didn't really fit him, but John can tell it was expensive. And polished. A shelf full of English books hid behind the Boss, but John doubted he's actually read any of them. A cigarette tray sat on the table between them, full of ash. But he's never seen the Boss smoke. So much of this felt like a show, just like the words *that's a shame*.

"Pearl Milk Tea," the Boss continued dreamily. "You Taiwanese really have crazy ideas. But the kids like it over there, don't they."

John hesitated, then nodded.

"They do," the Boss went on. "But it can be a tough product to sell here."

"We'll get by. Can't turn back now."

"No, you can't," the Boss stood up, extending his hand. "We'll miss you, Jiang Lian."

John didn't want to wish he can say the same. He was just glad to leave the Boss's cramped office after shaking his hand. And he grinned when he stepped outside, noticing again how the city has less smog and so much more sun than he has ever seen. As he walked further from the restaurants that squeezed against each other in Chinatown, the lack of Chinese characters on storefronts only lifted his grin.

When Yan Ping left Taiwan, the disappearing Taipei skyline felt like something that was ripped from her. Her neck craned to watch it disappear, even when others on the plane had leaned into their seats and dozed off. *Is this how you felt, brother? When you left me?* A few blinks of the eye were all it took for her home to disappear under a layer of clouds.



Growing up, John often followed her whenever she left the restaurant to wander Taipei. She always knew, of course. But she still let him tag along. His head might peak past a corner to watch her chat with Liang *tai tai* about which oranges were freshest. Sometimes, she can hear him awkwardly bump into a wall as she walked into an alleyway where lovers might hide. She let him see the things she wanted him to see before revealing she knew he was there. *John! What are you doing? Stop stalking me.*

*You're too young, Ping'er. You don't know the world,* he would respond. He was too proud to apologize. And she always saw it coming. She might stick her tongue out, squeeze her eyes shut, and wag her butt from left to right. She was only nine, then. *So what, you're here to protect me?* She remembers him shifting a bit, his scrawny body hunched and unsure. Not the protector he thought he was being. *Always, Ping'er.*

The flight attendant walked by and asked if she wanted anything to drink. *What is there to drink?* The flight attendant smiled. *Water, orange juice, soda, or – you want water?* Yan Ping nodded. She had sunk farther into her seat without realizing it, away from the flight attendant. She might have looked calm, but she felt like cold sweat was dripping down her insides. *This woman knows I don't fly all that much. She knows I'm an imposter,* she thought.

Back in places like that alleyway, Yan Ping used to hold her nose up and say *I don't need you to protect me.* Mom and dad tried to explain away her defiance with age. John still looked worried every time she defied him, though. It was probably why she kept it up around him. *But it's why I'm here, Ping Ping.* He said it like it's obvious. She was still so young. Young enough to go too far with her response. *Then go away.*

She woke up when she was halfway around the world. With nothing but the Pacific Ocean under her. *Is that why you left, brother?* She almost wondered out loud. *Because I told you to?* She couldn't wait for the plane to land in America.

Lil Jiang is almost like John's actual brother. Not just because *Jiang* is part of both of their Chinese names. When John had been working under Boss Feng for about two years, he heard the Boss yelling at someone one night before he left work. The guy's voice was unfamiliar, so he must have been someone new. It was a someone new that kept more of his tip than the Boss allowed, though John felt sure the Boss wasn't allowed to keep as much wages and tips as he did. That night, this someone new lost some wages and earned John's respect. John waited outside the shop for this someone new to leave the building. A free meal can come a long way to raising a dejected spirit. From that point on, he became Lil Jiang to John.

So it's no surprise that Lil Jiang told John he overheard the Boss on the phone, talking to someone about John's lack of papers and citizenship.

"He did that," John had said, and Lil Jiang wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement.

"Yes. I know I heard him. It's what he said."

Lil Jiang wasn't sure what reaction was on John's face, then. The latter's features were still, but more so frozen than calm. He noticed sagging shoulders, but everyone's shoulders sag after years of this work. John's hand fell rigid at his sides, as if limp, rather than lazy. If the day had been any darker, or if Lil Jiang had not been sitting next to him, he wouldn't have noticed anything at all.

"That pig," John muttered.

Lil Jiang nodded.

"Did you hear anything else?"

“He talked about tapioca balls,” Lil Jiang went on. “Something about spicing up the menu. He laughed like a pig, too, and said business and competition don’t always need each other.”

John’s face dropped. So the Boss also wants to introduce pearl milk tea to San Francisco. John had been so happy yesterday. Because for the second day in a row, the sun didn’t remind him of light he couldn’t see in a crowded kitchen, or the fresh Bay air something he couldn’t breathe over kitchen fumes. He walked with a taller back and longer strides to Chinatown, sitting in Portsmouth Square, heart throbbing with every moment of not doing anything. There’s a sense of newness to the city that he hadn’t felt since he stepped off that plane, and he was sure that this time it’s not naiveté. Until now.

“Does it have to do with your sister’s business?” Lil Jiang asked, bringing him back into the present.

“Our business,” he corrected, swallowing at how those two words seem to float away from him as they were uttered. “And it must be.”

Lil Jiang looked away. They sat on the steps of John’s apartment for a while in silence, the sun having long since set on the Outer Sunset. Lil Jiang thought about little kids walking down these streets in a few months, maybe a year, holding something the town hasn’t seen before. Straws that are too big, starch inside of a beverage, and sealed cups without a lid. His aunt had told him about these so-called pearl milk teas, and how cute it was to see his nephews with them. But he couldn’t imagine what she saw. Because Boss Feng’s voice crawled into his head, laughing about business without competition, and John sat on his side, probably thinking about a sister who still can’t see dreams of belonging as just that.

“Do you think it would have been hard to get this city to drink that stuff?” Lil Jiang whispered.

“Would have?”

“Well. I mean you’ve got to think. I mean, now it’s more likely that...”

Lil Jiang couldn’t finish his sentence, but John heard what wasn’t spoken. And he made a decision.

Turning his head towards Lil Jiang, John said every word slowly, “It will be. But Ping’er knows that.”

They couldn’t look at each other while they ate. John’s decision had been made, and he would leave by the end of the night. Yan Ping started with the knotted face and yelling, before the words became physical when she pulled him by his shirt. He didn’t resist. John let Yan Ping scream and plead and cry into his face until she was spent. Then she walked away to make dinner, and their room was silent.

Except it wasn’t that silent. Outside, the sounds of Cantonese filled their space. Children fighting for buns. Neighborhood aunties gossiping. Their open window let the whole street in. Yan Ping closed her eyes. When the murmurs of chaotic thoughts died with her anger, she found memory in emptiness.

Memories of John when he was still in his twenties, leaving her behind with mom and dad and Big Sister. She had asked mom *Why?* and dad *Why?* and both just said he’s only going for a while. But that didn’t answer *Why*. She didn’t worry, though, because John told her everything. Things like how to tie a shoelace, or how Big Sister didn’t go away because she didn’t love them anymore, but because she’s opening a second shop in Taichung. Like a captain sailing out to sea. So what really stung when John left was when he also didn’t tell her *Why*.

Kind of like now.

“What are you making, Ping’er?”

She cracked the egg into a tiny bowl and stirred.

He waited. “I don’t have a choice here, Ping Ping. You’re grown and you know that.”

Yan Ping put the knife and green onions down. It’s true. If Boss Feng had truly told someone about John’s not-citizen status, then they’re just moments from that someone coming and taking him away. It’s like sitting on a time bomb. Unlike her, he never even got his green card. *And what then*, John had asked her. *Would being made to leave be better than choosing to go?* She rolled her tongue across her lips and stared at the knife. She knows this is different, but those words sounded so much like what he said before he left Taiwan and she asked him *Why* a second time. *Is staying because you never tried better than going where you’ve never been?*

“I don’t care,” she finally said. She didn’t look up from the knife.

She heard his jaws clenching and his lungs freezing, even though they made no sound. She knew she wasn’t being fair to Big Brother, but she stayed silent. Waiting for him to say something first.

“They can send me back to Taiwan,” he said coolly. “We’ll be thousands of miles away again.”

“And how many hundreds will it be instead, if you just choose to go if they don’t make you leave?”

“You don’t know that it will be hundreds.”

She lifted her head and grimaced at him. “Because you don’t tell me, John. As if I’m still just fifteen.”

Yan Ping didn't mean to snap. Not because she wanted to hold something back, but because she didn't need to. Not until he brought up being sent back to Taiwan. Because then she remembered, like random planks of wood you don't notice until they're built into a bridge. John leaving for America didn't stop her from going to school each day, or make her miss her meals, or stop her from bringing food to customers' tables. So when he left, she thought that would be that.

But she watched more American movies after that. And she tried harder in English class. Even thought about buying a ticket to San Francisco one day. She noticed when she slipped a piece of a customer's green onion pancake for herself and nobody saw. Because what if they did see, but just didn't care? And when she finally did immigrate, she breathed as if relieved. Like a marathon runner at the end of a race. She thought only of John, and arrived without a plan or a goal. And she never wondered *Why America?* until she realized it now.

John sighed. "I'm sorry, Ping'er."

"And you might always feel that way."

As he looked at her in surprise, she continued cooking, wondering where he would be in a few hours. Then in a few days. Then if she would still be wondering this, years down the road. Because she's given in, and will let him make the choice that's not really a choice.

"I guess I'm still running Lu Tea House by myself, then," she muttered.

"Yes," he affirmed sadly. Then thought carefully about what lay in that word. "You'll own a business in America, Ping'er. It's what I've always wanted. At least, for myself."

She picked up the knife again and started chopping potatoes. John sat in silence while she cooked. Different thoughts brewed in two different minds, as brother and sister soon shared one more meal together. In silence, and without looking at one another.

This is a view of the city he never sees. Empty and dark, except for the line of street lamps that lit their way. John struggled to keep his eyes open. He was grateful to Lil Jiang's uncle for driving him to their apartment in Hayward, but part of him still struggled to trust. And he didn't know why. Before he left, Yan Ping's eyes said all the words she couldn't voice. *Coward. Traitor. Runaway.* He sucked in a heavy breath, lips quivering, and gave in to his body as he drifted to sleep.

He woke up to the sound of a door slamming. Lil Jiang's uncle had parked in front of a three story building filled with tiny windows for tiny apartments. John's moved from one set of boxes to another. Tomorrow morning, they'll discuss when and how they'll get him to Kent, Washington. He'll let them do the talking. His mind is only on Ping'er, his sweet sister. His sweet sister who he left to build a life on her own, in this strange land. The second part of that thought seemed to drift away, letting *his sweet sister who he left* echo too loudly in his head. He didn't even want to think about the wolves who'll come after her. Boss Feng can't be the only one who wants to profit off of this pearl milk tea phenomenon. *Please don't let the wolves eat you, Ping'er.* He groaned. *Don't be a sheep like me. Don't think that I'm a sheep.*

"I'm not a sheep," he whispered.

"What?" Uncle Jiang turned to face him.

"Nothing," he muttered. He needed more sleep.

*I'm not a coward. I'm not a traitor. I'm not running away, Ping'er. I'm really not.* He tried to think louder. To project his thoughts. But they were still drowned out by little Ping Ping shouting *then go away* in a Taipei alleyway. He had been so hurt when she said that. He was only a teen, then. All he wanted to do was protect her. To be the big brother he felt she deserved. *I'm protecting you right now. I'm leaving you to protect you, Ping Ping,* he pleaded to himself.

But the thought of multiple Boss Fengs filled his mind. And the scariest part is that he can't even begin to imagine what they'll look like. *I'm leaving you to protect you. Please believe me.*

"I can do that, Miss Lu," said Ronnie, the son of Miss Deng from a couple of blocks over. He was counting the till and sifting through the twenties. The first few weeks had been busy, full of wary parents scared that their kids will choke on the tapioca balls and young people that just want to shoot it out of their straws. Yan Ping almost smiled.

"You should stay focused," she replied, still scrubbing the counter. *Who cares if it's already clean?* Left and right, in broad strokes. Then two circles around the edges with the other side to wipe away the soap.

Yan Ping calls her parents more now. She grows both anxious and relieved when they ask about John. Because that means he hasn't been deported to Taiwan, and that he could still be somewhere in America. Somewhere ten, or hundreds, or thousands of miles away. Running from place to place, like how he ran from counter to sink and kitchen to register back at their parents' shop. Picking up plates, washing plates, again and again. Getting the rough and calloused hands that always gently patted her head, a stark contrast to her own. So she kept scrubbing and cleaning and working, hoping to find a part of him in her palms.

Someone's hand squeezed her shoulder. It was comforting and relaxed. She didn't flinch.

"You should get some rest," Joseph whispered into her ear. "You have Ronnie for this."

"I have Ronnie to count the money," she countered. Not harshly. "Just a few more scrubs."

"A few more scrubs, then. Whatever you need. Just don't forget to come to bed, Ping Ping."

He squeezed her shoulder again, and she put her hand over his.



“Everyone grows tired, Joseph. Even me,” she tried to laugh. “When Ronnie tells me how much we made tonight, I’ll probably sleep easy.”

Joseph kissed her on the cheek and went upstairs. She paused and watched him leave, then went back to scrubbing the clean counter. The cops came soon after John had left. They came at a time when she blamed everybody. John for not having his papers. The US for not giving it to him. Boss Feng for betraying them. America for not being a dream. Pearl milk tea for being more than one person’s business.

So of course those cops were added to that list when they brushed her aside and scanned every part of their apartment. They asked if she lived alone. She said yes. They said they were going to look around. She let them. They searched everywhere. Under the crate she shared with John as a dinner table, in the lone closet on the side, under the bed, and even inside the kitchen counters. She raised a middle finger to the door they slammed when they left. Days passed after that and she lost the will to blame. She couldn’t figure out who’s at fault in this situation. Maybe that’s what happens when everything’s so linked.

“Here you go,” Ronnie handed her an envelope. “We still growing, Miss Lu. Lots and lots of money tonight.”

She smiled. A twenty to spend on a dinner, movie, and drinks for two would be a lot of money for a high school kid. She took the envelope and rustled his hair. He looked to the side, annoyed, but perked up again when she pushed a few bills into his hand.

“Thanks for staying, Ronnie,” she said. “Buy yourself a nice dinner tonight. You’re still growing, too, and you’d want to be taller to do slam dunks.”

After Ronnie had left, she made herself a cup of green milk tea and sat at the counter. She didn’t add tapioca pearls, because John thought starch in a drink is a weird idea. She raised the

cup to the wall, as if for a toast. A toast to what? Boss Feng giving up on his pearl milk tea menu? For all the hurt he's caused, people didn't even choose Lu Tea House over his restaurant because of the pearl milk tea. All the kids who came just liked the board games she let them play and wanted to say hi to friends who worked for her. It felt like a hollow victory. So a toast to what?

“To still being here, brother,” she whispered after a while. “To still being a part of this damn country.”

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## **V. The Boba Lens: Introduction**

Boba was one of my high school gateways into an imagined Asian America. My high school was in a predominantly white town two hours away from Seattle, and many of my peers did not know what dim sum or bubble tea referred to. I was one of the few Chinese students who attended that school, and our different friend groups knew many of us as “that one Chinese kid.” This meant we were simultaneously racialized on a daily basis and spatially removed from material symbols and environments that we can associate with being Chinese American. In this way, being Chinese American was often a lonely experience in a town whose people, places, and institutions racialize it as white. The loss of a spatial and material cultural product that is racialized in a similar way as me led to lack of belonging and feelings of isolation.

This experience reached a turning point when my friend and I bused to Seattle during our junior year of high school. That trip became one of my first encounters with boba as a commercial product in the context of being a consumer. However, it was not the first time I had seen boba. When I was in elementary school, my Shanghaiese friend's mom had made us cups of boba when we came home from school. Seeing boba again in this commercialized context

recalled memories of a space that was predominantly Chinese American, and an identity that is constructed through my relationships with Chinese American peers. Its presence gave external and cultural form to an identity I had come to experience as isolated and non-normative, and ignited my imagination of an Asian America produced through foodways, places, and social relationships. This would become the foundation for my exploration of boba as a lens for understanding these social forces and relationships.

Exploring boba through Richard Hartland's interpretation of Derridean signifiers helps to construct a framework that understands boba as an analytical lens. This dynamic process can help to define the mechanisms through which Asian Americans' marginalized positionalities can be spaces for contesting dominant narratives. Demonstrating the form and potential of boba as a lens through creative writing involves crafting characters, conflicts, and plotlines that can nurture reader investment in story and reader engagement with the theoretical questions my stories ask. My earlier drafts of "Try New Things," "Powder," and "Siblings" sought to do so through creating what Professor Victor Bascara calls propulsive narrative force with an exclusive focus on characters' exterior actions. This produced limitations in terms of character development, and subsequently, reader engagement. Consequently, these limitations led me to explore the works of William Faulkner, Fae Ng, Virginia Woolf, and Lai Wa Wu in brainstorming how interiority can work alongside stylistic brevity to cultivate more effective character development and successful reader investment. The process of writing and developing "Try New Things," "Powder," and "Siblings" meant using techniques of interiority and brevity to foster reader interest, which can lead readers to consider boba as a lens through the multiple ways in which it embodies social processes and relationships within my project.

## **VI. The Boba Lens: Overarching Goals**

Literary scholars have produced frameworks for exploring social and textual construction that inform my analysis of boba as a lens for understanding complex social processes. These frameworks are helpful for constructing a notion of boba that produces significant possibilities for Asian American agency. In activating my conception of boba and highlighting its importance for Asian American communities, I explore different ways of crafting reader investment in my stories, whether that be brevity in form and/or exploring character interiority and social actions through content. It is by applying Richard Hartland's account of Derridean signification to boba that I move to envision boba as a lens through which Asian Americans' marginal positionalities can be understood as dynamic sites of contestation. I hope to demonstrate this by writing in a hybrid form that recalls the styles of Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Fae Ng, and Lai Wa Wu.

In thinking about boba as a lens, it is important to reflect on boba's history. Boba, otherwise known as bubble tea, is a global phenomenon with disputed origins. Literature on the Internet mostly credit its invention to the Chun Shui Tang tea house in Taichung, Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> A popular urban legend claims it was created when Chun Shui Tang's product manager added tapioca pudding to sweetened Assam tea, which Chun Shui Tang offers with ice after its founder experienced cold coffee in Japan.<sup>2</sup> If this story is true, then Assam tea from India became a menu item in a Taiwanese tea house that further developed it to mimic coffee in Japan. These stories speak to boba's panethnic implications and its relevance for a panethnic Asian America.

In the United States, this panethnic cultural product has been adapted as a safe space for Asian American youth, as a marker of community, and as a diasporic cultural production. Jean-

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Arthurs, "'The Best Frogspawn You'll Ever Drink!' Cold Tea with Floating Tapioca Balls Is the Latest Craze Sweeping the Nation. FEMAIL Dared to Taste Bubble Tea," *Daily Mail*, July 2, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2167678/Bubble-tea-latest-craze-sweeping-nation-FEMAIL-dared-taste-it.html>; Derrick Chang, "Is This the Inventor of Bubble Tea?" *CNN Travel*, June 12, 2012, <http://travel.cnn.com/explorations/drink/inventor-bubble-tea-885732>.

<sup>2</sup> Derrick Chang, "Is This the Inventor of Bubble Tea?" *CNN Travel*, June 12, 2012, <http://travel.cnn.com/explorations/drink/inventor-bubble-tea-885732>.

Paul deGuzman invokes Critical Race Theory to note how boba cafes can be safe spaces for Asian American youth to assert selfhoods that are often policed in institutionalized settings like schools.<sup>3</sup> Popular music videos by the comedy duo The Fung Brothers visually associate boba with groups of Asian American youths interacting and building community with one another.<sup>4</sup> Boba's distinction from cultural productions in Asia is emphasized by media discourse that notes how it supposedly "made a centuries-old drink hip."<sup>5</sup> These social, visual, and textual ways of constructing boba allows it to demonstrate how notions of culture, community, and space are dynamically and actively constituted, changed, and reproduced.

I find Richard Hartland's overview of Derridean signifiers to be very helpful in guiding my framework for portraying and understanding boba in this way. Hartland's account of Derrida can act as an analogy for how I envision boba as a lens for understanding social processes, which then allows me to examine how boba processually functions to impact Asian American communities. Hartland's account of Derridean deconstruction explains that Derrida's rejection of the signified enables his framework of signification as the endless movement of signifiers that create meaning.<sup>6</sup> In other words, what is projected as a fixed product is oftentimes one context-specific form/moment in a perpetual process of meaning-making. In this way, I hope to show through my stories how boba can similarly be viewed through the lens of Derridean signification. Rather than being a fixed product, boba is a perpetual process of self-definition and redefinition that embodies the processual development of memory, social interactions, and sites of production.

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul deGuzman, "Beyond "Living La Vida Boba": Social Space and Transnational, Hybrid Asian American Youth Culture," *Amerasia Journal* 32, no. 2 (2006), 96.

<sup>4</sup> The Fung Brothers, "Bobalife (MUSIC VIDEO) - Fung Brothers ft. Kevin Lien, Priska, Aileen Xu." YouTube video, 6:25, posted by "FungBrosComedy," February 20, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zccNQPH7Xe0>.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Chiao, "3 Great Iced Boba Milk Teas in San Gabriel Valley," *LA Weekly*, July 8, 2013, <http://www.laweekly.com/restaurants/3-great-iced-boba-milk-teas-in-san-gabriel-valley-2897278>.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hartland, "Derrida and Language as Writing," in *Superstructuralism: The Philosophy of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 134.

The impact of Hartland's notion of Derrida for how boba can be seen as a lens of understanding social processes is significant when read in conversation with Lisa Lowe's account of Asian American positionalities and marginality. Lowe shows that the narrative and construction of America is actualized through the relationship between imagined coherence and actual erasure. She does so by identifying how the idea of a homogenous United States is constructed after centering ideas like heteronormativity and freedom, which then need to be understood as shared and realized.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this understanding can only be achieved if the experiences and presences of those who are made to be Others are neglected or erased.<sup>8</sup> For Lowe, this erasure constitutes a position at the United States' social and cultural margins, and she argues this position at the margins has potential for revealing fragments in the master narrative of American homogeneity.<sup>9</sup> I believe that conceptualizing boba as a lens reveals these fragments through Asian Americans' agency as participants in the social processes boba embodies. This conceptualization also demonstrates the mechanisms by which our communities contest exclusive master narratives. For example, when boba is only seen as a finished product, it mainly functions as an object for consumption. However, understanding it as a dynamic lens through which social processes can be made legible means understanding it as an agent of social forces with actionable consequences on our realities. Asian Americans exercise agency as participants in processes like memory, space, and culture through how they contest oppressive labor conditions within boba shops, create meanings for themselves and their relationships from interactions at boba cafes, and produce a dynamic notion of culture by how they continually reconstruct boba in memory.

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

For me, boba's processual defining and redefining of self serve to create the realities within which it is produced. How boba is constructed as memory impacts how it is constructed as a site of social interactions. How boba is constructed as a site of social interaction impacts how it is constructed as a site of production. How it is constructed as a site of production then impacts how it is constructed as memory, and so on. In doing so, boba demonstrates how the form of memory, sociality, and production are constructed. In demonstrating this function through creative writing, I find myself inspired by Lai Wa Wu's creative thesis. Wu's thesis explores cooking as a form of bonding through virtual and real life communication and as sites of memory.<sup>10</sup> Wu's thesis then provides a model for how decentralizing the spatial, temporal, and relational sites of my stories allows for multiplicity to be portrayed as an entry point for viewing boba as a lens for understanding social processes.

Demonstrating boba's multiple and related roles in many different contexts can lead to a more dynamic and active perspective of boba, and this involves considerations of narrative form. For example, how boba can appear as trauma is different from how it can appear as reconciliation. To demonstrate the difference, I hope to generate different affective responses to boba's different forms. In order to do so, I need to create reader investment in my stories. This led to changing narrative considerations in search of the most effective approach for producing a reader's ability to empathize with a story and its characters. This eventually made me consider notions of interiority through the streams of consciousness techniques used by William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. It also led me to consider how brevity in cadence, which I initially associated with the pace of a story's social actions, can also produce narrative momentum through detailing a character's thoughts. Fae Ng's *Bone* proved most helpful in this respect by

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<sup>10</sup> Lai Wa Wu, *Connection Lost*, M.A. thesis in Asian American Studies (University of California, Los Angeles, 2013), 14-23.

sharing its characters' struggles and conflicts through brief and intentional sentences. These creative works are then highly formative in generating my style and approach for communicating boba as a lens through creative writing.

Envisioning boba as a lens for understanding social processes allows cultural productions to be seen as dynamic and changing with actionable social consequences. This has significant potential for articulating how Asian Americans' positions at the margins can be sites of contestation. I apply Hartland's Derridean lens to boba in an effort to demonstrate how it acts as a lens for understanding social processes through perpetual meaning-making, and I demonstrate the potential of boba for Asian American agency in differentiating between being perceived as an ahistorical product and as socially embedded lens of analysis. Articulating this concept through a series of creative works require reader investment and generating varied affective responses that demonstrate boba's multiple, mobile, and interactive meanings. It is by working through several drafts that I understood the strengths and limitations of my approach to literature, which eventually led me to focus on character interiority and intentional brevity through exploring the works of William Faulkner, Fae Ng, Virginia Woolf, and Lai Wa Wu.

## **VII. The Boba Lens: The Initial Process**

My first drafts of "Try New Things," "Powder," and "Siblings" were produced through considerations that ultimately proved problematic. In trying to preempt narrative lulls, I built these stories through frenetic storytelling pace and minimal referentiality. However, doing so can prevent the reader from grasping the story's plot and characters' motivations. As a result, this approach can prevent me from balancing a character's interiority with their actions in the social world and damage narrative effectiveness. The first drafts of my three stories were built on



problematic approaches that prevented the reader from understanding and empathizing with my plot and characters.

For the first drafts of my three stories, I hoped for the reader to experience a frenetic storytelling pace and the capacity to contextualize the narratives within their own experiences and imagined settings. The first goal took the form of narratives that centered the social world and people's actions, often at the expense of characters' interiority and thoughts. The latter goal took the form of minimal referentiality to setting and place. These strategies are a result of my own experiences as a reader and the narrative conventions that often push me away from certain works. These conventions include descriptions of setting and an overt focus on interiority, which does not always orient itself around a story's plot. In the past, I had interpreted these traits metaphorically as being stuck in traffic, or as moments in which plot progression is unnecessarily halted. My own experiences as a reader then became foundations for how I approached my earlier drafts, which meant I internally framed my considerations as solutions to narrative problems I wanted to preempt. Unfortunately, seeing my considerations as solutions prevented me from understanding how they can present problems of their own.

Frenetic storytelling pace became problematic in several ways. In discussions with my faculty committee, I understood that the action of the social world can be interpreted as chaos by readers who do not yet understand my characters or their conflicts. For example, in "Try New Things," the reader might not be able to feel empathy for Danny's sense of belittlement around Jasmine, because people do not always explain their actions in the social world. Moreover, the reader might not understand the significance of Lu Tea House for Tim, or the extent to which they should be attentive to his relationship with Tammy. For the reader, the characters' motivations remain unexplained, which means their conflicts and the story's plot would remain

obfuscated. As a result, the story can just feel convoluted and directionless when I sacrifice interiority for a constant focus on the actions of the characters' social world. This lack of reader investment also undermines the effectiveness of "Try New Things" ending, which seeks to represent the affective loss that accompanies gentrification. If a reader is not able to engage the characters, conflicts, and plot, they would not be able to go further in using my stories to reflect on my broader goals of representing boba as an analytical lens. In this way, I would gradually move to incorporate interiority and varied storytelling pace after assessing the shortcomings of focusing solely on a frenetic social world.

Lacking referentiality also proved problematic in ways I did not anticipate. My choice of incorporating minimal references to location and space in earlier drafts was due to two reasons. The first was the hope that readers can apply their localized contexts to the narrative of the story as a way of feeling connected to characters and plot. For "Try New Things" in particular, I also wanted to withhold the fact that Danny and Tim are different characters to share that fact as a climactic reveal at the end. I had hoped for the reveal to personify a move from seeing Asian America as homogenous to seeing it as a heterogeneous community whose cultural productions impact its members in different ways. This proved ineffective. The focus on the reveal limited my capacity to fully develop Danny and Tim into the distinct characters that they are and need to be, which further impedes readers' attachment to either character. Moreover, in "Powder," which moves frequently between different times and settings, this lack of referentiality can confuse readers as to which character I'm referring to, at what point in time, and at which location. In addition, minimal referentiality in "Siblings" can prevent the reader from appreciating how a particular place changed over time when reading the stories in conversation with each other. As a

result, minimal referentiality actually foreclosed the possibility of richer character development, more nuanced characterization of space, and the reader's ability to latch onto a narrative.

Having understood the shortcomings of writing my stories through a frenetic storytelling pace and minimal referentiality, I worked with Professor Victor Bascara to explore works that can develop my approach in a more constructive direction. We worked together to identify these problems of character development, having a clear plot, and expressing clear character motivations through discussing canonical literature. The following section details how these discussions and works informed my later drafts.

### **VIII. The Boba Lens: The Later Drafts**

My later drafts seek to address the challenges my first drafts encountered, and they hope to more effectively lead the reader into thinking about the questions my stories ask. Individually, the stories consider the implications of boba as construction of memory, as sites of both trauma and fulfillment, and as part of a community's social and productive fabric. Collectively, they hope to broaden these questions into reflections on how boba transgresses space and time, how it can mean different things for consumers and producers, and how its different meanings in different contexts constitutes a process of meaning-making. In learning from the limitations of my previous drafts, I drew from the writings of Lai Wa Wu, Virginia Woolf, Fae Ng, and William Faulkner to articulate these concepts by focusing on character interiority and intentional brevity in form.

Exploring the works of Fae Ng, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf has been tremendously helpful for my project. Faulkner and Woolf's different approaches to the streams of consciousness technique offer a constructive contrast that allows me to better understand the strengths and limitations of applying this method for revealing characters' interiority. Faulkner's

use of streams of consciousness in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom* felt more erratic and tangential, which showcases characters' personalities and how they function. Woolf's streams of consciousness in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* help me grasp the relationship between different characters and give nonaction a sense of momentum. In reading both Faulkner and Woolf's works, I was intentional in placing their novels in conversation with the challenges and needs of my own stories. While their novels offer helpful insight for how I can develop my characters' interiority to clarify personalities, conflicts, and plot, I often experienced the narrative lull I initially wanted to avoid when reading Woolf and Faulkner's works. The challenge, then, was to incorporate the strengths of their style and maintain the energy and pace that I hope to achieve in my stories. I turned to Fae Ng's *Bone* for the latter in an effort to minimize narrative lulls whenever I share characters' interiority by incorporating *Bone*'s expert use of brevity.

In "Try New Things," boba's relationship to memory, space, and community dynamics are meant to be shown through the interactions between two different characters with a shared space. One of the main narrative limitations in this story was the conflict between my climactic reveal and the character development that readers need. In order to reveal that Danny and Tim are two different characters, I would not be able to develop them fully into unique and humanized characters that readers can fully empathize with. As a result, later drafts of my story discarded this reveal and focused more on the closure of Lu Tea House and opening of IdentiTea as the climax. This decision then enables me to consider how I can incorporate streams of consciousness into "Try New Things" and maximizes the effectiveness of the climax. These considerations guide my goals for character and story. I now want Danny and Tim to feel like distinct and complex people, and hope to construct them in ways that illuminate clear conflicts

and goals through which the reader can be invested in them. Reading Faulkner has been helpful in this regard, because his works show me that not everything a character says or thinks need to be related to plot for it to be relevant for story. For example, Quentin's ruminations on a watch and on time in *The Sound and the Fury* can reveal that he is often stressed, hint at his struggles with social inertia, and demonstrate how he unravels.<sup>11</sup> All of these functions can indirectly assist readers in understanding the way Quentin navigates his conflicts in moving the plot forward. This perspective led me to share Tim's thoughts not just on things relevant to the plot of "Try New Things," but also on his peers' relationships and his low self-esteem. Similarly, I then opened the scope of Danny's interiority to his experiences in Seattle's International District and race relations in his local Pacific Northwest setting. In doing so, I hope for Danny and Tim to be more complex and relatable characters whose struggles and goals are made clear.

Thinking of interiority and streams of consciousness as serving the plot without being bound to plot details allows me to explore linkages between different stories as ripple effects. The ripple effect analogy is something that Professor Victor Bascara mentioned in our conversations regarding this project. I want my three stories to share the theme of boba as transgressing time and space through its relationship with memory. I hope to capture this concept through motifs like fleeing. Fleeing is meant to be a thematic constant that links my stories, and I hint at it in "Try New Things." Intentionally incorporating this motif and expanding the scope of my characters' interiority inadvertently led me to further develop Mrs. Lu as a character. In "Try New Things," she acts as a maternal mentor figure for Tim. My later drafts show her vaguely reflecting on running away from trails of milk tea on the walls and telling Tim he can only run away so many times from his goals. Through sharing Tim's interiority, I also aimed to convey the karmic implications of possibly seeing his departure from *IdentiTea* at the end of the story as

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<sup>11</sup> William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 76.

a form of fleeing. This is a reference to “Powder,” which would clarify for the reader how Mrs. Lu’s ruminations in “Try New Things” are referring to memories of Raymond’s confrontation with his dad. “Powder” and “Try New Things” collectively builds this motif of fleeing within a familial context as a multifocal phenomenon. For Raymond, he is the one fleeing. For Mrs. Lu, I utilize vagueness to preserve the possibility that her inability to follow up with Raymond also constitutes a form of fleeing. In this way, I hope to communicate that boba’s form within the context of memory can be related to, constructed through, and constructive of multiple affective responses and social relationships. I attempt to do this by creating a narrative relationship between two stories after learning how interiority can detach itself from the plot to serve the purpose of the story.

In “Powder,” boba’s multiple and context-specific meanings can be best appreciated through narrative coherence between parallel storylines. However, lack of interiority can prevent the reader from grasping time jumps in the parallel storylines between Raymond and the couple. However, I want to avoid further complicating the narrative with tangential and long streams of consciousness if the plot already involves frequent and nonlinear jumps in time. Therefore, I took the opportunity Professor Victor Bascara offered to have me rewrite one of my stories in the style of Fae Ng’s *Bone* to practice sharing character interiority without streams of consciousness and with brevity to rework “Powder.” In *Bone*, characters are often able to communicate their interests, histories, and challenges through brief lists and allusions to numbers.<sup>12</sup> With this style of writing, a character might say that one year in prison brought them one thousand new learnings, rather than ruminate through a longer stream of consciousness on how prison sped by because of the way it shaped their growth. This strategic focus on brevity then aids Ng in making

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<sup>12</sup> See Fae Myenne Ng, *Bone* (New York: Hyperion, 1993).

her backwards chronology and frequent allusions to memory comprehensible.<sup>13</sup> In this way, I tried to clarify Andy and Kevin’s relationship history and tensions, their connection to Raymond, and Raymond’s stifled conflict with his parents by utilizing character interiority and with brief, purposeful cadence.

Making the nonlinear and parallel format of “Powder” accessible through sufficient interiority and brevity allows me to further share how boba can embody varying meanings in different contexts. In “Powder,” I return to an approach I took with earlier drafts of my stories in keeping sentences and paragraphs as short as possible. However, instead of using these short sentences to convey a character’s action, I tried to create momentum through the way their thoughts progressed. As a result, I allow Raymond to share more of how his tension with his parents came to be, and reflect on specific moments of trauma in being an employee in relation to boba. In this draft, I chose to develop Andy’s relationship with Kevin not through the dates they went on and their hurtful and reconciliatory actions, but through how Andy’s perception of Kevin drove these actions. This is further complemented by sharing not only who Andy is as a partner, but also how that identity is informed by who he is as a musician and lover of real milk tea. Including a more holistic account of Andy as a person is a result of reading Lai Wa Wu’s thesis, which humanizes a mother and daughter’s relationship through showing how it appears in different contexts, although Wu does so by contrasting different media platforms, rather than character identities.<sup>14</sup> This gives me more direction and focus with how I allow a character’s interiority to depart from the plot. By centering characters’ interiority through a focus on brevity, I hope to communicate how boba moves through space in embodying different meanings for different people. It is the site of dissolution for Raymond and his family, even while it is the site

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<sup>13</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See Wu, *Connection Lost*.

of connection and reconciliation for Andy and Kevin. I also attempt to show how boba moves through time in embodying different meanings. While it is a sign of trauma in Raymond's past, it is a suggestion of hope in Raymond's present. In this way, intentionally presenting characters' interiority in "Powder" can build my depiction of boba's relationship with memory to show how it transgresses space and time in ways that make the story's form accessible.

In "Siblings," the story's attempt to animate boba as a space for producers in a capitalist economy, a source of livelihood for new immigrant communities, and a possible site of tensions within ethnic enclave economies is dependent on the dynamic between Yan Ping and John. The mutual love and conflict between John and Yan Ping is meant to serve as the reader's entry point for empathizing with and investing in them as characters. Through that investment, I hope for the reader to have a stake in considering what their experiences may suggest about boba in the aforementioned capacities. To do so, I incorporate *Bone* in making memory an active component of the characters' present. Yan Ping and John's memories of each other and their childhood actively inform their goals and actions in their present moment. In the spirit of Faulkner and Woolf's streams of consciousness, what the characters think in their present moment and in their memories are not always related to the plot-based conversations they are having. However, I was more selective in sharing interiority with the reader in this story. This is because it is more important for the reader to attach themselves to the siblings' relationship with one another, and not with the siblings as isolated characters. The characters' thoughts that I shared, tangential to the plot or not, are often meant to elucidate something about their concerns or hopes for their relationship with each other as a means of directing reader focus towards that relationship.

Reader investment in character relationship is how I hope to utilize Yan Ping and John as points of entry into the broader questions "Siblings" asks about how individual relationships with



boba speak to boba's social roles. Moreover, Mrs. Lu as Yan Ping can hopefully connect my stories and many of boba's implications through how Yan Ping is linked to Mrs. Lu as mother and mentor. This move from narrow to broad in how I'm analyzing boba, along with Mrs. Lu's central position in "Siblings," is why I made "Siblings" the last story in this series. The roles of memory, time/space, and fleeing/mobility as aspects of boba's shifting meanings are all given clearer form through how "Siblings" can be read in relation to "Try New Things" and "Powder." Yan Ping's flight to the United States in pursuit of John can be read in conversation with Mrs. Lu's flight to Seattle to reunite with Raymond. This can also be juxtaposed against Raymond and John's different notions of fleeing, which then adds generation as a dimension through which boba interacts with time and space. Moreover, mobility and fleeing as narrative constants are contextualized within memory to encompass past/present and different spatial points of reference for the sake of showing how boba as a movement of meanings is trans-spatial and trans-temporal. These meanings demonstrate a holistic lens through which to view boba as the sites, relationships, and products of consumers, producers, ethnic enclaves, and multiracial spaces. I attempted to achieve this by positioning "Siblings" as the last story, so that the character of Mrs. Lu can be a reference point for the motifs of memory, generation, and fleeing/mobility to construct how boba perpetually and processually defines itself in different spaces and times. The reader can most effectively engage in this analysis and reflection when they are invested in Yan Ping as the main character. I hope to accomplish this by guiding the reader to invest in Yan Ping through her relationship with John, making that relationship a central element of the project as a whole. That is why John is often alluded to in both "Powder" and "Try New Things."

The later drafts of my stories aspire to articulate the form and potential of boba as a lens for understanding social processes and relationships by focusing more intentionally on character

interiority and writing with brevity in cadence. This meant hearkening to the works of Fae Ng, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and Lai Wa Wu in conceptualizing how creative works can develop characters, plot, and conflict in ways that generate affective responses within the reader and foster reader investment in story. In doing so, the reader can hopefully engage with the stories in substantial ways and consider how character actions, motivations, and experiences demonstrate boba's function as a lens for understanding shifting social meanings. Moreover, characters' engagement with boba as a process also demonstrate the possibilities of boba for their agency in navigating social realities as Asian Americans at social margins. The strategy of my later drafts in crafting reader engagement and investment through building character interiority with brevity in style allows readers to see the possibilities of boba as a lens for understanding social processes.

## **IX. The Boba Lens: Conclusion**

I consider boba to be a lens for understanding social processes that operates in a similar fashion as Richard Hartland's interpretation of Derridean signifiers and signification. This is important for conceptualizing boba as actualizing the potential for Asian Americans' marginalized positionalities to be sites of contestation. Representing this idea through my three short stories involve multiple and developing strategies for crafting reader interest, investment, and engagement. In hoping to avoid narrative lulls through focusing primarily on characters' external actions and climactic reveals, I prevented myself from creating the necessary character development for readers to empathize with their conflict. This can also stop readers from further engaging with my stories to analyze their portrayals of boba as a lens in the context of race, space, memory, and generation. This then led me to analyze the works of Fae Ng, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and Lai Wa Wu in considering how I can improve character

development by building their interiority through brevity in style. My latter drafts were then more focused on characters and their worlds of thought. This is all in an effort to convey how boba as a lens can make legible the implications of my characters' selfhoods and experiences as they navigate their social realities at the margins.

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