

Chinatown was a friend of my mother's.

They knew each other before I was born. A wrong bus ride home during her first Canadian winter led her straight into the centre of Chinatown's beating heart. Cold but unafraid, and in a winter jacket twice her size, she found her way into a butcher shop. A bell rang above the door announcing her arrival, and she walked up to the counter passing the lined rows of *char siu*¹ and *siu aap*². Her wallet ignored what her stomach could not.

A man approached from the back in an apron covered in grease. I knew him when he was gray-haired, with crow-footed eyes. I knew him as Uncle Ho. But there in that moment, these were two strangers meeting for the first time in Chinatown.

小姐! What can I do for you?"

The sound of his fluent Cantonese struck like a major chord in her head.

"Can I borrow your phone to call my husband?"

For the first time in two weeks, she spoke in her mother tongue to a man who looked like family. For the first time in two weeks, she did not have to repeat herself thrice in a language that felt like chalk on her tongue. And for the first time in two weeks in this North American city, she felt like it could be home.

And so, as she waited for my father underneath an oddly familiar static-hum of fluorescent lights, my mother shared her first meal with Chinatown that evening: a gifted plate of roasted pork on a bed of white rice, with a side of sour vegetables from Uncle Ho. He told her stories of raising a family in Canada, and she shared hers of growing up Chinese in Vietnam. A story of having a home and being forced to say goodbye.

¹ Barbecue pork

² Roast duck

In exchange for a promise to return within a week, my mother left with three bags of groceries from the market owner next door, a roasted duck, and a feeling of belonging that would forever be immortalized within her. It was as if this town had taken her by the hands, looked her in the eyes and said: *There is space for you here.*

Chinatown knew my mother the way you can recognize the footsteps of the people you love. And when I came tumbling down onto this Earth, Chinatown knew me too.

I saw Chinatown every single week. My mother would always tell me that it was much bigger then, than it is now. But at the age of four with choppy bangs and bright eyes, the pagoda roofline town was my entire world.

We ate dim-sum with Uncle Ho and his grandson every Sunday and afterwards, that 10-year-old boy and I would split a custard bun directly down the centre to see who could eat it the fastest. He had golden skin and eyes like mine, and a Chinese name that felt nice to memorize. It was very easy, at eight-years-old, to fall in love.

I do not remember his name anymore. My mother would have.

Nobody in my high school knew Chinatown the way I did. And I quickly learned that nobody in my class wanted to know me. But I wanted that so desperately. I ached to belong. I asked my mother to make sandwiches for lunch instead of rice. I went to the mall instead of having dim-sum and watched my mother wonder what she'd done wrong. I fought my reflection because it hurt me so deeply that I couldn't look like everybody else.

I didn't mean to, but I had traded my pride for shame. And I let Chinatown go with it.

My mother died at the end of twelfth grade. Cancer. I had just graduated. She asked if we could go for dim-sum when she felt better. I said yes.

I cannot remember the last time I was in Chinatown.

I am visiting home for Spring Break when I see Chinatown on the news. I ask my father to turn up the volume and I watch as the camera pulls in on Uncle Ho's butcher shop. There are plans to tear down the businesses in the area to build a new condominium. I stare at the storefront, lost in an emotion that I cannot quite place. The taste of nostalgia is suddenly heavy on my tongue; potent and filled with a strain of guilt that makes my mouth run dry. Uncle Ho materializes on the screen and his eyes tear into my mine like he knows I'm watching. His hair is thin, and his hand trembles with age not even a skilled butcher can escape.

"To know Chinatown, is to know community," he says. "And I pity the ones who think that is something worth destroying."

I knew Chinatown. I loved Chinatown. And I lost touch because I was simply too ashamed to pick up the phone.

The air in my lungs feel unreliable. I reach for my father the same time he reaches for me. I cling to him, and I let out my hurt. My body is riddled with grief. I cry out for my mother who will never come. I let out a stream of apologies directed towards my childhood, and I hope she can hear me.

My father grabs his keys, and we drive in silence towards Uncle Ho. We pass through the *paai lau*³ like a portal and it feels like forgiveness. I see children playing on the street and I know that this is what it means to heal. My father buys me a custard bun and I split it down the middle like I'm eight again. I hope my mother feels me here, and I wonder what Chinatown will say.

I knew a little girl born in the centre of my beating heart. Her mother was a friend of mine.

³ Chinatown archway