

The In-Between

A Short Story by Emily Yu

I pull my fake leather jacket tighter around my shoulders, a soft attempt to keep out the biting gusts of wind. I wish I'd thought to grab warmer clothes before I stormed out; now the earliest I'll be able to go back and pack up my things is tomorrow morning when Jes is at work. Walking through rainy downtown at night is like walking along a black mirror; the reflections of the streetlamps ripple as I step through the shallow puddles on the cracked sidewalk. I swore under my breath realizing the bus must have just passed; it'll be another hour for the next. It's not worth the wait when Brooke's house is only a forty-five-minute walk away.

The trade-off is that I must walk through Chinatown at night, in the dark, when every shadow is ready to morph into a rapist or a mugger. At least, that's how my parents had programmed me to think. And it seemed like in every city in the world, Chinatown is always the sketchiest area. Cheaper and less desirable real-estate in North American communities were the most accessible for people like my dad, who ventured across the Pacific from Hong Kong decades ago with little money but many hopes and dreams. He was one of the early immigrants, having opened his own restaurant here in Edmonton so long ago. He sold it before I was born, trading his chef's apron for a hard hat at a local factory, so I'd only ever experienced my dad's cooking at home.

My stomach rumbles unhappily at the thought of food. I'd do anything for a bite right now after wandering aimlessly around the city all day, watching happy couples enjoy their lives and wondering how I'm going to convince Brooke to let me bum at her house for the next little while. I hadn't gotten around to finishing my bowl of Cheerios this morning since Jes knocked it over during our fight, paying homage to the first words she'd ever said to me, back when I was

just another customer at the greasy diner where she worked: “No use crying over spilled milk.” Back then, she’d flashed her gap-toothed grin at me, and the moment I looked into her vibrant green eyes, I knew I was a goner. This time, I couldn’t even meet her eyes.

I stop walking as the thought of Jes makes me bite back the sting of tears. My mom had warned me that she was bad news, and I wanted so badly to prove her wrong, to tell her that she was wrong for judging me for dating a girl, the same way she’s judged me for my whole life. Instead, now I’m the one who’s wrong, and I’m tired of feeling this way. The floodgates open and I stand there under the yellow light of a streetlamp, crying until the sky opens up and cries with me, disguising my tears in its raindrops.

“Hey! Hey, you! You crazy!” I hardly hear the voice yelling at me over the sound of pouring rain, her words laced with a choppy Cantonese accent, just like my parents’. A middle-aged lady is waving a dirty dishrag at me from the door of the Chinese restaurant across the street, the fluorescent lights flooding from within like a beacon in the dark. “Come inside!”

“I’m fine!” I wipe my eyes with the back my hand, a futile gesture in the rainstorm.

She continues to gesture at me furiously, and she reminds me so much of my mom that I hesitantly cross the road towards her. Maybe I could wait under the awning until the rain slows down. As soon as I approach, she holds open the glass door, refusing to step away until I come in. “You come in. I give you food.”

I shake my head. “No, thanks. I’ll be okay.”

“No, no. Come in.” She practically drags me inside, my wet shoes sliding on the checkerboard linoleum. She sits me down in a chair and before I fully realize what’s happened, she’s draped a clean tea towel over my dripping hair.

“Thank you,” I say, drying the blond strands that are sadly turning coppery yellow from my fading dye-job. “I’m fine, honestly. I’ll go as soon as the rain stops. You’re probably closing soon anyway.”

“Not yet. Best business after bar close. You eat,” she commands, manifesting a steaming bowl of congee in front of me. “On the house.”

“Thank you... I don’t usually eat Chinese food,” I say. I should decline, but I don’t want to seem rude, and the fragrant smell wafting from the bowl has me salivating. Fresh green onions adorn the fluffy surface of the rice porridge and I find myself picking up the ceramic soup spoon.

“You Chinese girl, you should eat Chinese food.”

“My mom calls me a white girl.” She called me that on many different occasions, like when I spoke English instead of Cantonese to her, and when I always chose burgers over Chinese food; most recently, it was when she found out I bleached my hair blond. I almost moan with the first bite of congee. It’s thick and savoury with chunks of salted pork and preserved egg, perfectly spiced with just a dash of white pepper. The flavours blanket me in a deep nostalgia of my childhood, more of a feeling than a specific memory—a feeling of safety, back before I realized that I wasn’t like the other girls that I went to school with.

“My daughter like you. Act like *gwei moui*—white girl, want to be like her friends. Inside, you both Chinese,” she says. “Your generation stuck in between.”

She turns to go back to the kitchen, and I’m left wondering when exactly I got stuck in between. The more I think about it, the more I believe that maybe I’d always been there, that I was born in between. It’s exactly where I was over a ten years ago, when I sat with my grandma

in our kitchen, drinking VitaSoy and spooning fermented bean curd on my congee while my gaze stayed fixated on colourful superhero cartoons as they yammered away in English, none of them ever showing characters who looked like me.

The woman returns with a warm Chinese doughnut, a savoury long piece of dough that's been deep fried to perfection. I thank her as I dunk it into my congee, the flavours pairing perfectly as they always have. If such a dichotomy can exist within this heavenly doughnut with its crispy golden crust and its fluffy porous centre, why can't it exist inside me too?

“Do you still talk to your daughter?” I ask her.

She gives me a funny look. “Of course, she's my daughter.”

“I haven't talked to my mom in a long time.” We spoke less and less after I moved out. She would occasionally text me and I'd send her back confirmation that I was alive, but ever since we'd argued about Jes, I generally ignored all her phone calls. I'd always been a disappointment to her, and I'd had enough of being reminded of that. Instead, I let her think that I was swamped with work—at least then she would think I was hardworking, a trait greatly valued by Chinese people.

“You call your mom.”

“Right now? It's one in the morning.”

“Don't matter the time. She worry about you.”

“How do you know?” I don't really need to ask; even if my mom is sleeping, I know that she'll answer. She'll insist that she comes to pick me up no matter where I am. The worry will come first, and the judgment later.

“You’re her daughter. Even if you look like white girl,” she motions her hand at my hair. “You still Chinese inside, and family important. White girl daughter better than no daughter.”

I choke back a strangled laugh. I never intentionally pretended to be white but when she says it this way, maybe what I had thought was fitting in had been me trying to cover up my identity as a Chinese-Canadian. Jes had cited one of the reasons for our breakup as me being “too much” and trying too hard, and as much as the words still sting now, I realize that I have been trying so hard to pull myself out of this in-between when I should have learned that I was never stuck to begin with—I had only convinced myself that I was. It was never my mom’s judgment that I was afraid of; it was my own.

The woman must sense my thoughts as she sidles quietly back to the kitchen, leaving me alone with my satisfying hot meal. I feel her eyes on me as I slide my phone from the inner pocket of my leather jacket and stare at the screen on the table. Slowly, I dial the digits that I know by heart, and my phone displays the name, *Home*.