

At Least the Food is Good

The color red bombarded my vision. The flaming hues caromed off the chairs, the tablecloths, the walls, and even the napkins that were in front of me. Walls were vibrating from the sound of people talking and laughing, and the crowdedness of the space all seemed equally as pervasive as the décor of this particular teahouse.

Inwardly, I sighed. Not being one for public places, loud noises, and least of all, conversing with relatives that I barely knew, I dreaded the next two hours before even sitting down at the table. My mother gave me the look, her silent command telling me to “behave.” I tried my best to reciprocate with a defeated gaze and a pout. It seemed to be a “good enough” response for my mother.

Going to “yum cha” was one of my mother’s favorite past-times, and it was one that she often made tolerate whenever we visited Chinatowns. Today was no different, seeing as we were in New York preparing for my youngest aunt’s wedding. For the next two hours, my mother would be sipping tea and catching up on all the latest gossip by milling through our family and having dim sum with our relatives. My siblings and I were unfortunate enough to accompany her.

“Ah Sien! How was the car ride?” My uncle asked jovially.

Thus, the parley, or rather the lack thereof, between my distant relatives and myself began. At that moment, a squeaking metal cart rolled by, bringing with it the smell of turnip cakes and egg tarts. Well, I told myself, at least the food would be good.

Indeed, most of the ordeal had been as I expected. While I stuffed my gullet with various cakes, dumplings, breads, and jasmine tea, my mother actively participated in the “adult conversation” at the table. She and my various uncles, aunts, and cousins talked animatedly about stories that seemed more and more ridiculous with each passing utterance. I had to stifle the urge to roll my eyes; looking around the table to my siblings, I could see they were faring no better.

My younger brother sitting next to me looked absolutely languid, kicking his feet back and forth while poking at his taro cake with chopsticks. He gave me a pitiful look as we made eye contact before returning his attention to the greyish, pulpy remains of his cake. All the while, the chatter from our table remained heightened.

“I heard that Ting Ying just had a baby.”

“Really? Good for her!”

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A girl...”

I paused in my tea sipping, hot water pressed against my lips as I digested the conversation. The heavy load of anticipation dropped into my stomach. I could almost taste the response, wishing that this time I would be proven wrong.

“Oh, what a shame!”

“That’s so sad.”

“She’s devastated”

“At the very least, she can have more kids.”

“I know. Better luck next time.”

Inwardly, I berated myself for wishful thinking. Had I honestly expect their opinions to change? Looking at my sister’s shaking head, I knew that she hadn’t had such expectations. I was simply dumb enough to set myself up for disappointment, but no matter how many times I heard those sentiments, I simply could never grow numb to them.

As always, I was fuming, outraged by the opinions expressed by my relatives. I thought about the baby who hadn’t even taken her first breath, yet already opinions of her were being formed. In the eyes of my relatives, traditionalists from Fu Zhou, the baby, being a girl, had already defined her place in life. Her duty was to marry out of the family; therefore, her opinions would never matter. She’ll never be good enough, because she doesn’t have the “capabilities” of a man. She will be unimportant, and in the worse possible situation, she’ll be unwanted.

If I had been any younger in that moment, I would have wanted to shout at the womb, “Don’t come out!” Being older, I knew there was nothing that neither she nor I could do

to prevent the inevitable. She would come into the world, and in all likelihood would feel the sense of inadequacy that comes from being a female in our household.

Would she grow up feeling unwanted or unloved? Would she live her life trying to make up for the fact that she wasn't male and wouldn't be able carry on the family name? How would she internalize the praise, gifts, and honors that her male relatives would receive, the ones that she would never see or hear directed at her? Would her grandfather ignore her existence?

A burning tendril wrapped its way through my stomach, filling my chest with a hot, suffocating air. It wormed into my eyes, pricking and stabbing into my tear ducts as I pondered the injustice of the situation. I clenched my fists, digging fingers into palm in an attempt to plug the water-works. Maybe I'm being too sensitive about this topic.

Suddenly, a warm hand touched mine, breaking up thoughts and bringing me back to reality. I stared into the chestnut-colored eyes of my younger brother, whose hands were squeezing my own. Since when did his hands get so big?

“Are they talking about bad things again?” my brother asked in English.

I stared up at my aunts and uncles who seemed to be frozen in their positions, still discussing miscellaneous topics. At that moment, I was reminded of my brother's keen aptitude for reading me. He had told me once that it was my posture that gave my emotions away. I had always believed him since there was no way he understood what my relatives had said earlier. After all, he didn't speak a lick of Chinese, let alone speech as obscure as the Fu Zhou dialect.

Curiously, the fact that my brother spoke and understood no Chinese played a key part in me recognizing the gender bias in my family. Even as a child, I remember my baby brother receiving phone calls from my grandfather and other relatives only to briskly toss the phone to my mother or try to convey in English that he had no clue what they were saying. He was always celebrated as the favorite grandchild or nephew even though he had never partaken in any true conversation with those who favored him. However, as the only male child of my father, the eldest in his family, my little brother has an important place in our household. It doesn't matter if he can or cannot speak Chinese; all that matters seems to be his gender. Being male gives him respect from my relatives, being male means there were festivities when his name was written in the family registry, being male makes him desirable.

“You shouldn't listen to them.” My brother huffed.

He proceeded to reach for the metal teakettle, pouring steaming liquid into my cup.

“Have some tea.” He offered, as if the tea would magically block out my thoughts and the voices of my relatives.

I smiled to myself, grateful that I had someone who understood my disdain for the traditional, patriarchal viewpoints of extended family.

“I understand why you're upset,” he said, taking a sip out of his own teacup.

“Being angry about people judging you for something you can’t control. I get that...but you know, I didn’t choose to be a boy anymore than you chose to be a girl.” My brother stated.

“One day, when they understand this, I think they’ll realize that we’re not that different and start treating the girls better.” He sounded like a mother teaching life lessons to her children.

I had to prevent myself from bursting into laughter. Not only was my baby brother lecturing me, but he also managed to sweep-up the emotional mess that I had made, using his clear optimism. My older sister chuckled in response to my brother’s speech as she poured more tea into our cups. All the while, the squeaking metal cart rolled towards us, bringing with it the delicious sight of mango pudding and sweet tofu.

“Well,” my brother sighed, “at least food is good.”