

Leftovers

He tried to rub the fatigue from his eyes, pain shooting through each time he blinked. It had felt like moments ago when he shut his door at noon to silence the screaming tones of the pressure cooker and block out the smells of the ginseng, wolfberry and chicken soup. His vision blurred looking at the MCAT book he had been working through, it would be the third time in that lecture hall facing that exam. He remembered buying his first prep book; the memory seemed so distant.

“Yes, I’m going to med school,” he had repeated with a confident smile each time. Now his desk was buried underneath countless sheets and practice books. He let his mind drift, trying to figure out how he got here.

The first time he registered for the exam was because he overheard his classmates. The website became a tab at the back of his browser for months – a quick click away when his parents checked in on him. He had told his mom first – she would tell Father later. “Oh, so talented! Our own doctor...Wait until *Poh-Poh*, finds out, we call now!” Despite being 3am in Guangzhou, he had stayed on the phone for an hour, nodding his head with a smile plastered onto his face. Maybe it was a coincidence but his mom seemed to have more friends over then. She paraded them through whispering, “He’s studying shhh...” before nodding gently and pushing them back into the living room.

The first time he opened his results, his hands left wrinkles on the envelope. The score held onto his legs, trapping him with a weight he could not escape. Outside, he could smell the rice for dinner from the kitchen vent and saw the two shadows moving through the window. He couldn’t bring himself to open the door and woke up the next morning, not in his bed, but outside

on the cement steps of their stairs. The sun had just begun to rise, but his nose dripped from the cold. He walked in quietly, passing through the kitchen and froze at the smell of simmering *tong*. “Fish and tofu soup,” his mother said before she shuffled back to her room. Sweet almonds danced through the broth and warmed his stomach.

The second time had been the worst. The door to his room was always closed. He had developed a habit of carrying paper or a book everywhere he went. Constant worry had his head permanently lowered and few words were uttered. At dinner, his body was always angled to accommodate for his table reading. One night, he had walked slowly to the table, focused on rereading a question already scratched up. He could feel his mother's gaze, her eyes painted over with worry and pity. His seat was across from his father's, who always sat at the head of the table and was the first pair of chopsticks that reached out. He hadn't understood what had happened. He just heard paper scattering and his pencil rolling away. In what seemed like the first time in months, he looked up and really saw the face of his father. Father's skin had taken on a red blotchy tone and his breathing was exaggerated, like he had just surfaced after being underwater for an eternity.

“All day, all night. Book, book, book. Everywhere! I never study and look at me! I was 16 – first job and working hard. Useless boy, what you really doing?” It was the first time he had heard his father talk so much.

He didn't know how long the silence had lasted for. His breath caught in his throat – all the words he had lined up were too big to get out. He was embarrassed at the squeak that finally managed to escape, “Yea, look at you – working minimum wage, 20 years later.” He turned to his mother, but her eyes were diverted to the ground. When his father sat down, he glimpsed her

pale hand move to rest on top of his father's beneath the table. He shoveled the rice in quickly as if it could push down the rest of his words.

He grew to not care about the food they were having. He would eat, just to eat, and they would be there, just to be there – an empty routine. His eyes would study the grains of rice each night, hardly reaching out for other dishes. Gaze lowered and shoulders hunched over, he looked up only to acknowledge the morsels of food his mother would drop into his bowl. “More, eat more,” she always said.

It would be his last time now. He felt like a veteran from a war that did not want him, another number thrown in like waste. A few days ago, he had been staring into the pages and was surprised to hear the phone ringing so late in the day. It was First Aunt – the one that talked too much. Yes, he was Little Brother and yes, he was studying hard and yes, he was doing well. She had called to ask his mother for help, how things were difficult because she had tripped the other day and how the doctors had tried to trick her into staying longer at the hospital. No trust, her voice had hissed through the phone.

The next day, his mother had rushed to pack things and made sure the two of them would have enough food – popping into his room to ask over and over if it was really okay to go and would he be alright with her gone? His phone flashed with the name of the taxi company and he nodded for the nth time that he would be fine – it would only be two weeks.

“Health most important, take care okay? Sometimes we do our best and that okay.” Her hands squeezed his momentarily, the now paper-thin skin barely masking the veins.

He nodded absentmindedly and noticed his father lift her luggage into the taxi. “I’ll be fine. I can take care of myself.”

He waved, realization looming over him as he stole glances at his father. As he turned to walk back into the house – the taxi disappearing into the distance – his father stood and watched even after the taxi had turned the corner.

These days he had spent all his time studying for the exam, relieved for once that he could use it as an excuse to confine himself in his room. “Good mornings” were nodded and meals were eaten quickly. His eyes still ran away from meeting his father's.

Now, he noticed that his coffee cup was empty and he moved towards the kitchen – realizing that he had forgotten dinner that day. He hoped there were leftovers.

He dragged his feet slowly across to the kitchen and felt around for the lights. Flinching, he gave his eyes some time to adjust, when he noticed the bowl on the counter. When he stepped closer, he saw a note scrawled onto a piece of scrap paper.

Soup in fridge, heat up.

The bowl was his father's own interpretation of ramen, filled with noodles and leftovers from a much too elaborate dinner for two. Awkwardly chopped eggplant, pan-fried with oyster sauce, lotus root cut filled with mushy beans and steamed fatty pork with black mushrooms. None of it was the frozen ready meals his mother had left them. He poured the soup into the bowl, microwaved it and ate in silence before returning to his studies. He hadn't heated it up for long enough, it was lukewarm.

Weeks later, he exited the exam room and began to prepare scripts of how he would tell his parents with different options he would use to persuade them. His mind was still running through scenarios when he sat down for dinner. It was steamed chicken, cooked with a salt rub and ginger-scallion oil, cut expertly on the kitchen floor lined with newspaper to avoid splashes

of oil. He ate slowly and closed his eyes tightly before spluttering out, “It wasn't good. I, I don't think...”

He felt like a string was pulling his head towards the ground with each increasing moment. He heard his father clearing his voice, the same sound he made when he brought back wintermelon pastries or egg-tarts after an argument with Mom. “You did your best?”

He nodded, unable to find his voice or lift his head until he felt the weight in his hand change. His father's chopsticks had left him the chicken drumstick in his bowl, piled on top of the rice with the bone sticking out. He felt his mother's hand smoothing his back as he took a bite. It burned the roof of his mouth and clouded his vision.