

The Vegetarian

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She had always enjoyed her food – I would hear them say of me in that harrowing period following the incident. They were still trying to stitch it together, to make some sense of it all. And they were right, I suppose, but that strikes me as an altogether reductive way to look at things. In all the confusion, this much has always remained clear to me: I ate when I was hungry, and I stopped when I was full. Sister's stitches might tell otherwise.

I had never reassessed my diet during the lead up to summer, nor had I agonised that my legs or cheeks might wobble when I ran. No one had ever required me to be skinny. It just wasn't important, not to myself nor to my family. And so, my eating habits had remained unchanged for most of my life.

I had always devoured whatever was placed in front of me, and if I still wasn't satisfied, I'd never shied from requesting more. I had never restricted myself, as some women are known to, preferring instead to eat whatever the hell I liked. When it came to counting calories, I wouldn't have known how to do it; I had, and still have, no idea what the numbers mean.

I was certainly no health-freak. I chewed on pork rind before dinner, sticky with dripping, and had been known to lick bao wrappers clean of pineapple jam. I was neither finicky nor fussy, nor was I greedy or ungrateful. I indulged in treats where I could get them, and never regretted a single one.

Actually, I tell a lie. There was a time when I did regret a snack. For weeks, my back teeth had been giving me trouble, a molar cavity most likely, which made chewing uncomfortable. But I could never resist Mother's Siu Yuk. And so, when presented, that Sunday afternoon with a glistening morsel, I had deemed the risk tolerable and chomped down hard on the crispy husk. The stab of pain was immediate. And the shockwaves nearly crippled me, sending jolts through my jaw and the left side of my body. While delicious, as always, that particular snack was a painful lesson in self-restraint.

Though, I fear I am misrepresenting myself as some kind of voracious animal. I had, on occasion, displayed more admirable discipline. There was one Qingming Festival, a few years earlier, when Brother and I were sitting side by side on a picnic blanket, watching Father do battle with a kite. Struggling with a tangle in the string, he'd summoned Brother to help him, who, in obliging, had left a trio of sweet green dumplings on the plate.

Entirely unguarded, the dumplings lay beside me on the blanket, sunlight bouncing off those luminescent orbs.

After several minutes, Brother had realised his error and come bounding back across the field, expecting to find them ravished. As a family of snackers, we kept our treats fiercely guarded, and if the cards had been flipped, he'd have seized the opportunity. Yet there the dumplings remained, untarnished and uneaten.

I suppose what I have been trying to convey is that my eating was normal. And yet, now when I survey the months, even years, preceding the incident on that fateful Yu Lan's Eve, I can't help seeing these moments as somehow connected.

My family had never pandered to the fads of picky-eaters. Food, to them, was either sustenance or a celebratory feast. Breakfast, though often rushed, was a hearty congee with dough sticks, and dinner was usually meaty and salty-sweet with hot steamed rice.

Sister, however, was different. She was the youngest in the family and had never quite seemed at ease with the way the rest of us indulged. And then one day she left for University, some Nutrition College in Tokyo, and when she returned one year later, the separation was complete. In Tokyo, her appetite had undergone a drastic revision. Refined carbohydrates were all but outlawed. Okra and tofu thrived. At mealtimes, now, she practically nibbled, flicking her peanuts in my direction, and gesturing irritably with her stumpy Japanese chopsticks as she ate.

Then when Mother got sick, Sister took over in the kitchen. No one would have minded, perhaps even welcoming the mushrooms, had it not been for the drastic reassessment of meat.

Red meat in particular was relabelled as unessential. I began to notice the portions shrinking and then finally disappearing from the plate.

I'd assumed, at first, that this change wouldn't be forever. Father and Brother wouldn't let it. But to my surprise they kept their heads down; until Mother got better, they promised they'd do their best. And their commitment was alarming.

Inevitably, it wasn't long before my own diet was scrutinised.

Sister began to make comments. It was observed that my usual dinner time had been creeping earlier and earlier, and I was regularly found to be consuming two evening meals. Unsatisfied by the first, I'd become restless and snappy, until for everyone's sake, I'd help myself to a second course.

Sister commented one evening that my eating had become zealous; my habits were unsustainable. She'd seen enough, she decided, and something needed to change.

The first cut they made was the mid-morning biscuits.

I was athletic and had always had a passion for track-sports, but while I loved to run, my hatred of cold weather was stronger, and when the weather turned unpleasant, I relied on those biscuits just to get me outside. And that winter of Mother's sickness was the bitterest I could remember. As I ran through the park, head throbbing, limbs numbing and stomach growling with hunger, I found myself dreaming of those biscuits with an intensity verging on obsession.

But Sister told me I was pathetic.

To begin with, I missed the biscuits terribly – the savoury sweetness, the blood returning to my cheeks with each satisfying crunch.

But then, as the biscuit ban continued, throughout a month or so of suffering, I began to realise, actually, it was possible to do without them. Thus came the turning point in my story. Soon after, the decision was made that I should stop snacking altogether. And what was most alarming about this one was that it was I who had made it.

Yu Lan Festival was coming. And while others around me began loosening their good habits, gorging on Zongzi and preparing feasts for hungry ghosts, I ramped up my self-restraint, and held fast in my abstinence. Though the avoidance of festive treats was a tricky one to navigate, I found ways to persist in my deprivation.

But the more I learned to deny my appetite, the more aggressive it became. I began to grow ravenous.

Yu Lan's Eve arrived. In the interests of tradition, Father and Brother had elected to suspend their vegetarianism over the holiday period. For a one-time only exclusive, meat was back with a vengeance, and perhaps distracted by festivities, Sister didn't even seem to mind. There had been a brief period of improvement in Mother's condition which meant that she was able to join us burning joss paper in the street. And yet, despite these lifted spirits, I remember being unable to shake the feeling that things were winding up to some cataclysmic event.

That evening, once Mother had returned to her sickbed, Brother and Father took up a game of cards at the table, and as Sister and I lay watching them on the living room floor tiles, I shielded my eyes from the tray of Siu Yuk that was being passed back and forth. I could smell the sweet, salty juices, and tried my hardest not to taste the air. I lay close enough to Sister that her breath tickled my ear as she laughed, and she lay close enough to me to hear my stomach's insatiable growling.

I gritted my teeth to suppress it. But the hunger pangs were persistent. The growls came louder now, furious, my stomach gnawing at its edges.

I needed to appease it. I needed to eat.

And that's when Sister nuzzled closer. As though for warmth or for comfort she squeezed her body closer to mine and pushed her face into the scruff of my neck. And it might have been coincidence, but at that very same instant, I reached the limit of my endurance.

I turned. She sprang back, but not quickly enough. And my prized pearly canine sunk deep into the flesh of her left cheek. I tasted salt and blood and saliva. And as I pulled away, I licked the tang of pork rind from her lips.

She had always enjoyed her food – I heard them say of me once the rabies shot had been delivered, as the row of stiches was being tacked into flesh of Sister's face.