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Broken Bucket Wisdom

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STEPHANIE NAWROCKI

Broken Bucket Wisdom

The office was in an old walk-in cooler. It was the only area of the Japanese restaurant where I could work without the weight of heavy food trays or sore feet that needed to be elevated with a stack of pillows before bed. I pretended to be earnest during Yasuko's job interview, but the second I saw her fragile frame and exhausted, elderly demeanor, I labeled her as unfit.

Waitresses are expendable. The second they decide to pocket tips or help themselves to our wine cellar is the second I'm ordered to toss them on the streets with a reputation as clean as a used condom. Restaurant work is brutal—my mom worked three serving positions when I was a girl, and I grew up coloring white paper napkins with old crayons in an empty booth while watching my mom carry tray after tray of sushi to demanding customers. When I turned thirteen, Mom put me to work—and I climbed my way up the ladder.

Yasuko shocked me by handing over a formal résumé—even the paper that it was printed on shouted that she needed this serving position.

“And what's your level of education?” I asked.

I slammed my jaw shut, trapping a piece of my lip between the top and bottom rows of my coffee-stained teeth. The résumé claimed she had obtained a master's degree in Japan.

“I earn master degree in Fine Art, girl.”

“Why you never go home after work?” Yasuko's voice took precedence over the repetitive Kyoto geisha suicide music that we listened to day after

day. I treated it like a constant reminder that we should never believe that we are denied options: I can serve sushi and make enough money to pay the bills, or I can go home and kill myself.

I continued to fold the green dinner napkins. “My mom and I don’t get along,” I replied.

“She Korean right? No one get along with Korean women!”

I laughed politely to make it seem as if searing needles weren’t pricking the outer layer of my skin.

“She’s definitely hard to get along with.”

“What about Dad?”

“We don’t talk.” I stood up and walked to the back door for a much-needed cigarette break. When I returned, Yasuko had thrown the leftover unfolded napkins back into the bucket. I swallowed hard and acted as if the thought of my parents was harmless.

“Ay-ya girl, you don’t need to play tough with me!” She crushed my inventory list into a crinkled paper ball and then began folding the rough edges into a swan. “Sometimes girl, even most broken paper can become swan,” she said before turning the swan back into a worthless ball.

“Is that what you learned at art school?” I joked, wanting to dodge the intimacy that Yasuko so happily handed out.

“Swans are beautiful, until they hiss. Then they not so beautiful.” She grinned and threw a green dinner napkin at me.

I loathed the customers that would come into the restaurant for dinner, selfishly wanting the dining room to be empty so that Yasuko and I could talk unbothered.

It was another slow day at work as I sat in my favorite secluded booth, staring at the teardrops of water as they streamed along the window and converged. A bowl of white rice and miso soup steamed in front of me, and I thought about how I would be begging for the warmth of food later in the evening. Of course, I had to find a new place to park my blue Honda Civic. The paranoia of being found habitually sleeping in my car alone at night in the same spot at Ellison Park forced me to become an explorer.

I thought about calling my dad; the scenario played out in my mind day after day. Of course, it was just a fantasy that I lived whenever I felt desperate enough to ignore the memories—or construct some fictional father figure in my mind. The reality is that whenever I found the courage to speak to him, my words were as rotted as the clothing left on a corpse.

If I breathed too heavily, if I lost my balance standing atop the rows of empty glass bottles, the nights I held my little brother Brandon under the

blankets in my bedroom while the thin drywall around us crackled and crumbled under the weight of a morbid marriage would be stained into my head for hours. My mother's wails always changed in tone with each fist that struck her delicate cheeks—nothing more than a musical instrument for my father to practice, night after drunken night.

“Are you open for lunch?”

I felt a slight jolt at the strange voice from behind.

“Yes! How many for today?”

The older man began to take off his raincoat as he settled down at his table. “Two. My daughter should be here soon.”

I smiled, handing him two menus. I felt my skin crawling with disgust as I walked into the kitchen and smashed a crystal wine glass against the wall. As I swept up the pieces, I began to laugh at my own ridiculousness and then I sobbed in the storage room, muffling each deep breath with a hand tightly cupped around my mouth.

“You know them, girl?”

I grimaced at the content and functional family in the back without realizing how obvious I was being.

Yasuko jabbed me in the shoulder with the back of her pen, forcing a soft click. “Girl, you always so angry! You see this pimple?” She pinched my cheek and laughed as I jerked away. “Angry makes pimples! Ay-ya! So many!”

“I’m aware of my acne,” I snapped.

“So pretty, but so much anger! So much anger make for bad wife!”

I hunched my back and mocked her posture. “So much talk make for bad server! Go take order before I old lady like you!”

Later that night, I caught Yasuko wincing in pain as she put every ounce of her energy into using the heavy mop. I sent her home and finished the job for her. As I filled out the closing paperwork, I lied and jotted down that she stayed the extra hour. I was starting to care about the old bag of bones.

Goddammit, I thought as I slammed the books shut.

“I know she’s psycho, but you have to take it,” I said.

I felt my little brother’s forest-green eyes shoot flames and laser beams into the side of my face as I continued to drive down the dusty gravel road.

“Steph, you don’t understand.”

His voice had become so deep, it drowned the high-pitched little boy who used to ask his big sister to sit at the foot of his bed until he fell asleep. Already, I had suspicions that this “brother-sister” trip that Yasuko lectured me into taking was a shitty idea, one that might result in a secluded knife

fight to the death. Her voice echoed: “Brother is same blood! What you mean you no get along?”

I thought about her broken English and warm honey-brown eyes.

“You go spend time with baby brother! He all you have!”

I snapped out of reflection and questioned whether or not my little brother would cut my throat if I antagonized him enough.

“I understand better than you think,” I mumbled indifferently a few seconds after the fact.

“Mom told me to kill myself yesterday.”

“How?” My head jerked when the front tire of my car dipped into a massive hole in the makeshift road.

“She said, ‘if you no want to go to the school, then you can go to the hell.’ Then she told me to go get hit by a car.”

My laughter bounced out of the rolled down windows of the car and eventually his deep chuckles joined in.

“I swear, Mom is getting more and more creative,” I squeezed out, laughing at the imagery of our Korean mother ordering my brother to lie down in front of speeding traffic.

“Do you ever wonder what her issue is, Steph?” I answered with silence, and he continued, “She still asks about you.”

I turned the steering wheel to the right and parallel-parked the car in front of the opening to the hiking trail. “Tell her that the faggot is alive and just fine.”

He rummaged through the trunk as I reached in the backseat for a handful of granola bars, which fell out of the torn plastic bag and scattered amongst the random articles of clothing and books.

“When d’you think you can come home?”

I cursed under my breath as the back of my head hit the roof of my car and a wave of rage welled up within me.

“Don’t worry about it! You just worry about covering your own ass and passing summer school!”

The high squeal of a mosquito buzzed in my left ear. I slapped myself in an attempt to squash its evil plot. Brandon marched in front of me, careful to avoid the holes that begged to sprain a careless ankle.

Hours later, we both leaned on our knees and gasped for breath after scaling a significant portion of the trail, which shot up at what felt like a ninety-degree angle. I rolled my backpack off my shoulders and reached inside for my cheap, re-used Poland Spring water bottle. I splashed the lukewarm water on my face to wash away the dirt and sweat and peered down at my phone to check the time. A single unread message popped up as a red talk bubble in the bottom left corner of my iPhone’s display.

“I think we’re finally high enough to get service,” I proclaimed in amazement.

I read the message over and over again to the point where my brother couldn’t help but peer over my shoulder in curiosity: *FAGg. You know what you do what ever. You make me so seek of you for toomany time I relly don’t give shit as long as you don’t make me mad for so many of everything. You are out of controle. Hope one day you know what you did to everybody.*

Another text message from my mother appeared as my phone vibrated for a quick moment: *I want you gone for good.*

Brandon wrapped his muscular left arm around my shoulders at the sight of my shaking.

“At least she got the last one grammatically correct...”

I smiled momentarily to console him. Tears fell from the corners of my half-Korean eyes and drove along the bumpy contours of my cheeks. My little brother hugged me so tightly I couldn’t brush away the tears from my eyes.

“I don’t know what to say, so I’m just going to hold you—okay?” It was the same thing I used to repeat to him while our parents fought.

That night, I sat in the driver’s seat of my car, unable to sleep under the noise of rainwater smashing against metal. The air smelled of rotten wood as I examined one of the many paper dragons that littered the floor of my Honda like garbage.

I unlocked the double doors and walked into work with two medium black coffees from Dunkin Donuts in hand. Yasuko was attached to every thought that trailed along my mind. Work was no longer unbearable and even though I was house-hopping from friend to friend, constantly worried about whether I would be sleeping on a couch, a bed, or in my car, I felt at home when Yasuko’s voice was present. I sang along with the radio that I blared early in the morning and began setting up the dining room.

Around 11:15 am, I became annoyed that her coffee was a disgusting lukewarm temperature. She was rarely late and a mere fifteen minutes wasn’t cause for alarm, I told myself. A growing concern pricked at my thoughts ,but I continued to work and hum along to the music that was now more of a distraction than a pleasure.

Hours passed and her whereabouts were still a mystery as I ran from table to table, trying my best to keep up with the demands of the angry customers that bitched about their limited lunch breaks. I dumped the cold coffee down the drain and crushed the paper cup under the weight of my fist.

Yasuko didn’t show the next day, or the day after that. For whatever reason, perhaps as an indication of my own self-destructiveness, I would hope to see her straggle in with her “ay-ya’s” and constant references to me, her manag-

er, as “girl.” I missed her teasing jokes, and her accusations that I wasn’t a “true Asian” when my face turned a bright shade of crimson from her spicy papaya salad. Her absurd home remedies for the common cold included binge-eating mangos and forcing me to eat an entire bowl of fresh pickled ginger.

I had always laughed at how she refused to call glasses or cups by their official name. Teacups, wine glasses, empty pints of beer—none of that mattered to Yasuko. They were all buckets in her eyes. A week before she unofficially quit both her job and her unofficial homeless lesbian daughter, she lectured me as I mopped up a mess made when I dropped a tray of full water glasses. Shards of glass scraped against the tiled floor as I rolled my eyes at her voice from behind. She picked up a large piece of crystal glass with her bare hand and interrupted me when I began to protest.

“Even broken piece can hold water, see?” She tilted her hand and I watched the water pour from the edges.

I rang the heavy mop out into the bucket as she continued.

“Hope is water that stays in broken bucket.”