

Goodbye My Friend

By Nan Xiang

On a bright evening in July, a strange guy was flitting around my kitchen. I caught him unearthing an oyster sauce bottle left by a former tenant and sniffing it: not rotten. It was the first time I met Peng. Mau had invited him over following their return from a five-day package tour to Rome. In the early summer of that year, Mau and I had rented the house in Utrecht's city centre. It was near a small brothel, but it was cheap. A century and a half old, our well-furnished house had worn over generations of tenants. Its interior bore a resemblance to the creased bodies of the sex workers standing behind the windows of the brothel. They looked isolated in their small rooms, but they would never be afraid to display their imperfections to passers-by.

Peng washed his hands and began slicing a piece of beef steak. He was as small as I was. With Mau's heavy cleaver, Peng struggled to achieve a smooth and thin cut. Noticing his growing anxiety, I offered to help, but Peng declined, promising to surprise us with the beef stir-fry he had learned from his mother. In the end, he served us something reminiscent of an accident, in which a bunch of semi-liquid dark brown tissues crashed into a swamp of overboiled iceberg lettuce. For a second, I considered not touching it. Like most overseas Chinese students of the one-child policy generation, Peng was a beginner at cooking, but he had a discerning palate. The bad-looking stir-fry tasted good and disappeared within minutes.

Our friendship grew at Fai's birthday party. Initially invited to assist at the stove, I found myself tasked with preparing a table of dishes upon arrival. What was available was basic Ikea cookware, a portable induction hob, and a jungle of near-expired ingredients Fai had rescued from the supermarket. I accepted the challenge. At dinner, Peng praised the beef chow fun (dry fried beef rice noodles), whose smoky flavour evoked his nostalgia for street vendors in Canton. That night, I felt a sense of satisfaction.

Eating alone is a cruel punishment for our generation. Mau, a night owl and a lab rat, seldom had meals at home. To ritualise my solitary dinners, meticulously prepared for myself, I ate in an augmented reality, courtesy of Netflix food documentaries. Once a week, I rewarded my hard work with a bowlful of spare ribs ramen, accompanied by the latest episode of Game of Thrones. Its banquet scenes might intensify the umami notes of my ramen soup. Sometimes, I was jaded with both food and films that I would open a porn to watch while chewing, as if I could exchange experiences with the actors on the screen. Not finding much joy in academia, I wanted to have some fun in life.

When Peng inquired if he could join me for everyday dinner, I embraced his idea, and we soon developed a symbiosis. I basked in the feeling of feeding another human being and the comforting aura of commensality, while Peng, freed from the pressure of ensuring himself well-fed, bolstered my culinary adventure with his wealth. Cooking for myself didn't require much preparation, and the limited supplies from my larder couldn't support many varieties. Cooking for two was quite different. Not as simple as doubling the portions, I needed a new and larger menu. The larder gradually expanded to an entrepôt, crammed with sauces, spices, and dried goods, gathered from open markets, ethnic groceries, and farm shops across the Netherlands. We made trials of untried ingredients, we failed a lot, but we succeed in opening a world of food we hadn't experienced before.

Peng's favourite dish was a by-product of my chicken broth, made from a free-range and grass-fed chicken I discovered at an organic butcher. Simmering the whole chicken in a cast-iron pot for a handful of hours was a solace on a quiet Dutch winter afternoon. The modest blue flames flickering in the stove cast a soft glow, piercing the darkness that settled after the early sunset. Moving closer towards the light, my numb hands could catch the waves of warmth radiating from the metal. As the steam wrestled to escape from the lid, it turned the pot into a hand drum, and the drummer, tapping out a rhythm with her fingertips, sent caresses to my heart. Eventually, the steam liberated itself, charting an unpredictable course in the air, moistening my lips, misting my glasses, and mellowing the space.

Once a thick layer of fat had sealed the soup, we transferred the bird onto a platter to cool. Under Peng's massage, the meat separated from the bones and fragmented into fine shreds, forming a small mountain at the centre of the platter. I poured fresh Sichuan chilli oil over the pile, a cascade of rubies flowing down from the summit in all directions. Simmering extracted the flavourful essence from the bird, but Sichuan chilli oil infused it with a new soul – bold and straight, burning and watering at the same time. Peng couldn't resist licking his fingers.

During the Christmas holidays, we revelled in feast after feast with friends, got too drunk and ended up passing out on the table, in the bathtub, or even in the closet at other people's homes. I almost forgot that Peng would leave just before the Spring Festival.

"Could you write down the recipe for the chicken shreds?" Peng asked.

"I never cook from a recipe," I boasted, "I use my imagination and memory."

"Then teach me."

"You've already mastered it. We have made it so many times together."

I never saw Peng again, but the recipe went on a journey with him to Hong Kong, Singapore, London, and Boston, and will go wherever he goes.