Commis by Don Lee

**WHEN THE CALL CAME** from my brother, I wasn’t the least bit surprised. The only wonder was that they’d lasted this long, into the dog days of August. But now my parents had decided to close their restaurant for good, my brother told me, and they wanted me—their fugitive daughter—to come home to Missouri to help them shut it down.

I didn’t have much going on to excuse me. Like most people in the food-service industry that Covid year, I’d been furloughed in March 2020 and then laid off. I’d been living off unemployment, collecting more money, actually, than I had as a commis cook at BoYo, the fine-dining izakaya in Old City, thanks to the extra six hundred dollars a week the government was doling out. The first month of the shutdown, I had lazed around my apartment in South Philly as if on vacation, thinking BoYo would reopen at any moment. After running out of shows to stream and growing bored with baking focaccia, my two roommates—both prep cooks at other restaurants—and I began incubating artisanal products for possible side hustles. We molded candles and soaps, fermented vinegar and kombucha, infused edibles, pickled beets and okra, assembled bentos to sell in the corner bodega, and macerated citrus, nuts, seeds, and herbs for Italian liqueurs—limoncello, nocino, amaro.

Then George Floyd was murdered, and our summer became all about activism, marching up and down the Parkway between City Hall and the Art Museum, repeatedly taking a knee, getting tear-gassed and pinned on I-676, followed by volunteering for neighborhood cleanups, meals on wheels, food banks, and cookouts for the homeless. As the election neared, we turned to canvassing and making calls and writing postcards and going out to rural PA to register voters.

But when the federal subsidy program expired at the end of July, we had to shift to more mundane concerns, like how to pay the rent. We started looking for kitchen jobs. There was nothing. The only places hiring were grocery stores, pharmacies, warehouses, and delivery services. I kept getting rejected. I was turned down for four different positions at Target, including cart attendant. Everyone was looking, which made finding an entry-level job as a stocker or picker ridiculously competitive, companies asking for relevant experience.

The only experience I had was at my parents’ Chinese restaurant and at BoYo, the latter acquired through pluck more than luck. After I graduated high school in May 2018, I’d immediately fled to Olney, a Korean American neighborhood in North Philly, where a cousin lived (I had told my parents I’d be there only for a short visit). On my second night in town, I set off to get a job at BoYo. I’d already tried calling and emailing and sending in my résumé, to no avail. I needed another tactic to get in the door. So I dressed up, put on makeup, and went there, pretending to be a customer.

The restaurant was a square box, sleek and elegant, with wide plank oak flooring, black wainscotting, brick walls painted gray, and exposed ceiling joists. It was very dark in there, with just one narrow picture window facing the street, but up-lighting and recessed mini-spots gave it a warm glow. A tiny bar fronted the room, behind which were eight two-tops of natural walnut that could be arranged in different configurations, flanked by six booths along the walls. Everything was dominated by the open kitchen in back, built around a custom Jade range, which was crowned by a massive steel hood. It was the most beautiful restaurant I’d ever stepped foot in. (I admit that up to then the fanciest place I’d eaten in had been an Olive Garden, but I wasn’t a complete hick. I had a TV. I had the internet. I had books. I knew about food.)

The chef’s counter, which I’d reserved weeks earlier, was on two adjacent sides of the kitchen—sadly, away from the hot line, but I could still see a lot of the action from my chair. And there in front of me was Bosse Park, or Bo, himself, examining tickets that were coming out of the receipt machine and consulting with his sous chef. I hadn’t been sure he’d be working service that night, although I had heard he rarely took days off. Like his staff, he was wearing a short-sleeve white shirt, black pants, and a gray apron. No toques or tunics here. He was shorter than I’d expected, but otherwise he looked like his pictures—midthirties, solid bodied, with a broad, pleasant face and neatly combed thick hair.

I ordered small plates of the raw diver scallops, steamed egg custard, smoked eel croquets, broiled baby eggplant, and dry-aged duck breast. I was blowing a big chunk of my savings on the meal, but I didn’t care. I hadn’t eaten anything all day so I could devour these dishes.

As I was finishing my last morsels, Bo walked past me, and he nodded subtly. “Excuse me, chef,” I said, startling him. He winced, actually. He was by reputation quiet and reserved, shy. He didn’t usually talk to his diners.

“Yes? How may I help you?” he asked, betraying the slightest trace of a Scandinavian accent. He was, like me, Korean by blood, but he came from another world. His father had been a South Korean diplomat, and Bo had been born in Stockholm, then raised in Hong Kong, Tokyo, Paris, Oslo, and Copenhagen.

“I’d like to work here,” I told him.

“As a server?”

“Cook.”

“I’m very sorry. There are no positions available.”

“I’ll do anything. I’ll clean toilets to start. For free. I want to stage with you.”

“I’m so sorry. There are no openings. Would you care to look at the dessert menu?”

The next day, I waited for him outside the back service entrance. “I’m sorry,” he told me again. “We really don’t have anything.” Three hours later, his sous chef passed by me at the door. Inside, she told Bo, “Hey, that girl’s still there.” He came out once more. “Maybe I can refer you to some other restaurants,” he said.

“There are no other restaurants I want to work for, no other chefs,” I said. “There’s only this restaurant, and you. I’ve studied everything about you. I won’t take no for an answer. I’ll stay here all night.”

This wasn’t that outlandish of a ploy. I knew he preferred to hire people who were raw and moldable rather than culinary-school graduates or restaurant veterans, and that he admired persistence. He himself had done exactly the same thing to get his first job at Noma—posing as a customer, then camping out at the back door.

“Have you ever worked in a professional kitchen before?” he asked me.

For an entire week, he had me clean the toilets, and the floors, and the mats, and the prep tables, and the pots and pans. Then he let me clean mushrooms and greens. Then pick apart herbs, juice corn, and seed kumquats. Then chop onions and dice beets. Midsummer, he put me on the payroll.

Twenty-two months I worked at BoYo. As a commis, I unpacked deliveries, labeled and rotated stock, cleaned stations, prepped ingredients, measured out portions, and organized mise. But my other duties changed from night to night, getting assigned to different chefs de partie, going from the fry station to the sauté to the grill. I was learning so much. Toward the end, I was being allowed to line-cook and plate. I was working twelve, thirteen hours a day, six days a week, beat to shit after every shift, but I loved it—loved being able to take ordinary, plain ingredients and make something beautiful out of them.

Now I didn’t know when or how BoYo would ever reopen. There wasn’t space on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant for outdoor dining, and 25 percent occupancy inside was a joke. While other businesses were pivoting to delivery and takeout, Bo had said in an email to his staff that trying to modify the menu to-go wasn’t workable. With expenses for ingredients, overhead, taxes, delivery fees, and a skeleton crew, we’d have to sell chicken wings for forty dollars to break even.

I was afraid Bo would soon be closing his restaurant permanently, as my parents were closing theirs, along with thousands of other restaurants across the country. I was afraid I’d never work as a commis again.

**I got home** a week before the final day of service. I didn’t know how long I’d have to stay. I was hoping no more than two weeks. But there was a lot to do—vendors to contact, services to cancel, equipment to return or sell, all the financial, tax, permit, and insurance issues to take care of, and then we’d have to break things down and move everything out and do a deep cleaning of the entire place.

For now I was in the kitchen with my mom and dad, in the weeds. Word about the closure had gotten around, and all of a sudden, for no reason we could figure (it wasn’t like we were the only Chinese restaurant in town, and we’d never been the most popular), the phone would not stop ringing with orders.

“Where were all these fuckers when we needed them?” my brother, Victor, said.

Opposed to many Asian businesses that year, the restaurant hadn’t been spray-painted with threats or slurs, the windows hadn’t been smashed, there hadn’t been any rants or boycotts, just some prank calls (“Can I have a side of corona with that?”). But beginning in late January, business had started to drop off, then plummeted with the “kung flu,” “Chinese virus” bullshit, until one day there were just three orders. Things never fully rebounded after that, although my brother, the de facto manager of Asia Palace, had done his best to keep them afloat.

He erected plexiglass barriers, put out sterilized pens and bottles of hand sanitizer, and taped up fliers touting the restaurant’s safety, health, and hygiene procedures. He’d always resisted signing up with delivery apps, objecting to the commissions—the restaurant mainly takeout anyway—but now he hired a few drivers, high school boys willing to work as tipped employees for half the state’s minimum wage. This location, Asia Palace’s third, was a free-standing former Dairy Queen on 50 Highway on the edge of Warrensburg, and it had a drive-up window we’d never used. Victor pried off the plywood covering and recruited a couple of high school girls to staff the window so customers could call ahead for cashless, contactless pickup. He made sure all the high school kids were white. He also planted American flags and an election sign for Fuckface outside the restaurant. (“Purely a marketing decision,” he said, to mollify me.)

Tonight the kitchen was as hot as I remembered, feeling twenty degrees warmer than it was outside, even with air conditioning. My dad was at the wok station, my mom was wrapping dumplings, and I was at the Fryolator, dipping egg rolls and General Tso’s chicken into the oil, while my brother continually walked in, ripping sheets off his check pad and shouting out phone orders. He’d laid off all the high school kids weeks ago.

At one point my mom ran out of scallions for the crab rangoons, and I chopped several bunches of stalks for her. My dad stared at me intently. “What?” I asked him. He didn’t answer and went back to tossing beef and broccoli.

There were no unique dishes at Asia Palace, nothing that varied from the standard American Chinese fare that could be found in any one of the forty thousand mom-and-pop Chinese restaurants in the US—more than the number of McDonald’s, Burger Kings, KFCs, Pizza Huts, Domino’s, Taco Bells, and Wendy’s combined. Over the years I’d suggested refinements, more adventurous dishes, and my dad always told me, “Customers don’t want fancy. They want familiar. Americans like sweet and fried.” Although he was Korean, he never put any Korean food on the menu. “Too foreign for Missouri,” he said. So it was solely the classics: orange chicken, egg foo yung, sweet and sour pork, fried rice, lo mein, Mongolian beef, egg drop soup, kung pao chicken.

We closed the doors at nine and cleaned the kitchen for an hour before heading back to the house, which was in a subdivision called Northfield. The rambler, built in 1978, was the only home I’d ever known, and it was showing its age, badly in need of a reno, especially inside. It had four bedrooms and two baths, fourteen hundred square feet. The most unusual aspect of the property was a wide breezeway between the garage and the rest of the house, letting passersby see right through to the backyard. Because the roofline above it was unbroken, it looked like someone had knocked down the front and back walls in an impulsive fit. There was never much of a breeze through there, but Victor and I had taken to sitting on the concrete patio at the end of the passageway and drinking beers after service.

As usual, our parents had already gone straight to bed.

“Have they talked about what they’re going to do after?” I asked Victor.

“No. When have they ever talked?”

He told me about watching the Super Bowl in February with our dad, who normally didn’t follow football (or any other sport), but the Kansas City Chiefs had been playing and he’d felt obligated. At one point during the game, our dad had said to Victor, “You know, I regret I never went to any of your sporting events.” Victor had been on the track team in high school, despite not being much of an athlete. He’d run the steeplechase, a discipline no one else had wanted to enter. Yet he managed to make the podium a couple of times and took pride in that. Our parents, though, were always working during his meets and were never able to attend a single one. Asia Palace was open every day except Sundays, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

“And you know what I thought when he said that?” Victor asked me on the patio. “I thought, yeah, that would’ve been nice, but it would’ve been nicer if just for fucking once we’d had a real conversation.”

Maybe it was an Asian thing, having taciturn parents who barely spoke to their children except to berate or command, which had only made me more insolent and moodier as a teenager. (At least I knew that during this trip back home, our parents would not be bringing up the subject of my former lover, Cory Ellis—the reason for my exile to Philadelphia. They never willingly broached uncomfortable topics.) Unlike most other Asian parents, however, ours hadn’t pushed us about school or extracurricular activities—too exhausted to do anything other than go to work, church, and sleep. I’d been shocked by how much they’d aged in the two years I’d been away. They slumped now with geriatric defeat. They weren’t even in their late fifties yet.

Victor looked older too, beefier, sporting a new goatee and mullet. We were twins but had never resembled each other. We wouldn’t look alike for many years, until we became middle-aged, when both of us would get kind of fat.

He pulled another Bud Light from the cooler. We hated Bud Light, but there was a stack of extra cases of it in the restaurant stockroom.

“What about you?” I asked him. “What’re you thinking of doing after they close?”

“The fuck knows.”

Victor had always lived with our parents. As far as I knew, he’d never had a girlfriend (or boyfriend?). I was certain he was a virgin.

“You could go back to UCM,” I told him.

In contrast to me, he had been a decent student. After I’d left for Philly, he’d enrolled as a business major at the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg but dropped out before the end of his first semester. He’d been unable to keep up with his classes, overwhelmed with everything he needed to do at the restaurant—a situation he blamed, I’m sure, on me.

“What good would a degree do me?” he asked. “I don’t need a degree for the jobs waiting for me out there.”

“It might get you out of Warrensburg. You could get a job eventually in KC or St. Louis. Maybe Chicago.”

Our aunt Aeyoung, my father’s sister, lived in Albany Park in Chicago, which had once been a thriving Koreatown. The only vacations my brother and I ever took had been to visit her. Victor had loved Chicago.

“Like you got out?” he said to me. “The way things are going for you in Philly, you might have to come back, you know. Live at home again.”

“No fucking way. That’ll never happen,” I said.

“Yeah? I wouldn’t be so sure, Penny.”

**Our parents** had worked in food services at Osan Air Base, about forty miles south of Seoul, and had befriended the operations manager, Mike Weiss, who was a fellow Methodist. In 1993 Uncle Mike, as we came to call him, was transferred to Whiteman Air Force Base, home of the B-2 Stealth Bomber, eleven miles east of Warrensburg. He sponsored our parents’ immigration to Missouri and, several years later, before Victor and I were born, got them a small business loan to open Asia Palace.

I started working at the restaurant when I was seven. I folded menus and assembled takeout bags. I’d snap open a paper bag, put a piece of cut-up cardboard on the bottom, and insert the paper bag inside a plastic happy-face bag—repeating this fifty times a batch. I worked the counter and took phone orders and waited on tables. I made rice and wrapped wontons. I peeled prawns and potatoes and washed dishes, using a footstool to reach over the sink. When I was ten, my dad started letting me fry chicken wings. Often the smells and the heat and the aches from standing for so long made me wobble near collapse.

Gradually my dad let me cook more. One Saturday when I was fifteen, he had to be hospitalized with a burst appendix, a rarity at his age, and the entire day I did the bulk of the cooking without a hitch, without recipes (since there were none), just going by what I’d watched. Thereafter, he made me his sous chef, and he also put me in charge of the Sunday dinners that we ate at home.

I became a devotee of cooking shows, competition shows, shows about chefs. I began following David Chang, Roy Choi, Danny Bowien, Eddie Huang, Kristen Kish, Ed Lee, Joanne Chang, Niki Nakayama, and Peter Serpico—Asian American chefs who were trying to redefine the notion of what Asian and American cuisine meant. But the chef who intrigued me most was Bosse Park, who had gone from Noma to Bouley to Lespinasse before opening BoYo and winning a James Beard Award for Rising Star Chef of the Year. Besides his culinary skills, his manner attracted me—his humility, his introversion.

People routinely referred to his restaurant as an izakaya, but Bo thought of it as an atelier—a workshop, a place to experiment. Yes, he admitted in interviews, his childhood years in Tokyo had had a profound influence on him, inspiring him to present Japanese flavors in a new way. Yet he made no claims to authenticity, not identifying, for example, his raw diver scallops as hotategai, or his broiled baby eggplant as nasu dengaku, or his steamed egg custard as chawanmushi. He didn’t want to be limited by labels. He was a Korean man cooking nominally Japanese food in America with French techniques and Scandinavian sensibilities. He knew it’d be impossible to satisfy all the expectations of what he should produce and how, and he wasn’t interested in trying. He just wanted to be true to himself. He didn’t care about trying to reconcile his disparate parts (he despised the term *fusion*). He could live with his contradictions. They were, he said, what made him whole. I loved this about him—his refusal to be codified.

I yearned for that type of freedom in Warrensburg. As a child, I’d always been mortified when classmates came to the restaurant, which was dingy and sad, no decor save for the golden fortune cat in the corner with its waving paw. At school, I was told I had a stinky smell. Kids would sing a rhyme, “Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these,” and pull their eyes slanty. They’d call the restaurant and mimic an Asian accent and say, “Can I order dog?”

Then, beginning when I was fifteen, sixteen, something new started happening. Besides having to deal with drunk college kids, stoners, and tweakers at the counter, I had to contend with older men, white men. They would ask me out on dates. They would ask me if massages were available. They would ask me if I liked big men.

I first met Cory Ellis, though, not at Asia Palace but at a barbecue at Uncle Mike’s house. Cory was a ground crew specialist at the airfield, and he and Uncle Mike belonged to a mentoring group for enlisted airmen at Whiteman. I was seventeen at the time, he was twenty-three.

We small-talked for almost an hour. He was funny, kind of a wiseass, very good-looking. I reveled in the attention. I had been miserable and bored in high school. I had no friends. I’d hooked up with a classmate once and thought he’d be my boyfriend, but he told people I was a chink ho and joked I had a sideways coin slot for a vagina.

“So,” Cory said, “what do you do at Asia Palace?”

“Everything. I cook. I clean. I work the counter. Sometimes I give rubdowns with happy endings.”

He canted his head, calibrating what I might be doing. I smiled, and then he smiled.

“I might have to stop by, then,” he said.

He lived off-base in Knob Noster, but he started making the drive to Warrensburg once or twice a week to the restaurant, becoming a regular and one of our few eat-in customers. He usually ordered the #55 Pepper Steak with Onion and the #80 Bean Curd Home Style, as well as another set of dishes to go: the #4 Boneless Spare Ribs, the #46 Shrimp with Lobster Sauce, and the #26 Vegetable Chow Mein—a couple of dinners to heat up in the microwave on ensuing nights, he said.

If I wasn’t working front of the house, he’d peek into the kitchen and say, “Hi, Mrs. Chung. Hi, Mr. Chung. Hey, Penelope. How are you all?” After a month of this, I wrote down my phone number on his credit card receipt and, following some prolonged sessions of late-night texts, we met at a Super 8 motel in Sweet Springs, more than twenty-five miles away, where we were fairly certain no one we knew would see us.

**The final night,** instead of cleaning after we closed, we had a party. My brother and I got our dad a little drunk, then Victor booted up a karaoke app on his phone and connected it to a speaker, and my parents, who were members of the church choir and had nice voices, did duets of some of their favorite songs: “Living on a Prayer,” “I Wanna Dance with Somebody,” “Total Eclipse of the Heart.” As I watched them sing, it occurred to me that they must have been around Victor’s and my age when the songs were originally released—before they’d gotten married, before they’d decided to move to America, before they’d committed to opening a business together.

“You ever wish you’d never come here?” I asked my dad.

We were standing outside the restaurant, watching cars percuss past us on 50 Highway. I’d seen him go out, light a cigarette, and I’d joined him. I hadn’t known he’d started smoking again.

“You can never know about life,” he told me. “You can never guess what if.”

This was the most I’d ever heard him wax philosophical. I had thought he’d just grunt and that would be the end of the conversation. I supposed that, even for him, the occasion gave rise to reflection.

“Are you and Mom going to be okay?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

As it would turn out, the next few years wouldn’t be easy for them. They would work at the Dollar Tree distribution center and the Frito-Lay warehouse, and then my mother would be an egg packer at Rose Acre Farms and my farmer would be a machine operator at Stald Aluminum, until they finally made up with Uncle Mike and he was able to get them jobs—good jobs with good benefits—at the deli bakery on Whiteman, where they would finish out their working lives.

“Victor, though, I worry about,” my dad told me. “He bought a shotgun, you know.”

“What?”

“It’s under the counter. All year he doesn’t go anywhere. He doesn’t go to Walmart. He doesn’t go to Bi-Lo. He just stays home. He doesn’t say anything, but he’s scared.”

I had been scared too. As a woman, particularly an Asian woman, I always had my guard up when I walked alone on the street, especially at night, prepared to be harassed or attacked. But this was different. Beginning in March, I had not felt safe anywhere in public, in a constant state of anxiety, vague unease sometimes oscillating to terror. By the end of the summer, however, the feeling had started to dissipate, and I was surprised my brother was still so wary. (I didn’t foresee that the hate would persist and escalate.)

Victor would be all right. He’d get a job at the T-Mobile store in Warrensburg, then after seven months would abruptly leave for Albany Park, where he’d help my aunt run her shoe store, and then they’d both move to Niles, the newer K-town northwest of Chicago, and eventually he’d manage a very successful high-end Korean sauna. He’d also get married and have a daughter.

“Don’t you worry about me?” I asked my dad.

“No,” he said. “The way you flip the pan, your knife skills, they’re amazing. You’re already a very good cook, and I think you’ll become even better.”

“I’ve missed being in a kitchen.”

“Maybe soon you’ll be able to go back to your restaurant.”

“I have my doubts.”

In October, though, Bo would reconfigure BoYo into a virtual kitchen with an entirely new menu—his take on Korean comfort food dishes like bibimbap, bulgogi sliders, shrimp pancakes, kimchi fried rice, and fried chicken wings. He’d call the venture BoYoGo, and it’d be takeout and delivery only. He’d hire me back then, and in time we’d return to in-restaurant dining with a full staff.

“I would say sorry I can’t leave Asia Palace to you,” my dad said, “but I know you never want it.”

“A nice thought, though,” I said.

And maybe here my dad and I might have hugged, but of course we didn’t. He did, however, grunt audibly.

**Cory was married.** He confessed this to me in the motel, before anything happened. That was why he always ordered the three additional dishes to go from Asia Palace. When he got home, he would pretend he hadn’t eaten dinner already at the restaurant, had only gone there for takeout, and he would share the second meal with his wife. I don’t think I would have flirted with him if I’d known, I wouldn’t have ended up sitting on the bed with him in the Super 8. Yet I went ahead with it. I thought it’d be a one-night stand. I didn’t think we’d see each other for more than a year, and that I’d fall in love with him.

Before I left Philly to come back to Warrensburg, I had tried to reach him. I texted and then emailed, asking to meet, telling him that there were some things I thought I should say to him. He never responded.

I assumed he was still at Whiteman. I drove out to his house in Knob Noster but, watching from down the block, discovered another family was living there. I didn’t know how to find his current whereabouts. I couldn’t exactly ask Uncle Mike or my parents, and Victor wouldn’t have known. It turned out to be very easy. I signed up for one of those background-check websites for a five-day free trial. He was now working as a ramp agent for Southwest Airlines at Lambert Airport in St. Louis. His wife, or presumably his ex-wife, was now a nurse’s aide in Seattle.

I texted him again: “I know you’re in STL. I’d like to come talk. Ok?”

The next day, he replied, “Ok.”

I went to St. Louis on Sunday, when my parents would be going to church service and brunch. I got there just before the appointed time, one-thirty, parking in front of his apartment, which was on Jefferson Avenue in a neighborhood called McKinley Heights. He lived on the second floor of a brick building that housed a barber shop and a Nicaraguan restaurant. I waited. He had said he’d be coming off the early-morning shift and he’d meet me outside, but he was more than an hour late, and I thought he’d changed his mind. Finally, though, he rolled up in his truck and opened the door and slid out. He was wearing a pair of wraparound sunglasses, hiking boots, a grimy gray T-shirt, and black cargo shorts that came down past his knees. He was deeply tanned, but otherwise looked the same, down to his hair, still a military butch cut with a fade.

“I thought you were standing me up,” I said.

“Overtime.”

I had hoped we could go somewhere for coffee, maybe sit in a park, or he’d invite me into his apartment so we could talk privately and civilly, but apparently that was not going to happen. He stayed where he was, leaning against his truck. It appeared we were going to do this on the sidewalk.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I want to say I’m sorry,” I told him. “I don’t know why I did what I did. I think about it almost every day.”

“Here’s something you might not be contemplating. No one gives a shit. It doesn’t change anything, it doesn’t change what you did.”

In April of my senior year, Cory had broken it off with me. He stopped coming to Asia Palace, but one day I saw a takeout order for the #4 Boneless Spare Ribs, the #46 Shrimp with Lobster Sauce, and the #26 Vegetable Chow Mein. The ticket said “Amanda” would be picking up the order. Cory’s wife. I’d met her once—just before Cory dumped me. Uncle Mike had gotten her to join the church that spring, although Cory steadfastly refused to go. I never went either, except on Christmas and Easter, which was when I was introduced to her, during the egg hunt. “You know, your English is really excellent,” she had said to me. “You don’t sound Asian at all!”

I slipped a note to Amanda inside her takeout bag. I made sure she would see it, writing in big letters with a Sharpie on a cut-up piece of cardboard (on both sides), “Your husband is a cheater,” putting the note on top of the food. What I hadn’t expected was that, rather than confronting Cory, she’d drive right back to the restaurant and make a scene. “Who wrote this? Who’s Cory seeing? You? Tell me!” And then it’d all come out, in front of my parents and Victor, and everyone at the church would hear about it, and somehow they’d decide that I was the transgressor, that I’d ruined this promising young couple’s lives, and there’d be a rift between my parents and Uncle Mike, who’d thought of Cory as a son, that wouldn’t be repaired for years.

“You have a right to be angry,” I told Cory on the sidewalk. He’d quit the air force. He’d loved the air force, guiding B-2 Spirits loaded with bombs on the tarmac with his orange wands, saluting safe flight to the pilots.

“Do I?” he asked me. “You’ll allow me that? You’d give me that right?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

He pushed himself off his truck. “Don’t text me again.” He began to walk toward his apartment door.

“You weren’t completely innocent, you know.”

He laughed. “Oh, I see, you weren’t really looking for forgiveness. You’re looking to offload some blame.”

He was, admittedly, on to something. I had convinced myself that I wanted to see him to apologize, but I now recognized that hadn’t really been my objective. “Was it because I was underage, or Asian, or both?” I asked him.

“You always have to make everything about race, don’t you?”

A woman passed us on the sidewalk and gave Cory a wide berth.

“You weren’t underage,” he told me.

Legally, this was true. The age of consent was seventeen in Missouri. Yet why was I the one who’d mostly been held at fault? How the fuck had that happened? Because I’d made the first overture? Because I hadn’t been able to keep my mouth shut? Would it have been different if I hadn’t been Asian—*dirty knees, such a tease, what’s your fee*—and had been blonde, freckled, and Christian, like Amanda? I had been a kid. A stupid, immature, lonely kid who hadn’t known a thing about the world, much less about love. No one had forced Cory to go to Asia Palace, no one had made him book a room at the Super 8.

“Maybe technically you weren’t a pedophile,” I said to Cory, “but for sure you were a creep.”

“We’re done here,” he said.

**It was a week of hell.** We had to empty the fryers of oil, disassemble the griddle and stove, and degrease and scrub every surface in the kitchen, including the range hood, walls, ceiling, floor, and walk-in. Then we had to return the leased equipment and try to sell the equipment we owned. In the end, we hired an auctioneer to do a complete liquidation, relinquishing everything from the flat top with the refrigerated base, the ice machine, and the three-bay sink, to the hotel pans, colanders, knives, spatulas, rice cookers, and mop bucket, all for pennies on the dollar. We donated dry goods, like rice and cornstarch and white pepper, and sealed containers of condiments, like soy sauce and oyster sauce and chili oil, to a food rescue. But there was a lot of stuff no one wanted, even for free, not even other Chinese restaurants in the area, who said they already had a surplus: takeout boxes with wire handles, disposable chopsticks, egg roll glassine bags, thousands of packets of duck sauce and fortune cookies. We put them in the dumpster, along with the building signs. Finally the owner came by for the exit viewing. After doing a walk-through, he promised to return the security deposit within twenty-one days and took the keys.

We went home and showered and napped. I checked in for my flight back to Philly the next morning, and then went into the kitchen. I’d volunteered to make dinner, and my mother insisted on helping me, despite my protests. She was not well. Her legs, covered with varicose veins, were always hurting. She constantly wore knee-high compression socks. I had her sit on a stool, and she trimmed some green beans for me.

I was making a duck and prawn paella, with sides of fried pimientos and a salad. At BoYo, we had taken turns cooking what were called family meals—dinners for the entire restaurant staff that we’d eat communally before the doors opened. Nothing really fancy, but it had to be good. Most of my early meals—hanger steak with béarnaise sauce, tandoori chicken, pollock with capers and brown butter—were duly appreciated, but the real hits had been some of the more adventurous Chinese dishes I used to suggest to my dad: Sichuan pepper quail, Cantonese crispy pork belly, clay-pot tofu and oysters.

That wouldn’t have flown in the Chung household. We’d had an unspoken agreement. When we were at Asia Palace, we never had proper meals; we’d simply pick extras off dishes made for orders. On off-nights, the last thing we wanted to eat was Chinese food, or really any kind of Asian food. So for our Sunday dinners, I’d made a lot of Italian and Mexican and Indian and sometimes straight American food, pot roast with mashed potatoes becoming a family favorite.

I cubed duck breasts, then chopped artichoke hearts. As I was roasting red peppers, holding them with tongs over the burner, I realized my mom was crying.

“Oh, Mom,” I said.

“It’s fine. I’ll be fine,” she said, continuing to dice a tomato.

“You should let yourself grieve,” I told her. “A restaurant has a body and soul. It’s like losing a child.”

Not looking up from the cutting board, she said, “When you went to Philadelphia, I thought I lost you forever, Penny.”

“I embarrassed you,” I said. “I made you ashamed.”

“No. Only for a short time.”

“Am I a selfish person?” I asked my mom. “Do you think I’m a bad person?”

At last she looked at me. “You’re a good person, Penny.”

“If I hadn’t left, maybe the restaurant would have survived.”

“I don’t think so.”

She took the rice I had portioned out in a big bowl and walked over to the sink and began to wash and rinse it—de rigueur when making most types of rice, except when it came to bomba rice for paella, which needed to retain its outer coating of starch. I didn’t have the heart to tell her.

“I’m sorry for all those years I was such a brat,” I said to her. “I resented you and Dad. I didn’t know. I had no clue.”

She kept washing and rinsing the rice.

“Maybe I should stay,” I said. “Maybe I should cancel my flight.”

“Why?”

“To take care of you.”

The water was finally running clear off the rice, and she gave me the bowl. “There’s nothing for you here. Go live your life.”

Even when BoYo resumed full operation, BoYoGo wouldn’t be dismantled. It’d be too successful. Bo would set up a separate ghost kitchen at another location for the delivery service, and then he would decide to open a new fine-dining restaurant with Korean-influenced dishes called BoYoKo, and he’d make me its chef de cuisine. I look back at that period and marvel at my energy and passion, my ambition. It wouldn’t last forever. Eventually, the grind would get to me, and I’d quit the restaurant business and become a food writer.

I fried the duck until it was browned, then added the vegetables with some garlic until they were tender. I poured in chicken stock and let it bubble for half an hour. Then I stirred in the rice and saffron, brought it to a boil, and simmered it, undisturbed, for twenty minutes. I tasted the rice. Even rinsed, it wasn’t awful. I scattered prawns and peas on top of the rice, covered the skillet, and allowed them to steam. After five minutes, I turned off the heat, flipped the prawns, and draped a kitchen towel over the skillet, and let it rest.

I brought everything out to the dining table. My dad and mom bowed their heads for a silent prayer, and then I handed out serving spoons to my parents and brother. “Jal meoggo,” I said to them. It was one of few Korean phrases I knew. Eat well.