

## Ladies' Lunch

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Lauren exited the taxi at Hennessy Road, scanning the storefronts for number 182. It was bright out, blindingly so, and oppressively hot. Her cotton blouse clung to the small of her back. The street was crowded with neon signs promising foot rubs, Chinese herbs, Christian books, bicycling gear, facial peels and more. Everyone walked with such purpose, with urgency, in Causeway Bay at noon, vying for noodles or curry, a cell phone upgrade or designer sunglasses. The faster they got there, the more they could consume.

She spotted the building number across the street just above a home goods store. Crossing would be no easy feat between the tramcars streaming down the middle of the road, taxis jockeying for position, and throngs of people pushing past one another. She walked quickly, eyes darting about, pausing for a tramcar, before moving again. A trickle of sweat ran down her stomach.

She entered a dingy, cream-colored building, stopping to read the directory. Xie Fe, Floor 3. Punching the elevator button, she cursed Janie under her breath. Why did she always have to pick places that were so obscure? It would

have been so much easier, and cooler, to meet in one of the malls that were filled with restaurants. She entered the elevator alone but seconds later, a slew of people streamed in after her, herding her to the back of the car. After a rickety ascent, the elevator pinged, everyone spilling out into the small restaurant lobby.

“Lei ho ma?” the hostess said before escorting the others to their table.

Lauren stood alone, admiring the jade green walls and Chinese lanterns dangling from the ceiling. The restaurant was filled with locals. She eyed the crowd for signs of any Westerners. In the far corner sat a fair-haired man under a painting of an oversized, bright blue canary, the tree branches stretched to the ground under the weight of the mega-bird. Lauren cocked her head, smiling at the bird.

The elevator pinged again and Janie emerged, her frizzy blond hair flying every direction at once. She wore a stylish denim skirt and tan, spiky heels, probably Jimmy Choos, Lauren thought, wishing she’d worn something other than her simple black flats. But how Janie navigated the city streets in three-inch stilettos was beyond Lauren.

Janie air-kissed each cheek, squeezing Lauren’s shoulders for extra measure. “Good to see you,” she said.

The hostess seated them along the far wall next to a painting of a man in a yellow raincoat

seemingly missing his head. Lauren assessed the painting. It should have been disturbing but it was strangely comforting, the headless man preparing for the rainstorm.

“Something for drink?” the hostess asked.

“Jasmine tea, please,” Janie said.

“I’ll have the same,” Lauren said, regretting that this wouldn’t be a drinking lunch even though it was only Monday.

She pushed her long dark hair behind her ears to highlight her diamond-stud earrings. Robert had given them to her for her fortieth birthday, just before he told her they were moving overseas again. Their third posting in ten years. A shameless bribe but she loved them anyways.

Janie studied the menu while Lauren fiddled with hers, its soft, weathered paper full of items Lauren had never heard of: glass noodles with chicken in sesame sauce, deep-fried bean curd with chili paste, drunken chicken, li mian noodles. The hostess poured the tea. Lauren tasted hers, wondering again why Janie had invited her to lunch. They’d been friendly for a year or so, ever since their teenage sons began hanging out together, but they’d never socialized one on one before.

“Thanks for having Paul over on Saturday night,” Lauren said, blowing on the tea. “He loved your pancakes.”

“He had about ten of them,” Janie said. “I thought he might explode.”

“I know. He eats so much these days. I go through four gallons of milk a week.”

“He’s really grown this year,” Janie said.

“What is he now, six two?”

Lauren nodded, smiling proudly. Better to be tall, she thought.

“Niko looks like his younger brother when they’re together,” Janie said.

“He’ll grow, I’m sure,” Lauren said, though she doubted it. Janie stood five foot two and her husband, Antonio, maybe five foot nine, and the boys were already sixteen. The handwriting was on the wall.

A young man in a black Mandarin-collared jacket approached their table. “Cyrus,” read his nametag. “Are you ready to order?” he asked.

Lauren gestured for Janie to order for them both. Janie knew her food. She rattled off a number of enticing-sounding dishes, casually sipping her tea when she’d finished. Lauren shifted in her seat.

“So how was your weekend?” she asked.

“Good. We had dinner Friday night at Spiaggia in Stanley,” Janie said.

“I love that place.”

The waiter arrived, placing a cup of soup before them. Janie picked up her soup spoon, blowing on the hot liquid before slurping it into her mouth.

“How is it?” Lauren asked.

“Hot and sour but not too spicy,” Janie said. “Try it.”

Lauren wasn't big on spice, but she liked flavor. She inhaled steam as she leaned forward to take a spoonful. The thick brown liquid was tangy with a taste of ginger. Dried mushrooms and bamboo shoots circled about.

"Hmm," Lauren said, her eyes watering with the spice.

They finished their soup in silence.

Janie refilled their teacups. "I wanted to talk to you about the boys," she said.

"Okay," Lauren said.

"This is kind of awkward," Janie said.

Lauren put her spoon down, her senses now on high alert. "Go on," she said.

"The boys went to a party Saturday night at Harbor Hill – a girl's house from school, they said - and when they came home, they reeked of pot."

"Shh," Lauren said, looking side to side to see if anyone overhead.

Janie leaned in closer. "I took Niko aside and checked his pockets and found a pipe and a bag of weed."

Lauren sucked in her breath, her fingers touching her lips.

"I asked Niko about it, and he said it was Paul's."

Something caught in Lauren's throat. She coughed spastically, her throat constricting. Janie handed her a glass of water. She chugged it, mindful of the patrons looking her way.

"Are you okay?" Janie asked.

The room swayed, the headless man swooping towards them. Drug infractions in a foreign country! They could be shipped out on the next flight to America. What were Paul and Niko thinking? Lauren lifted her cup and tea sloshed out onto the table. She put it down, trying to figure a way out. The mega-bird across the room caught her eye. She leaned forward, hands gripping the edge of the table.

“Interesting that you say Paul’s smoking pot when the evidence is in Niko’s pockets. Maybe it’s Niko who has the problem,” Lauren whispered.

“I thought about that, believe me, and I’m not saying Niko’s innocent in all this. But I smelled his hair and his clothes, and he was clean but when I did the same with Paul,”

“You smelled my son’s hair?” Lauren asked, knocking over a cup with the back of her hand.

“Damnit,” she said as she sopped up the liquid with her napkin.

Cyrus hurried over.

“I need napkins and wine, white wine,” she said, flustered.

Though the restaurant was air-conditioned, Lauren fanned her face with the paper menu, her eyes canvassing the room.

“Are you alright?” Janie asked.

“No, I’m not alright,” Lauren hissed.

Cyrus returned with a plate of glass noodles, a fragrant aroma of garlic and sesame filling the air. Janie served Lauren and then herself.

Lauren picked up her chopsticks and tasted the noodles. Cold and slimy with a sweet, peanut flavor.

“Hmm,” she said, momentarily lost in the taste.

“I know this is sensitive,” Janie said.

Lauren raised her chopsticks menacingly in the air. “You don’t know anything,” she said.

Janie pushed her chair away from the table, preparing to stand.

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said, gesturing for Janie to pull her chair back in. “But you don’t. It’s completely different for you. It’s without consequence; just something to talk about casually over lunch.”

“That’s not fair,” Janie said, not moving an inch.

“It is fair. You’re thousands of miles away from your company, and Antonio’s like some fucking wizard over here. You can do anything. But I live in a glass house.”

Janie raised her eyebrows.

“I do. That’s what it’s like. Everyone knows my business. Everyone’s looking in, and that can be fatal.”

Janie scooted her chair forward. “Lauren,” she said.

“No, I’m serious. Fatal. As in no job, no home, no life!” Lauren said. “When you’re in the Navy this long, there’s no other road. You’re either in or you’re out, and if you’re out, something really bad happened. You really screwed up.

And everyone knows, and everyone talks about it.”

Cyrus set the wine and a bamboo basket on the table, removing the lid to reveal six dumplings.

“It’s xiaolongbao,” Janie said. “Soup-filled dumpling. You pick it up with your chopsticks, then put in on your spoon.” She demonstrated. “Then you carefully bite into it because it’s hot, and you suck out the liquid.” She slurped in the steamy juice. “Then you eat the dumpling. It’s pork.”

Lauren followed Janie’s lead, savoring the flavors. “Hmm.”

They polished off the dumplings before speaking again.

“You know, it’s like that for everyone here,” Janie said.

Lauren raised her eyebrows.

“We’re all living in glass houses. Maybe yours has bigger windows and a few more eyes on it, but in a city this small, everyone knows everyone’s business.”

Lauren sipped her wine, weighing her friend’s words.

“That’s why I wanted to tell you,” Janie said. “So we can figure out what to do about it before everyone’s talking about it and we do have a problem.”

Lauren nodded.

“And if you want to know the truth,” Janie said. “Antonio’s not really a wizard. He keeps

getting passed over for a promotion and is worried about keeping his job.”

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said. “I didn’t know.” She’d just assumed, what with their frequent vacations and Janie’s expensive shoe collection.

The waiter returned with steaming fish encrusted with salt and herbs. Janie dug straight into its center with her chopsticks and Lauren joined in, devouring it within minutes.

“Would you like any dessert?” Cyrus asked as he removed the fish carcass.

“No,” Lauren said. “I am stuffed.”

“We’re fine,” Janie said.

Lauren thought about it a minute, then raised her wine glass. Janie’s lips curved into the slightest of smiles, and she raised her teacup. They clinked them together and polished off the last of their drinks.

As they exited the building, Lauren hooked her arm with Janie’s and together, they walked down Hennessy Road.

*Note: The author submitted this story to Hong Kong University in 2011 as a candidate for a MFA in Creative Writing.*