

THE NIGHT

TABLE

A lengthy education in the century egg



Written and illustrated by Flo Leung

When I was six-ish, I became obsessed with Saturday morning Hasbro cartoons and Indiana Jones. While I imprinted on the fabulous mullets and sweet leggy dance moves of Jem and the Holograms, my dad affectionately gave me the more accurate, though far less glamorous, nickname of Short Round. It grew on me; *Temple of Doom*’s Shorty was, after all, brave and scrappy and had no problem calling out cheaters in a card game. Besides, like my adventurous namesake, I was about to make an important discovery of my own—that my parents were holding top secret snack meetings, after hours, in our very own kitchen.



One restless night, I woke to animated whispers and the surprising *tchhk-hiss* of a can opening. I followed the sounds down the dark hallway and watched as my mom and dad clinked glasses across our creaky kitchen table, then leaned over the small plate that sat between them, chopsticks in hand. I stepped into the room, imagining perhaps some hot potstickers or even—wildly—salty french fries might be the source of all that secret excitement.

This is what I saw instead: wedges of cold, inky century egg with its molten grey-green centre, dotted with toasted sesame oil, a messy rosette of sliced pickled ginger on the side. My dad offered me a single bite, a dark jellied sliver, just to taste. I edged closer and was taken aback; the smell was too ripe, too complicated and concentrated to easily enjoy. My mom, who I’d never seen drink anything other than room-temperature water or tea, poured a splash of frosty cream soda from a

bright pink can into a Chinese teacup and nudged it towards me, a sort of last-minute place setting at this strange night table.

I could tell from my parents’ expressions that this dish was meant to be something special, but I couldn’t quite translate what was in front of me into what I could understand as being delicious. For now, this moment remained private, their own secret chord. I sipped my cold soda and watched as they polished off the plate.

As I slipped back into bed, I thought about how seeing this side of my parents was both thrilling and confusing, like the dream when you suddenly realize there’s been an undiscovered room in the house the whole time.

My parents emigrated from Hong Kong to Toronto’s North York in the mid-’70s, the first of their families to work as artists and live overseas. They were frugal and mostly practical. They also didn’t seem to believe in minimalism. Mom was constantly rearranging souvenirs and trinkets, jade carvings, miniature clay teapots, decorative silk coasters, aesthetically pleasing fruit from that week’s grocery shop, into ever-changing still life arrangements all over our tiny suburban bungalow. Dad doted on his tank of ornamental goldfish, fawning over their luxurious butterfly tails as if they were miniature racehorses.

They embraced their Canadianness, even as they found ways to remain in touch with a more familiar, faraway home. In the evenings, we would click over from Must See TV to the Fairchild channel for Hong Kong news. Mom would watch her Chinese soap operas about empresses and warriors, and the occasional Cantopop concert featuring Andy Lau and Anita Mui. After dinner, Dad could usually be found in his armchair with a can of Labatt 50, working his way through a well-thumbed Tom Clancy novel (first *The Hunt for Red October*, then *Patriot Games*) with his orange-and-yellow English–Chinese dictionary perched on the armrest.

In the years that followed, as I could stay up ever later, there were more not-so-secret snacks to be shared—fluffy barbeque pork buns, crispy fried turnip cakes, fragrant soy sauce noodles. Somehow in our Don Mills kitchen, my parents had created their own version of Hong Kong’s late-night *siu yeh* tradition, a kind of culinary code switch that eased their occasional pangs of homesickness.

To me, those midnight dances to and from our oversized Harvest Gold fridge briefly transported my parents, like some wardrobe gateway to a shared Narnia of younger, hungrier, more carefree

versions of themselves. I might have tried harder to follow them through. Instead of a portal, I saw a crisper drawer of unknowable, if occasionally delicious, things: Ziploc bags filled with dried oysters and black sea moss, newspaper-wrapped salted duck eggs, herbal-soup-bound sticks and twigs, all precious little packages taped with notes in script I couldn’t read.

For a long time, that first unforgiving century egg was the mark of an invisible divide. It told me that while I might pull up a chair and eat at our special night table, I didn’t, and perhaps couldn’t, know everything about my parents after all.

A decade and a half passes; I somehow earn a degree and get the hang of living in a new city on my own. Post-student life in Montreal is a dream, but it isn’t quite home. I start to worry about how to be useful, and think about the type of work that can bring people together. I return to Toronto, find roommates, a decent spot in the west end; I decide that cooking school might be a good place to start.

That first semester, we wear our starched white jackets and learn to tie our neckerchiefs for our daily uniform checks. We are told that each of the one hundred crisp folds in our paper toques represents a technique to cook an egg. This is where we begin, making hollandaise, attempting omelets, and whipping sabayons. We are marked on how well we scramble and temper and poach. We go to demos with declarative names like The Fundamentals: Mother Sauces 101. Our lessons are technical and informative, and yet there are days I feel like I’m running through the rooms of a museum, getting quizzed about someone else’s past. I take the final exams, thinking that I’ll figure it out when I return in the fall. I pass every class and I don’t go back.

Instead, I start working in a kitchen downtown. For 12 hours a day, six days a week, I am surrounded by stainless steel and terrifically talented weirdos. I am reintroduced to salted black beans and ceramic jars of preserved mustard greens, no longer stashed in the crisper drawer of a suburban fridge. It is the early 2000s, so this restaurant’s tasting menu features courses of Braised Abalone and Pig’s Ear with Julienned Black Truffle Salad, followed by Tuna Carpaccio with Black Bean Sauce, Ginger Flower, and Lemongrass Tomato Water.

In my first week, from my junior spot pitting cherries and picking herbs, I watch the saucier at work. There is a too-quick-to-catch series of movements—a hot oiled pan, the flicked addition of finely minced aromatics, followed by a firework crackle of curry leaves. There is more butter, then

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crumbled, salted duck-egg yolks that froth and foam into rich golden lava. At the right moment, the fish cook plates a delicate portion of Alaskan king crab, and the salted egg sauce is painted over top. As servers line up along the pass, there’s a flurry of garnishes to finish the dish before it is swept through the swinging door into a room of linen and crystal. Here, I think, is a good place to learn for a while. This time, I stay.



Fall and winter come and go. I learn to make dainty quenelles of calamansi sorbet for the intermezzo course. Spring and summer are a blur; there are mountains of stone fruit to turn into preserves and vinegars, and I am entrusted with my station’s salad dressing recipe. Another winter passes, another spring.

There is a phone call for me on the restaurant line one day, just before service. Not long after, I find myself back in Don Mills. The house feels smaller since Mom has been on her own. A surgery date is scheduled. I take notes about her new medication, correct dosages, dates of follow-up appointments. I keep her company during her beloved soap operas as she recovers; I am embarrassed that my Cantonese remains so childish that I can’t fully understand what the characters say. There are thoughtful food drop-offs. I take up rearranging the most aesthetically pleasing fruit. We spend a lot of time sitting and sipping tea.

In the kitchen, the giant mustard fridge is long gone, though its shiny, energy-efficient replacement has all the ingredients for a comfort meal of simple steamed eggs, with Mom’s favourite additions. She lists off the measurements by heart: three large chicken eggs, an equal portion of warm water, one salted duck egg, one century egg, a pinch each of chicken bouillon powder (or “yellow chicken powder,” due to its brightly coloured can) and white pepper. I prepare the eggs under her direction; I dice and scatter the salted yolks, along with the sliced century egg, evenly around the shallow blue-and-white ceramic dish. I whisk the seasoned chicken eggs and water, then strain (“double strain for the smoothest texture!”) over everything. I set up the steamer and let it gently cook away. We sit at the still-creaky kitchen table and eat the dish, soft and soothing, a barely-there finish of light soy and toasted sesame oil, with plenty of plain white rice.

In the time since that memorable first encounter, I have learned more about the chemical process behind the century egg. Traditionally, a duck egg (though a chicken or quail egg may be used) is covered in an alkaline clay mixture

made of wood ash, salt, and calcium oxide. This increases the pH and sodium content of the egg, effectively curing it and making it safe for consumption weeks, even months, later, buried under its protective layer of soot and husks. I admit that this spooky goth alchemy remains no less mysterious in a real-life run-in: A once-yellow yolk is now a dark, muddy slate-green, the rest of the egg a gelatinous smoky amber. It’s comparable to the funk and complexity of a good blue cheese, and just as beloved by its believers.

I think about how many ways I’ve learned to cook an egg, and how far I still am from the one hundred crisp folds that once creased my paper toque. I think about how private an egg can be, and how learning to welcome that mystery may well be its own lesson.

I wonder if perhaps I’ve misread the century egg, believing its nature to be a defiant battle cry, a punk-inspired rail against convention. If this egg did have a lesson, it might, instead, teach me something about perspective. It is stubborn, but not because it is unchanging or unyielding. Its power lies in its gentle, protective warding—against the fickle outside world, against decay, and even, for a short spell, against time itself. Like memories of late-night fridge dances, the century egg patiently endures, transforming otherwise fleeting moments into something precious, something worth holding onto.

I am still with my mom in Don Mills, making our afternoon tea, when we receive another phone call. The tests look good. **S**

