

The Secret of the Mooncake

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When people read this story or tale, whatever they want to call it, I may have already met my death; if not, I must have disappeared and no one will be able to find me.

Chapter 1

Back in the 1970s, I was a baker in a small bakehouse. Sifting flour, mixing formulated eggs and water together, twiddling my thumbs while waiting for the dough to sour and baking it on a damn hot day was basically what I did every day. I didn't really like being a baker. The job was dull and repetitive, and my boss, Mr. Lee - a fat and bald middle-aged man - didn't treat me well. Yet, as an ordinary person, born into a poor family and who had quit school because of a lack of money, I did not have any choice. The only joy I had at work was that I could talk to different people at storefront when the boss was away, and I indeed met diverse people. A nagging mother with her son always bought one or two slices of bread when they walked past the bakehouse on the way to school on weekdays. "Did you bring your textbooks? Don't fight with your classmates like you did last week," the mother kept reminding her son. "All right, all right," the little boy only gave a perfunctory reply. An old couple bought bean buns for their grandchild after their morning stroll every day, but later, only the old man came by himself and I didn't dare to ask why. And a college girl in plain and simple clothes often bought bread for meals, which seemed to suggest that she didn't have much money.

"You've tasted all types of bread in our store, haven't you?" I said to her once.

"Eh, yes, I think," she smiled awkwardly. "All of them are delicious."

"However delicious they taste, bread isn't always enough for a meal. You should eat some rice and meat."

"I will. So nice of you, thank you." She grinned and I couldn't stop looking at her face because I noticed there was a triangle-shaped red birthmark on the left cheek.

"Without the birthmark, she would be a beauty," I thought, after she left.

This day was a little bit different, I did not make bread, but mooncakes instead. Yes, this day was Mid-Autumn Festival, the only day I could leave earlier. It was three o'clock already when I finished my work, much later than my expectation, so I rushed out of the bakehouse and hurried to the station for the train to my family's home, where I would enjoy my happiest holiday with my family. Even though it was a little bit late when I arrived home, my family was still waiting for me for the reunion dinner. "Daniel! Ah...," excitedly, Grandpa erupted into a cough, which broke his sentence. Then he continued, "we have waited for you for so long. Now, all are here!" "Welcome home! My son,"

Mom said with arms open. Touched, I got tears in my eyes.

Family is the most cherished thing on the earth. I couldn't remember who said this, but it was definitely right. We did not have much money, but my family was still full of love. Moon cast its light on all our faces, on which were smiles, and this moment was so warm. I thought to myself, I should work hard, at least for my family, so one day I could bring them happiness and pride.

Chapter 2

As each ordinary day went by, my life was just like the routine of the sun, going to work in the morning and getting off work at dusk. Half a year had passed when suddenly, another bakeshop opened, right opposite ours. The atmosphere became tense, since our boss was nervous, which made us nervous, too. Mr. Lee stayed at the bakehouse all the time and kept staring at the other side of the street. However, it turned out that my boss had worried too much. Nothing to be worried about and nothing to be afraid of, for the business of the competitor was bleak.

I was not surprised at all. I had tasted their bread once, and 'terrible' I would say. The bread had no butter fragrance nor appetizing exterior. What was even worse was that their bread was not soft, indicating the fermentation process didn't last long enough. How could they make such a stupid mistake? As if they didn't have any experience in baking.

But the boss of the opposite shop, a white, clean gentleman named Mr. Wong, did not seem worried about his business and stayed optimistic. He talked and laughed with everyone, even though they had never met before, and he always closed the shop at 6 pm every day, perfectly on time. Just sometimes, it seldom could be seen, he stood against the shop door and looked at the sky where only clouds could be seen, like he was feeling lonely. Maybe he really felt lonely and bored in the depth of his heart, since there was no Mrs. Wong.

Finding that few people were willing to buy the competitor's bread (almost all of them wanted to talk to Mr. Wong rather than really wanting bread), my boss felt relieved, even a little bit arrogant. "How stupid they were for daring to challenge me," my boss said in front of our staff, showing off. "I bet 100 dollars that their bake shop will not last more than 3 months!"

They did survive, however, for more than three months and the situation was changing. As another Mid-Autumn Festival approached, all bakeshops started to make mooncakes for sale, and the business on the other side of street picked up, boomed, and finally, soared. It seemed that all the changes were because of their mooncakes. At first, just several people bought their mooncakes with a 'have-a-try' attitude, but they found that the mooncakes tasted incredibly delicious. Then, they recommended the mooncake to their friends, family and colleagues. The fame of their special mooncake spread through the town like an epidemic, so quick and so strong that almost everyone in the town was 'infected'. People started to describe it with all commendatory terms, and some even said, "no words deserve to describe it; such a delicacy can come from nowhere but heaven." Later, all the mooncakes made every day were sold out way before they closed the door. So then a buy-one-only purchase restriction was implemented, but still, many people came for one mooncake and even queued up before their bake store opened. It seemed like the competitor's business was so brisk that they didn't care about profit any more, and they were closed every Sunday, which was

considered to be the best day for selling mooncakes.

Chapter 3

“Daniel, in the past few years, I’ve treated you as my brother.” Mr. Lee called me to his office and said this brazenly. “Here is a task for you. I want you to find out their mooncake recipe. You know whom I am talking about.”

“But... this seems immoral,” I hesitated.

“I don’t care about morality! Listen, if you fail, neither you nor I can survive any longer. I am sure you have noticed how bad our business is,” said Mr. Lee with resentment.

“All right, I will try,” I replied reluctantly.

The next day, I waited in line before their shop opened, bought one mooncake, and had a bite of it. Astonishing! Sweet but not greasy, it had a special fragrance, like sweet-scented Osmanthus¹ mixing with the gentle breeze. When it was inside your mouth, it melted and slid down your throat to the stomach, giving you the greatest pleasure. The only drawback was that it tasted like it contained tiny grit, but the “grit” also contributed to the special taste. I brooded for a while, but still could not figure out what they added to make this delicious mooncake.

The other day, I bought the second mooncake. This time, I refrained from eating it. Instead, I examined it first, and then bought all the possible ingredients to try making one on my own. For the whole afternoon, I tested at least twenty different combinations, but still could not work out the exact taste. Sometimes, my combinations were very close to theirs, but not exactly the same.

“Something important is missing,” I murmured.

But what was that? This was the key problem.

“What a pity, all the mooncakes are sold out. Your mooncakes are quite sought-after, Mr. Wong.” The day I had off, I went to chat with Mr. Wong, wearing casual dress and pretending to be an ordinary customer.

“Oh, sorry about that. You can leave your information, if you don’t mind. I can reserve one for you tomorrow,” Mr. Wong said courteously.

“No need, I don’t want to bother you, thank you,” I said. “Actually, I have tasted your mooncakes before. They’re marvelous, really, and differ from other mooncakes.”

“Thank you,” Mr. Wong seemed very happy. “You’ve over-praised me.”

¹ A species native to south China, whose flowers can be used to make tea, wine or sweet cake in Chinese cuisine. It is also closely associated with Mid-Autumn Festival in China as the occasion of its blossoming is matched with the festival.

“To be honest, I’m a journalist, you know, a journalist,” I repeated. “Writing something about food. I really want to take your mooncakes as the topic of my next article. Do you mind...” I lied, and tried to mask my tension.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m afraid not,” Mr. Wong said before I could finish my words. “You know, every successful food store has their unique recipe, which is a secret. And my secret...” he paused for a while, “should not be exposed to humans.”

“Humans?” I was confused.

“Ah! I mean ordinary people. Those who don’t have talent for baking. Not easy for them to master the skill,” Mr. Wong said, and added, “Yes, that’s what I mean.”

“That’s all right, thank you all the same, Mr. Wong.”

“Ordinary people? What does he mean by ordinary people?” On the way home I kept thinking.

Chapter 4

Curiosity aroused with Mr. Wong’s words rooted in my heart and started to grow, tormenting me. From that day on, I always peeked at the back of Mr. Wong’s bake store from the alley when I had time, because as I knew all the raw materials would be transported into the bake store through the backdoor. To find out the missing ingredient, the backdoor was of importance. It was locked all the time, except for when the deliveryman came with bags of flour and Mr. Wong opened the back door to pay. But there could not be any trick in the flour as it was the most common thing in a bakeshop. Once, when I was thinking about the explanation of the mooncake mystery, Mr. Wong showed up suddenly, and I immediately hid behind trees. Fortunately, Mr. Wong did not notice me and walked directly past, but I saw a plastic bag in his hand. “Could the contents in the plastic bag be the secret ingredient?” I wondered. It did not seem likely, as in the bags there were only lettuce and carrots. Nothing special - just vegetables. I was disappointed, once again.

The day indicating the task had failed finally came. I didn’t find out the recipe, and the business of our bakehouse was so bleak that running one more day meant losing more money. My boss decided to close down the bakehouse, on Sunday when the opposite shop was closed for rest. I could not recollect what Mr. Lee said on that day, or maybe he said nothing, but only gave us our last salary. I was the last one to leave the bakehouse. With complex emotions in my heart, standing in front of the bakehouse, I looked up at the signboard for a while.

It was not easy to find another job, especially for me.

“I’m wondering, whether you would like to work in my store,” a familiar voice said. “Mr. Journalist?” I knew I was blushing without a mirror, “Sorry, Mr. Wong, I just...Oh, forgive me please.”

“Forget it, boy. Sometimes, people have to do something they are reluctant to do, because of a command or a penalty,” said Mr. Wong, as if he could understand me.

I said nothing, but just stared at the ground.

“Come on, boy. I know you need a job, and I also need someone to help me,” he patted me on the shoulder like he trusted me.

I couldn't find a reason to reject him, so I nodded.

The next day I started to work at Mr. Wong's bake shop, doing roughly the same things as before except for the dough kneading of mooncakes, which was done by Mr. Wong himself in a small work room. What I needed to do was just mold the mooncakes.

“No one should enter the small work room in any circumstance.”

That was the first thing Mr. Wong told me when I stepped into the kitchen. As he told to every new employee. The small work room was located off the corner of the kitchen with space to accommodate only one person. Whenever Mr. Wong was not in it, it would be locked tightly by a door decorated with strange pattern.

The incredible delicious mooncake dough was made inside the small work cell, and without doubt, the secret of the mooncakes must lie inside it.

“But I'm not curious about it, not at all. It's just a recipe,” I said, although no one was near me.

Chapter 5

Another two years passed. To be honest, I was quite satisfied with my current situation. Mr. Wong treated me much better than Mr. Lee did. I got a promotion to become the assistant manager of the bakeshop, and my salary rose, allowing me to send more money to my family, which made them proud of me.

I also got more freedom. I got one day off every week and Mr. Wong didn't mind my talking to people at the storefront provided that I had finished my job, because he would also do so. The single old man, the nagging mother and her son still came regularly for bean buns and bread, but the college girl with the triangular birthmark on her face came here infrequently, so it seemed she was busy with her study. I sort of missed her. Apart from these people, I had also met more new customers, and some of them were from other towns. They told me many novelties, and I told them things happening in this town, histories and news. Conversations like these always made me happy; however, there were still some times that I could not find a customer to talk with, and then I would talk to Mr. Wong, although we had already talked many times.

“Tell me about your family, Daniel,” Mr. Wong asked me.

“Well, I have a big family. My Grandpa is a funny old man. He knows many stories, myths, fairy tales and horror stories. He's apt at telling stories. When he tells a story, his words bring us there...” I stopped for a while, and said, “wait, I remember I've already talked about this a few months ago.”

It's your turn to talk about something related to you."

He kept looking at the sky as usual when he had nothing to do, but said nothing.

"Come on! Tell me something. Don't keep looking at the sky. Nothing is up there," I said.

"Yes, something is up there," he disagreed.

"What? What's up there?" I looked up at the sky, seeing nothing but the sunset glow.

"Can't you see the sunset glow?" he asked.

"Yes, I can. So what? You can see this every day - as common as air."

"It has a meaning. Only smart guys can perceive it," he said, looking serious.

"What's that? Tell me, tell me," I begged.

He was silent for a minute, and said, "It's time to close the shop! Aha!" He laughed so loudly, while I looked like a fool. "Come on, help me close the shop. It's almost six."

Although I felt confused, I still had to help close the shop. I put away all the stuff after other people had left. And then said goodbye to Mr. Wong as he walked upstairs - he lived above the shop - before I pulled down the rolling door.

On the way to my dormitory, I turned right suddenly to an alley, stopped and carefully looked around. Finding no people around me, I took a small package wrapped in paper out of my knapsack. Unfolding it carefully, I smiled, the way an addicted smoker smiles when he lights a cigarette. It was a mooncake. The marvelous mooncake that kept convincing me it had magic.

I had stolen one every day when no one noticed, except for Sunday when no mooncakes were made. I bit into it and then closed my eyes, enjoying the pleasure it brought, and then I felt like I was flying.

Chapter 6

It would have been a nice Sunday if it had not rained so heavily and I had not received that telegram. "Grandpa seriously ill, lung cancer and terminal stage," said the telegram, "three months left at most." Every word was a thunderbolt hitting my heart. There was still a way to treat Grandpa, but that required money, lots of money - I knew my family could not afford that.

Outside it was still raining, even heavier, and the thunder became more frequent.

I knew no one could escape death. However, when it came to my grandfather, I was still saddened. I wished it were merely a nightmare, but the touch of the paper telegram kept reminding me it was not. I really wanted to find someone to talk to, to share my grief, and Mr. Wong came to my mind. It was Sunday, so he should have time.

When I arrived at the bakeshop, no one was there. I went upstairs and tried knocking at the door of Mr. Wong's bedroom, but no one answered and the door was tightly locked. Feeling disappointed, I sat down on the stairs, sighed and leaned against the door.

"Gee...," a weird sound arose.

Where was the sound from? I stood up and looked at the door, which seemed like a normal door. I groped for the door from the top to the bottom, and suddenly, I found - at the lower part, there was another door, which was as small as a book, painted in the same decorative pattern and hidden from sight. Curiosity motivated me to push the small door. It opened slowly as the "Gee" sound arose again. I looked into the room. It was almost the same as a normal room except for one weird thing: I could see the refracted light wavering on the floor as the rain fell! It meant the ceiling was all glass and it was transparent! Would a normal person design the room that way?

Then one thought flashed into my mind - the door to the small work room had the same decorative pattern!

I rushed downstairs into the kitchen and groped the bottom part of door of the small work room. As expected, there was a small door hidden, just like the one upstairs. I stretched my hand into the small work room through the hidden door, even though rationality told me I would not find anything. I didn't know why I still put my hand in, but I just did. I touched a piece of string suddenly - the thought that it was the right thing came to my mind, and then I dragged it, slightly first, a little bit more, then quickly pulled.

A small, old, black cowhide bag with a yellow circle on it came into view.

I stared at it while it lay on the floor, as if it was tempting me to open it. Intuition told me it was the vessel of the mooncake's secret.

Complex thoughts were floating in my head. I really wanted to know the secret, as the curiosity had already tormented me for a long time, a few years maybe. But stealing the recipe was a betrayal. If Mr. Wong found out, he would be furious. I was so lucky to meet Mr Wong, I could not...

"But it could save Grandpa, as long as I sold it, to a distant bakehouse!" As I changed my mind, guilt and hesitation faded away like they never existed.

I opened the bag, smelled it and the familiar fragrance of breeze and Osmanthus surged out. There it was, the secret! Some yellow-colored powder was inside the bag, and it must be the ingredient that was missing. I grabbed some powder, then mixed it with water, eggs, flour deftly. At dusk, a mooncake was made, then I ate it, and the marvelous taste filled my mouth, immersed my tongue, activated my every cell. This time, the mooncake tasted much, much better, probably because I had made it myself.

The minute hand moved a bit and the clock on the wall indicated it was a quarter past six.

Strangely, I started itching, right after the first bite. I could not help scratching my skin, face first, then neck and later, every inch of my skin. My head also hurt, ears stretched, eyes dazzled, and I teetered like I was drunk. Maybe I really was because I also saw my hands and arms shrink, as did my legs. The scene in my eyes reddened. Every piece of bone in my body felt fractured. “Ah!” I shouted out. It hurt! “Bang!” I fell down, and hit the floor heavily, then the mooncake rolled out from my hands, slowly rolled to the backdoor and stopped, wobbling, about to topple over.

A hand picked it up. It was Mr. Wong. My blood froze.

I could not recognize his expression, mad or smiling, I didn’t know, and I did not have vigor to guess, even to care. I used my last feeble strength to hold out my hand, begging for help. I was not sure whether it was still my hand, because it was short, white and furry.

The clock rang - it was six thirty.

That was the last thing I remembered before I fainted...

Chapter 7

What happened next was a little bit messy. Grandpa passed away, a fortnight after I was informed of his cancer, much faster than expected. In the last several minutes, he kept looking at the door, reluctant to close his eyes, and yearning for one last look at me, but I wasn’t there. “I was unconscious for fifteen days because of a serious car accident”, that was what I told my family afterward, but this was just a half-truth. My family said my absence might be the greatest regret of Grandpa’s life, but Grandma believed that Grandpa did not really leave this world, he was still alive, in a different way. She said his spirit was in a rabbit - a fat white-haired rabbit, because that rabbit appeared at the funeral, standing at the window, looking at Grandpa’s body, seeming to grieve for the whole night. And I was the only one who supported Grandma’s conviction, strongly.

Mr. Wong also left, the night after I woke up from a coma. Before he left, we talked for a long time. It was the first time he told me about himself, and it was also the last time. Below is his story; I tried to quote exactly what he said because you may not believe it if I write it in my own words.

I am not a human, a rabbit instead. I am not from any place on the earth, but from the moon. I lived on the moon for more than four thousand years, with the goddess of moon, Chang E. I served her, but I just needed to do some simple work - sweeping the floor, folding her clothes, cooking - things like that. Few things to do, actually. Most of the time, we played chess, made herbal medicine, walked around the moon and looked at the earth when we were bored. Everything was good. Although there was just a girl and a rabbit, we still felt satisfied with such a simple life.

Ten years ago, an astronaut called Neil Alden Armstrong came to our home. So many years we hadn’t seen a human. Both master and I were so excited that we hid behind a big rock and peeped at him. However, we were disappointed to see he was in a cumbersome space suit. I was so eager to see how a human looked - I hadn’t seen that for so long that I had already forgotten their faces. So I walked closer, without Chang E’s permission, rushed to a closer rock and hid, trying to get closer to the astronaut. Suddenly, he turned around. Although I hid immediately,

he still noticed that something white passed. He walked toward me step by step, closer and closer, and I hid behind the rock, not daring to breathe. Fortunately, his space suit beeped, warning him oxygen was running out, and he returned to the spaceship.

Although Armstrong didn't really see me, he still reported what he called a "White-Shadow" to NASA. Chang E got angry because my impetuous action endangered us. So she banished me to the earth, for a total of ten years. During these ten years, whenever the sun rose, I would be in human form, and whenever the night fell, I would reveal myself - a rabbit.

Before I left, she gave me this cowhide bag, through which I could grasp the moon dust across space and use it to make mooncakes. It would not run out of dust as the moon is incredibly large, even though I have already dug some more holes on the moon's surface in the last ten years. The mooncake made by the moon dust has magic. People who eat it will get addicted. However, this mooncake has a weakness - if someone eats this kind of mooncake for a consecutive seven days, he will become a rabbit every night from that day on, just like you. And there is no antidote.

Today is the last day of the banishment; I will depart at midnight, go back to the moon and will not return any more. And you, you silly lad! I cannot turn you back to a normal human, but I will leave this store and this cowhide bag to you - cos I don't need them anymore. You can continue running the bakehouse. Finally, as an old man, oh sorry, old rabbit, I would like to give you the last piece of advice: you better keep the transformation in you a secret because you will never know what others will do to you once they know you are not a normal human.

That's it. Good luck, lad!

After Mr. Wong had finished his story, he hugged me and I hugged him. Two rabbits hugging - that's quite weird. I will never forget that moment, because it was the last time I would ever see him.

Now, I am writing this story with my white short rabbit hands on another Mid-Autumn Festival. No reunion dinner, neither a family. When I raise my head, through the transparent ceiling, I can see the bright round moon in the black sky. Then I miss the old times when I was still a normal human, miss Mr. Wong who must be on the moon happily with *Chang E* now. I suddenly understand why there was no Mrs. Wong - who would like to marry a half-rabbit-half-human man? I can feel how Mr. Wong spent his every lonely night as a rabbit - probably just watching the moon all the night with homesickness and loneliness in his heart.

At times I wonder about this experience, especially when the moon is full. What have I learned? Well, I have indeed learned one thing, that is, whenever you find a new kind of delicious food, you should be alert, and should never, never eat it every day. You may think my story is all rubbish and you may say it is ridiculous, that it doesn't matter at all, but please, don't forget this: DO NOT EAT...

"Do you mind if I eat your carrot?" a voice interrupts my thinking, forcing me to stop writing.

Without waiting for my reply, a rabbit's hand has already taken a carrot from my plate.

"What?! You have already eaten five carrots. Aren't they enough?" I shout, surprised.

"It's Mid-Autumn Festival, Daniel. What does it matter if I eat more," she says.

Then she turns sideways, looking out the window and starts eating the carrot. The moon light suddenly becomes brighter and is cast on her face. Her face is so beautiful, and even more lovely with a patch of triangular red fur on the side of her face. I just cannot stop looking at her.

A scene comes to my mind: after graduating, she came to my baking store and said that she wanted to learn baking... I think I am luckier than Mr. Wong, because there is a girl who ate the seventh mooncake for me. Maybe she will become Mrs. Daniel someday.

“Hey, are you looking at me?” she turns and looks at me.

“No, no! Of course not! I am looking at the moon. The moon, you know? You have to appreciate the moon on Mid-Autumn Festival. It is a tradition. Look, how beautiful it is.” I know I am blushing, but luckily, my white fur conceals it.