



Campus Quarto

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Madeleine Redux

Running on empty, I stop by the gas station, but someone's already halted for me: one of my four roommates, shepherding egg tarts to all of us after spending Labor Day in Queens. There's a Chinese belief that hate is just about the most useless thing there is; my mother would always scold my younger sister and me for any hint of conflict when we were younger. So, yes, this gift resolved the new-roommate-nerve—we coexisted in silence, like quintuplet flames, with the understanding that the egg tart blurred our borders. We were now dependent, linked by a shared gift, so it didn't matter that we didn't know exactly where any of us had gone to school, or what we were interested in, or even our full names. In silence, we were eating in an unquestioned mutual support emptied of conflict, for now.

Splitting the perfect egg tart in half in front of a water-blurred window on Main Street, Flushing means propping the delicate puff pastry edge up with a fingernail, leaving crumbs on every surface it comes into contact with. Pulling apart the flaky crust, the delicate, sweet taste of the golden egg custard filling, hypnotic in its roundness, means being taken back to after-school fall commutes for students at the junction of the third busiest intersection in New York City, where an array of bus stations and subway entrances line each corner, steam rising from manholes between insistent traffic and pedestrians.

In one of the largest and fastest-growing Chinese enclaves, with NYC home to the largest ethnic Chinese population outside of Asia, egg tarts, or *dàn tǎ* in Mandarin, are a common sight on shiny bakery trays, outdoor stalls, and dim sum carts. Nabbing one means a refuge from autumn chills and spring drizzles; it means a wave of nostalgia for

the times when visits to Chinese bakeries were an exciting treat as a kid. Entering a Chinese bakery, you'll find that in addition to egg tarts, bakery cases hold milk buns with a copious variety of toppings including rousong dried pork, bright strips of egg, or sausage and scallions.

Popular sweet options include crumbly streusel pineapple buns, red bean paste buns, taro buns, and coconut buns filled with a salty-sweet cream of shortening and sugar. Plump sesame balls and chewy mochi adhere to the prized 'Q' texture prevalent in East Asian cuisines. Western-inspired creations are widespread and are typically presented in a separate bakery case housing colorful swiss rolls, napoleons, and mini cakes. For makeshift sandwiches, each milk bun is split with crispy fish filets or soulfully tasty char siu barbecue pork. Holiday specialties include dense mooncakes and whipped cream sponge cakes layered with fruit, and you can expect to-go drink pairings of bubble tea, dreamy soy milk, and piping-hot classic teas and coffee. Expect cash payment to be the most convenient option, as well as leaving with single-serving portable desserts and pastries less sweet than mainstream American tastes.

Some delectable hotspots for the Chinese egg custard tart include New Flushing Bakery and Taipan Bakery, where rows of trays showcase the origins of Portuguese pastéis de nata and English custard tarts by way of Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Varieties include the original bright yellow egg tart; shifting your gaze a little further down means coming across the patches of browned sugar signaling a brûléed Portuguese-inspired tart; the silken pearly surface of egg white tarts; tart crusts containing custard remixed with earthy matcha green tea or other flavors such as coconut, almond, strawberry, and papaya.

My sojourn with the egg tart is always brief, like a magic trick. Each tart is consumed in moments, oozing sublime yellow filling into a ribbed paper liner, buttery crust cracking to reveal a deceptively simple custard with the lightly sweetened dexterity of liquified sunshine. And

so it was such that my roommates had a good beginning, as whenever we walked through the cramped halls or sprawled on the dingy sofas or binged *Genshin Impact* on a regular-sized TV or murdered homework, the same molten crackle echoed around our dorms then and for semesters to come.

Touch During the Pandemic

I'm not a stranger to touch, but it's become a stranger to me—I feel if someone were to touch me on the shoulder to get my attention, or suddenly emerge behind the corner to wrap me in a hug, crystals faceted with tiny personal mirrors would penetrate each area of my body from within and bind me still. I rely on stuffed animals and the warmth of my comforter but the air is persistent, like tides on the shore, filling me with a sense of emptiness for most of the day.

The contact of heavy raindrops have become a reprieve. Without touch, I take more risks—an umbrella forgotten on a hook in my dorm, a raincoat left behind at home, folded in the bottom of a plastic bin. I become more reckless without touch, so reckless that I explain away the soaked hair and t-shirt as a warm shower simulation, a motivator to take a real shower as soon as I return, the cold air outside a conduit for developing inner strength. Touch is replaced by recklessness, a casual neglect of all the advice one's mother ever gave, such that my longing for touch overtakes all else.

In some ways, though, a lack of touch guarantees safety. The warmth of my bed becomes tempting and slows down my academic progress. The treats on my desk, gifts from the people and clubs I encountered in my first month on campus, coat my tongue in crumbly bits of chocolate and marshmallow crumbs, savory shards of chips, and pucker-worthy sour candy. Focusing on these sensations both distracts and centers me from everything else, everything worthy of focus in my life: real relationships, real good grades, real physical exercise, and real bondage to the ethereal nature of progress in life. Everything slows down,

drowned out by the warmth of my bed and clothing, everything else unremarkable save for the fabric touch that swallows me whole. I am unbothered by anything else, even time and schoolwork, indefinitely, like the myth of the snake that swallowed its own tail.

Stranger Danger

“Widen your stance!” The officer raises his voice at me at the Citizen’s Police Academy, whipping the sole of his boot at the arches of my feet, urging me to shift my weight. “Bend your knees.” In front of the class I raised my arms straight ahead, the orange plastic pistol firmly clutched in my right hand. Without asking, the officer swings my left hand forward and twists it down so that it wraps across the handle and lies diagonally across my right fingers. A group of approximately twelve students peer at me from three desks as I aim the pistol at Bob, a skin-colored mannequin in the room’s back corner.

For the past five weeks, in this one-credit internship for graduation requirements, we’ve learned how to suppress violence and save lives. In my dresser drawer in my dorm was a blue pouch with a Narcan dose meant to be sprayed up the nose of an unconscious person; I remember stopping pools of red dye from spilling out as we raced to bind dummy flesh with spools of bandages, hammering mannequins with CPR compressions, and watching videos of difficult encounters and police shoot-outs prefaced with mild content warnings from staff. The levels of force varying from mild to deadly radiated upward in green-to-red gradients on our handouts, and we wound through police HQ on a comprehensive tour, from the thousands of camera screens lining the dispatcher’s room to the million-dollar computer lab. Alternating between the HQ and the Student Union Ballroom, the booms of students whipping false batons into padding held by police echoed throughout the room before we practiced handcuffing and hauling each other off using physical leverage on the way to arrest processing.

It’s a largely physical intuition at play here at police HQ -- officers

transform my stance with efficient glancing touches too quick to notice. Physical maneuvering becomes essential as another man whips a baton at me in all directions and I raise my own to block each blow, which often slides off clumsily in my novicity. Videos of traffic stops, which are “wildly dangerous,” play, showing scenes of two officers wrestling with a man as his young daughter watches, traffic whipping past on all sides as their athletic bodies hurtle into the middle of the street. The officers retreat, but not before getting hit with shots from the criminal, who speeds off. Now, primary and secondary weapons would also be part of our education.

My classmate, another Chinese-American woman, says “pew” as she aims, which makes the room break out in laughter. She talks about biking to Police HQ using Stony Brook’s bikeshare, which I’ll be trying for sure next class. Last week we encountered a deer by the edge of Clara’s Woods in the early evening, which her mom says is good luck. We snapped quick shots of its silky tan outline. The next time I’d overshot my bus stop, I walked past a whole herd of deer, the young ones nibbling near the edge of the highway. Further down the road, I entered the woods ten feet down a marked trail to take photos of them, particularly a steady male with antlers who raised his head and watched me calmly, his body around which I’d sensed an aura of respect. Behind me was yet another Chinese American woman clicking pictures who gave me a nod of recognition and, as I retreated and walked north, raced past me on the next portion of my run.

On the bus my knee leans against my police classmate’s thigh as we sit in the shrunken soft brown seats, and I think this is because it’s been a month since I’ve seen my family and younger sister. It’s good to know there’s someone else I can relate to here, good to know the lessons have not only gone to waste on me. For example: to test for eye dominance, you point at the number twelve on a faraway clock and close your eyes one at a time—if the clock moves to the right upon closing your right eye, you’re right eye dominant. The officers’ voices

have etched themselves into my memory during our ride through the dark—“This is not a real gun. It’s plastic. I’ll try not to point it at you. We use the Glock 19, it’s more accurate, better for females – there’s less of a recoil. We’re shooting from here to twenty-five yards.” And the long gun, the Colt 69 – a plastic blue dummy with a black strap around the shoulder for us – was their secondary weapon as campus police, good for five to six hundred yards. Once a bullet gets out you can’t take it back, so always notice the backdrop. We rode together in the dark, speaking quietly about majors and big midterm assignments, the brief touch of my knee on her thigh’s center, tender as if I were still hovering over fake flesh trying to stem a puddle of artificial blood. Looking away, and back and again, the night watched me, littered with embers about to blow out.

Latitude & Longitude

“Feel the light descending onto your head. As the band of light passes through your shoulders and chest, it widens. As it continues to descend over your arms... become aware of any tingling... any tension you might be holding in these places. Continue noticing any sensations, no matter how small. Lower ribs, pelvis, upper thighs, calves. When you feel comfortable, slowly open your eyes and return your focus to the room. The next step is to journal about that exercise on page thirty-two of your workbook. What was it like paying attention to your body the last seven minutes?”

I’m sitting on the miniature white tiles of a locked single all-gender bathroom in the basement of my dorm, tuning into the Zoom video on the screen of my phone for Seeking Serenity. Despite the name’s vagueness, it always happens in the afternoon at 2 p.m.—a link that I picked up after registering with CAPS for the three-session workshop. Today, I’m looking for privacy, which is usually found in the coordinates of my dorm bed, but sometimes my roommates’ noise as they play video games and watch Netflix on their wide TV right outside my door

gets to me and I end up immersing myself into any atmosphere I am in. At the tolling of the hour, I log into health services and access the link. Just a short phone screening and I'm in and registered for the class. The coordinates of my desired and present destination are clear—the state of my existence represented by the exact nature of my crouch on the white, barren ground, toilet paper dispenser at eye-level even as I lower myself in the cleanest corner by the locked door. It's like being a child again—nothing to worry about except from regulating my emotional state with a soothing woman and the one other participant who has not already abandoned the class by its third and final session today. The screen is crisp as paper beneath the pads of my fingers; the instructor's verbal intonations as she asks us to reflect are ponderous and cool as ice. My body's textures are unlocked with her encouragement, the exact location of my presence in the world sharper than ever in this open technological space. Sterile serenity, an emotion easily transcribed into breathing, feels like moving beads on a bracelet, their small clinks of contact almost inaudible. 