

RETURN TO JULY

It was July. One of those nights when you can almost smell the heat. The moon was low enough to shine down on back alleys and shortcuts. I had been working at my dad’s ice cream shop that summer, but what started as long day shifts turned into evening and night shifts. Everyone wanted ice cream. This particular night, I finished work and headed home, with strict orders from my mom, sick in bed. This sweltering July night, my mother had a cold and wanted hot soup.

It was the night I took something that didn’t belong to me.

I was fifteen years old. I was well known and well liked. I had my own room in the only apartment my parents had ever shared. I had two younger sisters, and I was nice to them most of the time. I knew all my neighbors. I was the kid who shoveled sidewalk snow without any bribing. I visited old people in the neighborhood because I genuinely liked their company and their stories, not just because I wanted candy. I never got into any trouble outside the range of standard “kid stuff.” I had only been grounded once for what I still (to this day) consider nothing more than a big misunderstanding. I was as good a kid as parents could want.

Dad’s ice cream shop was four blocks away from our apartment. Four long blocks that took me twenty minutes most days, and fifteen if I hustled. Mom was a big fan of Liu’s China Garden, a small restaurant that we could see from our front stoop if the light was right and we squinted. We ate there at least twice a week. When we ate at the restaurant, I was encouraged to say “hello” and “thank you” in Chinese. These simple utterances routinely set Mr. Liu off in a flurry of sentences strung together with an almost overwhelming pace and volume. I never understood any of it, but the initial interaction usually ended with a cheerful pat on my back and an enthusiastic thumbs up to my parents.

That hot July night, Liu’s China Garden was empty. While Mr. Liu set off to get mom’s soup order together, I waited at the counter with a few sweaty, crumpled ones I’d gotten from dad’s tip jar. I watched the fortune cat with the big eyes on the shelf next to the register, waving in what seemed like perfect time to the faint sounds of Chinese opera coming from an old radio in Mr. Liu’s dark kitchen. I couldn’t stop looking at it, though I don’t know why I should care about a thing like that. He looked like some kind of cheap toy that my sisters might have enjoyed when they were younger. Before I could think about what I was doing, I picked up the cat, flicked the small power button under his paws to “off,” and put the motionless creature in my backpack. I placed the money on the counter and walked out. That was the last time I set foot in Liu’s China Garden, my family’s favorite nearby restaurant.

I have not been back to my old neighborhood in almost twenty years.

My father sold the ice cream shop after I graduated from college, and once all of the kids were out of our old apartment, my parents moved to a quieter suburb, to a house without stairs. Returning now is bittersweet. The side streets and shortcuts are mostly preserved, but now the four blocks from my old home to the old ice cream shop are punctuated by newer, cleaner apartment buildings full of younger, wealthier families.

It is another hot, sunny July day.

Standing in the spot where my front stoop used to be, I squint towards Liu’s China Garden, one of the few relics from my past that remains in the neighborhood. The restaurant has received a bit of a face-lift and has expanded to almost twice the size that I remember as a teen. The small “fortune cookies” neon that used to flicker nonstop is gone, replaced by a sign indicating that all major forms of credit cards are now accepted.

I set off towards the old ice cream shop, wondering if I can maintain my former pace. As I approach Liu’s China Garden, I see Mr. Liu turn his sign from closed to open. He holds the door for me and pats me on the back, smiling, as I unzip my bag.