

CONOR KELLEY

We No Deliver

Conor won honorable mention for “Franchise Mode” in the CU writing contest

I shifted from foot to foot, not knowing where to put my hands, examining the chalkboard on the wall in front of me. “LUNCH BUFFET \$5.95” were the only words on the board, written in a haphazard, slanting script. Stroking my beard, I read the words over and over again solemnly, pretending to be in the middle of a crucial decision regarding my meal. I wanted to ask Kim what a buffet was. However, I doubted I would be able to hold it together long enough to hear an answer. I presented my choice with an air of excited professionalism.

“I have decided that I will try your finest *lunch buffet* this afternoon,” I said much too loudly for this shoebox-sized Asian restaurant, pronouncing *lunch buffet* carefully and enthusiastically, as though it were a challenging foreign name. I was close to breaking into a smile. She wasn’t.

It was an Asian restaurant because although it claimed to serve “authentic Vietnamese cuisine,” it also offered calamari, orange chicken, barbecue ribs, and other items as Vietnamese as Uncle Sam. None of these were available for the lunch buffet, though. Nothing edible was. I glanced around the restaurant, but there were no other employees present to hear my schtick.

Kim was not amused. She never was. After moving to my apartment in the city the year before, I developed a pleasant rapport with local business owners I saw frequently, such as gas station attendants, liquor store owners, and fast food employees. Kim, the owner of this restaurant, continued to stonewall me. She was short, loud, and mean. I ate at her tiny restaurant at least twice a week, yet she refused to acknowledge me with more of a greeting than her standard “Hi, how you do, wha you li?”

Maybe she knew I was just coming back to see her daughter. *So what?*, I thought. *I’m still a paying customer. At least shoot me a courtesy laugh.*

*

At the end of a summer night a couple weeks after I moved to this city, I drunkenly called in a delivery order of spring rolls, barbecue ribs and a Coke to my apartment at two o’clock in the morning. That night, I told my friends I was celebrating my newfound freedom, but by the end of the night I was mourning another “it’s not you, it’s me.” It was never me. I craved the food that would satisfy my hunger and take my mind off of my latest disappointment.

When I pulled open the door, a beautiful Asian girl in a University of Illinois sweatshirt was standing in front of me holding a plastic bag full of food in white Styrofoam boxes and a 2-liter bottle of Coke. The food suddenly meant nothing to me. I no longer felt inebriated or hungry.

Once I convinced my mouth to form words, I apologized profusely for troubling her with my delivery, saying it was necessary because I was too drunk to walk anywhere and sick of cardboard pizza covered with detachable cheese. She explained that she was Hanh, Kim’s daughter, and she didn’t mind coming to my apartment. She smiled and our eyes met. She shyly glanced away, and something inside of me awoke.

I spent the next minute or two leaning against my doorframe trying not to sound stupid. “So, you wanna share this dinner with me?” I asked. Laughing, she told me that nobody eats dinner at two in the morning. I told her if she ate with me, she could call it whatever she wanted. She said maybe some other time; she had to be back to work. I didn’t have a clever answer, so I gave up. She glanced at the credit card receipt. “Goodnight, Ryan,” she said softly as she walked away, swinging her hips almost imperceptibly. It’s a good thing she didn’t turn around, because she would’ve seen me smiling like an idiot.

After watching her bright yellow Honda Civic drive off into the dark city, my stomach gurgled. As I ate my way through the family-sized meal, I wondered how she could be Kim’s daughter, and what she was doing in a city like this. Her mother was so stout and mean, and she was so lean and delicate. She spoke flawless English that landed softly in my ears. I replayed our conversation over and over again in my head while I ate. It was the greatest meal of my life. After that, I showed up at this “authentic Vietnamese restaurant” nearly twice a week, hoping to see Hanh again.

*

Kim and I stood in silence, facing each other. I wasn’t sure what she was thinking, because her face bore its standard look of mild irrita-

tion. After a couple seconds of stiff silence fit for a morgue, her face changed just a little. *Was that a smirk?* I wondered. I looked closer for verification of the look, but her eyes appeared tired and sad.

"Yeah okay, buffet fo you. I dish."

"What?" I said, looking at the plate she was holding.

"I dish! You wan litto evyting?"

This had never happened before. I was confused. Usually she just set out a plate and a silverware set and walked through the curtain that held the image of a Samurai into the back kitchen. Hold on a second. Samurais aren't Vietnamese.

"No, not everything," I said after the initial shock had worn off. She gave me a sideways look, as if to tell me to not push my luck. She proceeded to walk the buffet line with me, asking me which foods I wanted. Each time I said no to an entrée, she gave me a quick disapproving glance. Each time, I half-expected her to ask me why.

How would this awkward walk down the buffet line end? Would she bring the plate to a table for me? Would she tuck my napkin into my shirt? Set me up with her daughter? Kim cleared her throat, bringing me back from my amusing thought.

"Soup?" she asked. I shook my head no.

"Hee you go dan," she said, handing me my heaping plate of noodles, sauces and various colored chunks of meat.

"Thank you."

"Ry, you wan drink?" she asked.

"Yes, please." I responded.

I thought to myself, *did she just call me by my name?* Did she say *Ry* or *Ryan*? Could she have been saying "*Right*, you want a drink?" That didn't make any sense. "*Why* do you want a drink?" That's a strange question that would have required a lengthy answer.

Kim brought my drink from the soda fountain behind the counter and set it down in front of me. I gave her the no-teeth smile, the one reserved for situations of forced civility. I tasted my drink; apparently, she picked Coke. *Good call, Kim*, I thought. She quickly walked through the Vietnamese Samurai curtain into the kitchen, and I did not see her for the remainder of my meal.

I stayed a few minutes after I had finished eating, drinking my watered-down Coke, pretending to be casual while glancing around for Hanh. I wondered when I would talk to her again. I fantasized about her walking through the curtain and sitting down across the table from me, telling me she can't stop thinking about me either.

*

Two nights ago, I came in to the restaurant with a friend for dinner. She was my female friend, and far from a Girlfriend. Halfway through our kabob appetizer, Hanh and her mother stormed past our table and through the front door, yelling at each other in what I could only as-

sume was Vietnamese. As she finished the conversation with something emphatic, Hanh turned her head sharply back to the restaurant.

We caught eyes for a moment, and she smiled. I shyly glanced away, at my friend, and back to Hanh. Her smile faded. She said something gravely to Kim, something that visibly shocked her, and got in that yellow Civic. Hanh threw something out of the car window onto the curb and screeched off.

That night, I persuaded my dinner partner to eat slowly, just in case Hanh would return. Kim must have asked us ten times if we would like anything else before I paid that bill. I finally surrendered as the closing hour approached, and walked out in silence as my friend lectured me on the possible benefits of a change of scenery.

*

Giving up for the day, I left the usual eight dollars on the table and walked through the restaurant. I paused briefly when I heard something that sounded like sobbing. As I stopped, so did the sound. I shrugged and strolled through the screen door onto the street. The screen door always amused me; I'd never eaten in a restaurant with a residential screen door before I came to this town. What was the doggie door for?

I stepped through the door back into the late summer dusk. This sobering time of the day always put me in a contemplative mood. My eyes glazed over as I stared in the direction of the setting sun. The clouds were lit up pink and blue like giant wads of cotton candy. I focused my attention on the street in front of me. I was paralyzed by what I saw.

The yellow Civic wasn't there; in its place an old black Pontiac that I didn't recognize. I glanced back at the restaurant. There was a new sign that said they no longer delivered, and I knew she was gone.

The sun set and the world darkened around me as I stared at that sign. The waning orange sunlight highlighted the faded tan of the old downtown buildings, and I wondered why the most beautiful part of the day was the sun's funeral procession. I took a deep breath and exhaled loudly through my nose. I kicked an unmarked envelope off the curb into the gutter and crossed into the shadows.