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# *Ba Jiao*

By Jasmine Lee

*After: Omakase - Weike Wang & The Thing Around Your Neck - Chimamanda Adichie*

*Content Warning: discrimination, sexual coercion, abuse*

Thank you Mama, the little girl squealed when her mother set dinner down onto the table, immediately pushing her face into the steam rising from the bowls. From her mouth erupted a constant string of questions: what's this what's this what's this what's this wha—

Hush, her mother scolded, gently pushing the girl's head away from her food before sitting down next to her. Are you ready to say your prayers?

Yes, the girl shrieked, clapping her hands together and squeezing her eyes shut. Dear Mister Kitchen God, thank you for... for... blessing this table... and for helping Mama cook food! Thank you! After this exclamation the little girl snatched up her fork and immediately shoveled a monstrous bite into her tiny mouth, nodding enthusiastically to her mother between swallows. Mama this is so goo—

Suddenly the girl's teeth clamped down on something hard and a horrible taste immediately flooded her tastebuds. Bone? No, bone doesn't taste like... this! Her spoon fell out of her hand and into the bowl with a clatter as she spat out everything into her mouth with a wail. Mama what was that!!! Mama it tastes so BAD!

Her mother could only chuckle softly as her little girl hopped out of her chair and into her lap, offering up a corner of her apron for her to dry her tears with. Oh, my dramatic girl, she murmured in between head kisses. Watch what you are eating, ah? Look here. She pulled the girl's bowl towards them and fished out the horrible-tasting object with her spoon, holding it up for her to see. This is called ba jiao. "Eight horns". It is a spice that makes food taste good, but you cannot eat it by itself. It tastes really bitter, right? She waited until the girl stopped crying to repeat the Chinese word for "bitter" with her—ku. It sounds like "cry", the little girl giggled between snuffles, and her mother nodded. Yes, she affirmed, but

the tone is different. This ku also means “painful”. Like work, school, even love...

Love is bitter, the little girl would remember years after this ba jiao incident and years after she outgrew her girlhood. Love is bitter, and sometimes the best moments come disguised as painful packages.

Unlike addition... The old teacher at the front of the classroom droned in tune with the air conditioning unit. ...Multiplication is where you take a number and add it together a number of times. He moved to scrawl an almost-illegible equation onto the board. Four times two.

EIGHT! He didn't even ask for the answer, but something inside her compelled her to screech it out anyways. Eight is a lucky number. Ba jiao.

Her cheeks radiated red as the entire class craned their necks to ogle at her, and time slowed to a crawl as her teacher merely stared at her, expressionless, before nodding slightly and turning back to his lesson. That familiar bitter taste filled her mouth again, but there was nothing in her mouth. What was hard to swallow this time was not spice, but shame.

Listen to that nerd scream, she heard someone mutter to his friend faintly behind her back, snickers erupting after. I'm surprised she can even see the board with those eyes of hers. Her entire face was burning now, and her eyes kept sneaking glances at the clock on the wall.

Tick. Tick. The minutes couldn't go by fast enough. She looked away and then looked again and swore the second hand was stuck on eight. Eight. Eight.

Finally, finally, it was time to leave, and the girl had never flown out of her seat as fast as she did in that moment. She rushed to the bathroom and locked herself into a stall, hanging her head above the disgusting toilet bowl in hopes of hacking that bitterness away. Tears stung the corners of her eyes and bore into her cheeks as she kept coughing, but nothing came out of her. After some time she admitted defeat, collapsing onto her knees as sobs wracked her body. The taste of the ba jiao nauseated her to the point of handicap, yet it seemed to plague her at the worst of times. Eight may not be such a lucky number after all.

Her path to freedom behind the bathroom door was blocked by a gangly brunet, a nightmarish smirk spread across his pale face. You know, I think you're cute for a chink. So nonchalant, as if such slurs were a part of his everyday speech. Before she could realize she was angry, he jabbed a note into her chest and stalked off.

It fell onto the ground by her feet, and she couldn't help but spare it a tiny glance before smashing

it into the tile and leaving for home.

A phone number, within it nestled three perfect eights.

For years down the line that phone number was etched into the dark crevices of her mind. Within those years that gangly brunet slowly cleaned up his act, dropping the language and picking up etiquette, class, and, as hard as it was for her to admit, charm. No longer were they naïve children, but personable young adults on their way to post-secondary education. No longer was the girl a girl on the outside, but a full-figured, sharp-tongued woman. A constant voice inside her head, however, accompanied the bitterness that periodically emerged from her throat, telling her on the inside that she still had quite a lot to learn.

It was during this time of confusion that she began to regard the gangly brunet in a different light. Now that he was somewhat likable enough to approach, the phone number with the three perfect eights called to her, and his first greeting took her aback—nowhere had she ever heard a man with a voice so soft, unsure, so unlike the malicious youth she knew him so well as.

Hello, she spoke. You were the boy who bullied me in grade school.

His laughter aroused her and disgusted her all at once. Where did the humor lie in that singular sentence she spoke? Suddenly she felt an overwhelming urge to hang up on him, not give him another minute of her time, but the everlasting voice in her head commanded her otherwise.

And so she stayed. She listened to him introduce himself, entranced by him with the help of her own post-adolescent desperation. Somehow between their primary school time and then they had grown into similar interests, lifestyles, and aligned more along with each other than she ever had with anyone else. Perhaps, she thought, things had changed. This could be good.

For once in her life, the taste in her mouth was not bitter, but sweet.

Who is this RAT inside my home! Her mother groaned when the woman walked through the door, arm-in-arm with the gangly brunet with the perfect-eight phone number. Despite her exclamation she moved to embrace her daughter warmly, giving her man a playful swat on the thigh with the back of her spatula. Dinner is almost ready. Make sure your hands are washed. She waited until he obliged and pulled her daughter aside, speaking to her in the Mandarin they had grown to affectionately call their “secret code”. Is he one of... those white boys?

The woman's first instinct was to recoil in shock, but she stayed in place knowing her man's eyes were most likely on them talking. Her second instinct was calmer, understanding that no matter how friendly or good a white man was in word, his true colors were found in the unspoken, his actions. It's okay, Ma, the woman assured, patting her mother's arm gently with a smile. He's different. You already like him enough, right?

I am your mother, she responded airily. I do not like people as much as you think I do.

They shared a laugh and the woman helped her mother move dinner onto the table, not noticing the small black fragments nestled between the pieces of braised pork.

Perhaps she should have known better. Perhaps she shouldn't have told her mother that everything with her man would be okay, because the way he wrinkled his nose at the ba jiao she didn't see in the dish triggered that bitter taste even before she took her first bite. As guilty as she felt, she couldn't make eye contact with her poor mother across the table, trying her damn hardest to keep a cheery smile on her face.

Is everything alright?

What... the man scooped out a ba jiao with his spoon, narrowing his eyes at it as if it were poisonous. What the hell is this?

Before the woman could chastise him for his language, his straightforwardness, her mother cleared her throat softly. This is called ba jiao, she nodded to him. It means "eight horns". A spice. We put it in many of our dishes.

Despite the woman's mother graciously offering her culture to him, the man was not thankful. His face remained twisted in disgust, his eyes fixated on the single bit of spice in the middle of his spoon. It smells weird. Why do you people put gross stuff like this in your food and call it "spices" like that helps?

This manner of speech, the woman would grow to understand, was what Americans described as "two-faced".

Neither the woman nor her mother had a plausible answer for his outburst, and the man treated their silence as a smack on the palm with no other punishment. Dinner was tense for the rest of that evening, and somehow the man flipped from insulting to charismatic faster than the woman could blink. As he babbled on and on about himself she snuck occasional glances at her mother, who was listening intently, but whose offense was nestled between the wrinkles on the outer corners of her eyes. The woman tried her best to play along with her boyfriend's antics long after the food was cleared off the table, but

the bitterness inside her stayed. As much as she hated to admit it, she found comfort in imagining him not being there.

He ended up overstaying his welcome. The woman had to all but physically shoo him out the door. He bade her and her mother goodbye too many times, and when the door finally shut the silence inside the house was embarrassingly relieving. The chance to apologize to her mother came, but the emotion in her chest dissolved quietly when her mother stopped her with only a look of sadness. The moment went away as she silently padded to her room, and the rift that opened between them both sliced a gash in her heart deeper than any resentment she had for that gangly brunet she thought she knew so well.

As time ticked by and the woman faced post-secondary life head-on, the arguments became so common she often wondered why she remained in his space in the first place. Time after time he would degrade her right to the cusp of physical violence, and time after time she would beg for his forgiveness like she was nothing but a lowly dog. Her mother's guidance became annoying gossip that she wrongly tuned out, almost against her own will.

There were still moments, however, that did not taste bitter.

What she could recall the clearest were the flowers. Flowers by the dozens. They would wait for her to awaken in the early mornings, delicately laid by the foot of her bed, or greet her at the door after long days of work. Her man would buy blooms of all colors, bouquets so lush they were almost nauseating to smell, all for her, and she would fall in love with him all over again.

The rose looks fair, but fairer it we deem / For that sweet odour which doth in it live.

Somewhere along the line she got lost within the roses, and the more his she became, the less her she was to herself.

Over time the flowers began to wilt. The sweetness in her mouth faded back to that familiar bitterness she had grown to tolerate. He became comfortable, too comfortable, and fell back into his old habits of evil. This evil, however, brought upon a new level of depth: self-satisfaction.

The woman was not aware of the concept of "makeup sex" until he came along, and soon knew all the ins and outs of it. Makeup sex was not a term to describe casual arguments, but ones that warranted violence, torrents of emotion—ones that could only be resolved with pleasure. As troubled and dark her man was at times, his lovemaking brushed over all his flaws like thin coats of paint. My little China doll, he

would grunt into her ear, and she would involuntarily shudder as he used her.

Somewhere in time, she realized one day after this “makeup sex” happened, he had stopped giving but kept taking. He had worn her down like a wood carving, shaping her into the woman he wished she was, manipulating her to love what she hated most about him. Somewhere in time she forgot what sweetness tasted like, welcoming the bitterness like it was her oldest friend. How sorry she felt for herself when her reflection in the bathroom mirror caught her eye—sallow skin, sunken eyes, permanent frown. Where was that bright little girl her mother used to dote on?

Perhaps she died along with that sweetness she yearned for so.

You’re my perfect little lotus, the man crooned to her after another night of conquest, and the sleeping peace in her abdomen suddenly awoke into something like disgust. Her body stiffened when his arm snaked around her waist, refusing to soften when he pulled her in and nuzzled the crook of her neck. Only when he relaxed into immediate sleep did she realize she was trapped in his embrace.

No, she seethed at him beneath her skin, the feeling in her belly growing horns and expanding. I am ba jiao. Sharp. Earthly. Bitter. You do not know me as much as you think you do. You do not understand me at all.

Enough.

She wrenched her left side out from under his body, scoffing when his only reaction was rolling away from her with a grunt. She swung herself out from the bed and hastily gathered everything she could fit in the biggest duffle bag she owned. Clothes, toiletries, pictures of herself. When nothing else could be stuffed inside the bag she heaved it over her shoulder and slipped out of the room without a second glance back.

The walk across the house to the front door felt like an eternity; every step seemed to root her firmly into the ground where she stood. Finally, finally, she reached the kitchen, and on full autopilot she grabbed the jar of ba jiao she stowed away in the back of the spice cabinet and spilled its contents across the room. Counters, the island, the stove, the floor, even the sink, all covered with the thing he hated the most, the thing she hated the most. Once the jar was empty she tossed it onto the floor along with the ba jiao, not caring that the glass shards bit and tore at her heels.

For the first time in her life, she discovered as she started her car and drove off into the night, there was no taste in her mouth at all.

A few faint voices chattered away on the radio, gossiping about drugs or men or both. She paid them no mind, paid nothing any mind, and just thought about driving as far away from the man she thought she loved as possible.

When the woman moved to shift gears, her hand brushed against something plastic, the crinkly noise snapping her out of her haze. A fortune cookie, perhaps weeks old, sat by her stick, and she pulled off to the side of the highway to open it. The first bite she took was so heavenly the fortune inside fell into her lap, ignored. She savored the sweetness of the cookie, watching the occasional car disturb the ambience outside her car window. Finally she looked down at the fortune in her lap, askew just enough for her to not be able to read, and decided right then and there to never know what it said.

Fortune and wrapper flew out the window at 100 miles per hour as she raced down the highway once more, hair streaming away from her face by the wind. The litter flew through the night and found refuge in a dead bush, and if one were to stop and inspect the fortune, they'd read the lucky number on the back of the slip first.

Three perfect eights.

