

Māmā wakes up every morning at four.

I know it's time when the blankets peel themselves back and I hear her feet find her slippers. Morning silence is heckled first by the soft sounds of her footsteps shuffling across the floor, then the buzzing of our fluorescent bathroom light. I stay sheltered under the dark warmth of the blankets until I hear the light switch click off and the bedroom door creak open.

Light floods the bedroom and then it is gone, reduced to a sliver of gold cutting between the floor and the exit.

I rub the sleep from my eyes and stumble into the bathroom, stepping on the pink step stool to reach the sink. By the time I finish washing my face, I am running to find her, hoping I haven't missed it.

"Māmā!" She smiles and waves me over with hands eternally coated with a layer of flour.

"*Zǎo ān* Emi." I grin and run over to take my place beside her, on my toes, eyes just hovering over the counter. She'd just started, dusting flour atop the spotless workspace and setting newborn dough on the snowy landscape. Her hands find the pillowy mound and work at it delicately,

"Gently, it's just a baby now." She lowers the dough into a bowl, pats the top, and glances down at me. "Now we give it a blanket," she says, winking. I lay the damp towel on the dough gingerly, afraid to crush its smooth surface. I can feel her eyes tracing my motions, steadying my hands. Once I finish, she lets out a comical sigh of relief,

"And now, we wait."

She scoops me up into her arms and I giggle as she messes my hair with flour, "Want to watch TV with Māmā?" And I lay my head against her chest, laughter subsiding into sleepiness as I fall into the rhythm of her breathing. I hear the click of the television and the low whine as the channel loads. I twist my body against her shoulder; the lull of her heartbeat is pierced by heated voices, the snapping of cameras, panic.

"Hundreds infected... the spread... sick... China... *virus*"

My eyes flutter open as Māmā sets me down next to her without looking. I see her eyes glass over with the glare of the television screen, and I look down to see her hands fidgeting. She stares at the screen but she isn't watching.

"Māmā?" I tug at her sleeve, afraid. "Māmā?" Her head snaps toward me and her eyes find mine. Immediately, my hands tighten into balls and my knees lock together. Her eyes say something unmistakable— fear. But she shakes it off, switches the channel, and sits me in her lap. She smooths my hair with one hand, but the other is occupied by her phone. I twist myself around to look at her, "Mā—" The timer rings.

"Let's go check okay, Emi?" I nod and rush over to the counter, all worry washed away by anticipation to check the dough. Māmā walks, and peels back the towel to reveal a mound that is twice as big as before. My eyes widen,

"Baby?" I ask with wonder.

"All grown up" she says with a smile, and scoops it out of the bowl. "We need to give it a massage, do you want to try Emi?" she lifts me up, "*Shì shìkàn*." I ball up my hand and bring it down with a soft thud. "Wah, my girl is so strong!" she laughs, setting me down. I glow with pride, and watch intently as she kneads the rest of the dough. Soon, little disks are formed and she retrieves meat from the fridge. Like magic, she pinches pockets of meat into swirling mountain tops and each of them are set aside to be steamed. She lets me make one too, but it turns into a messy dome in my hands, with meat spilling out of small cavities. She puts it into the bamboo steamer anyway,

"It's special."

When they're done, she uncovers the lid and my eyes light up. Clouds of steam rise in an endless spiral, and I breathe in the sweet smell of pork buns. The baozi have perked up, and my mouth waters imagining the light and airy skin that encases golden sauce and glistening meat. Māmā rips one open, and it exhales steam, breathing. She is magic, I think, to be able to knead life into food like this. Each one tastes like home, and I know each customer feels the same.

Irene brings two boxes to her PTA meetings every other Tuesday, Nathan buys three for breakfast before his classes. Every day, regulars and newcomers of all kinds push through the door with a chime, then leave with full stomachs or ansty anticipation to dig into their box. But as the days go on, the door chimes less.

Māmā still wakes up at four every morning, repeating the process, kneading and pinching and steaming. The television is always on, she doesn't take her eyes off it. She closes the blinds early and makes less buns. When I ask why Nathan hasn't come around, she smooths my head with a smile,

"He is busy, school is hard work Emi." I lean my head against her stomach and bunch my hands up in her apron.

Māmā works hard too.

One day, the bell chimes and a newcomer stormed in. Relieved to have business, Māmā smiles, "Welcome! How can I-"

He spits on the floor and screams. I do not understand the words, only the look on Māmā's face as she sweeps me behind her, backing away. Fear. It is only when she threatens to call the police that he leaves.

But every morning, Māmā gets back up again. Every morning, we make baozi. Hers, perfect, plump, with twisted tops. Mine, fat, clumsy, but still sweet.

There is only one night I am not awoken by the sound of Māmā's feet. A earth-shattering crash cuts through the silence, and like lightning, Māmā is up. I am up too, but hide behind the shield of the blanket.

"Māmā?"

"Stay here Emi." I hold my breath, knees locked together once again. After a few minutes, she comes back in and locks the bedroom door. The blankets peel back and she slides in next to me. "*Shuijiào*, Emi. Go back to sleep."

In the morning, she sweeps glass into the trash and boards up the empty frames. The door chimes, and I step out, taking my place next to her. She scrubs red stains on the door,

*Chink*

*Get out of our country.*

*Go back home.*

Sharply, she tells me not to look. She says nothing more as she gives up scrubbing and instead, boards the door up too. When she steps back in, I cling to her legs silently until she crouches down.

"Emi, *kànzhe wǒ*, look at me." I look into her eyes. They are tired. Only now do I notice the circles that have formed. Just because the covers did not peel back, I realize, does not mean that Māmā has been asleep. "Emi," she rests her hand on my shoulder, cups my cheek with the other. Tears pool in her eyes and I wish I could do magic, like her, make the water disappear into steam, into air.

"Don't let anyone tell you that you don't belong here."

I nod.

But the baozi taste a little less like home.