

The Distance Between Lunch and Breakfast

It was a warm, delightful summer morning in 1989. Liuxiang, Danli, and I came to the renowned, charming Montmartre, in the heart of Paris. Liuxiang was an old friend of mine, while Danli, from our small tour group, was a new friend we just made. In her late twenties, Danli was tall, slender, and friendly. After strolling around the artistic village, we went to a nearby restaurant, which resembled a modest eatery in Taichung, for lunch.

The inside of the establishment was rectangular in shape. Although there was no artistic interior design, it was brightly-lit as if the sun were also dining in here at the moment. A waiter, a smiling and energetic young man, came to greet us warmly and then led us to a table for four against the left wall.

We each ordered our own food. It's been so long that I can't recall the specific dishes we ordered or whether they were delicious. But I do remember that the portions were generous. We were all very full after eating. At this moment, Danli announced that she would like to order another dish that caught her attention in the menu. Today, I can't recall the name of the food, either. Anyway, upon hearing her idea, both Liuxiang and I were astonished by her voracious appetite.

"I'm full actually, but since this is Paris, famous for gourmet food, I want to taste it." She explained, smiling, and waved for the waiter to come and take her order.

Unsure of how to respond, Liuxiang and I stayed in our seats, keeping her company.

The dish was served very quickly. It appeared like a small colorful mountain, its aroma heavenly. I wondered if Liuxiang was thinking what I was thinking—just wait and see how she was going to swallow it all.

Danli, however, remained calm, picked up her fork, and dug a little from the bottom of the "mountain." Then she took a bite. She chewed it slowly, savoring the taste as if she were a difficult food critic.

Finally, she swallowed the bite and nodded, saying, "Good." We beamed, feeling delighted for her.

Then, most unexpectedly, she gently set down her fork and announced in a satisfactory tone, "Let's go!" She raised her right hand and waved to the man again. "Check, please," she said.

Dumbfounded, Liuxiang and I stared at her in disbelief. The food before us was virtually untouched. We hesitated, not knowing what to do with it . . .

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The morning sun felt pleasant and wonderful. Rendong, also an old friend of mine, and I decided to enjoy breakfast together at a hot spring hotel in Guishan, Taoyuan, a city near Taipei. Although the

restaurant, on the fifth floor across from the counter, was neither lavishly designed nor playing mesmerizing music, we loved the food and service it provided. Therefore, we went there once again.

As we arrived at the establishment, we found dozens of customers, much like travelers, were already there. Some were eating at the tables, while others were browsing and selecting food at the long counter on the right-hand side. We chose a table for two near a glass wall. To our left, there were still two empty tables. To our right, two customers were enjoying their coffee, conversing quietly.

Just like what most hotels served, the sumptuous breakfast was all-you-can-eat style with various kinds of Taiwanese and Western foods including salads, cereal, beef, chicken, fried vegetables, dumplings, congee, sweet potato, bread, fruits, deserts, beverages, and so on. Among them, there were even Taiwanese noodles customized to your liking. We didn't have a tight itinerary that morning, so we ate and chatted leisurely, planning to leave the restaurant when closed at 10:00.

Rendong was savoring different dishes contentedly. Eating faster than her, I finished around 9:30. Then I took out some scratch paper and a pen from my black crossbody bag, put them on the cleared table, and started to scribble down my ideas for an essay.

To complete the satisfying breakfast, Rendong went to the kitchen window and ordered some Taiwanese noodles with lots of vegetables at the top. When they were served, the layout, steam, and aroma were most enticing. Rendong saw my interested expression and asked me if I would like to share some of them. Feeling quite full already, I declined and continued my writing.

It was nearly 10:00. Rendong and I were probably the only remaining customers in the enormous room, the light music still lingering in the air. At this moment, two young men, who were wearing dark clothes and looked like university students, came to the table closest to our left, put down their bags, and hurriedly went to the counters to get food. They were of the same height, one thin and the other a bit overweight. I wondered why they came so late and what they were doing in town. It seemed that like the other guests, they also stayed at the hotel the night before. Knowing my questions would remain unanswered, I looked down and focused on my story.

As I was writing, a young waiter in a red top and black trousers suddenly materialized by our table. Gazing up, I found him holding a bowl of steaming noodles in his hands, which looked exactly like what Rendong was now having. We were very surprised and asked him if it was brought to the wrong table. Perhaps the customers sitting next to us ordered it. My friend requested only one bowl and was already eating it. The waiter insisted that it was ours, claiming that we ordered a second one. We told him we didn't do it. Not until he explained, did we realize that after Rendong had requested the first one, she had forgotten to retrieve the little clipper for ordering and that the chef imagined we would like another bowl and so, he made one more. I wished I could take these extra noodles, but I was too full to eat another bite.

While Rendong, the waiter, and I were pondering what to do with the food, we heard the slender young man at the neighboring table speak suddenly, "I could take the noodles."

Amazed, we all turned to look at him. Instantly, the waiter placed the food in his hands and was gone. Rendong and I felt relieved.

I said to the student, "Thank you so much! You're so nice." Rendong also expressed her gratitude to him.

He smiled gently and replied, "You're welcome."

I was so pleased that an idea popped into my head, so I said, "I'd like to write about this." I asked him for permission and he agreed immediately.

Therefore, I took out a piece of blank paper and put it on the paper I had been writing on. I started writing and announced at the same time, "The title will be *A Heartwarming Moment at the Breakfast*. No, it should be *The Distance Between Lunch and Breakfast*." Rendong beamed while savoring her noodles.

Since we had begun our conversation, I ventured and asked the same man, who was sitting to my left, "Just curious. Could I please ask you why you two gentlemen came to the restaurant so late?"

He answered politely, "I just finished a technical exam."

"Could I ask what technical exam it was?"

"The technical exam of a PE university." He was still well-mannered, not offended by my question.

"To get into National Physical Education University?"

"Exactly."

Unfamiliar with the entrance exam for the physical education university, I asked, "What kind of exam? Baseball? Basketball?"

"Just some basic exercises such as sit-ups." He explained patiently.

"I see," I replied, amazed they tested such fundamental skills. "Did you both take the exam?" I glanced at the other man, who was sitting closer to my friend and eating some vegetables at the moment.

"I just went with him," this other young man put down his chopsticks, locked eyes with me, and answered courteously.

"What a good friend!" I commented.

At this time, Rendong had finished her breakfast, leaving the plate, bowl, and cup before her completely empty. We were about to leave. Before standing up, I said to the student who took the exam, "I hope you can get into the university."

"Thank you!" Astonished at my kind words, he responded joyfully.

We said good-bye to each other. Then Rendong and I exited the restaurant, both enveloped in a comforting warmth that lingered for a long time.