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Just Desserts

By

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“Taiwanese girls are stupid,” said Lindy.

She was sitting across from me at the former gay dive bar, current expat dive, Origins, sipping from a bottle of apple ale with no intention of finishing it.

Lindy spoke matter-of-factly. Though she herself was Taiwanese, she didn't consider herself one of them them, as she had been an exchange student in Germany for a year. Once back in Taipei, she had also witnessed the comings and goings of exchange students, little heartbreakers in their own way, from many different countries, but all bearing a growing sense of entitlement.

I picked at the basket of potato wedges in front of us, selecting the thinnest, crunchiest piece. “Nah, that's just the type that show up at Elektro and Omni. The ones who are super into foreign guys.”

“Yeah, the clubbing types are like that especially, but it's not just them. Any Taiwanese girl would be thrilled to date a westerner, and show him off to her friends, and

make cute little half-white babies. It doesn't matter if he's a loser in his home country. If he's here, and he's white, he might as well be Brad Pitt."

"That's quite the generalization," I said, munching on the fried wedge. "What about you?"

"Me?" She grinned, "I'm immune. You see, I've been studying you guys for the past few years. I know all your tricks."

I shook my head, smiling, "Weren't you convinced that you were in love with that Russian guy your family hosted—what was his name?"

"Oh, Nikita" she said, and took another sip of apple ale. "That was five years ago, though. I was young."

The only thing I remembered about Nikita was that he had allegedly drunk an entire bottle of vodka before our Chinese placement test, showed up wasted, and still scored the highest marks. After that he disappeared. We hardly saw him at the beer factory or Tequila Park.

It was still early, not yet 8pm, so I suggested open bar night at one of our old favorites. Lindy rejected it, saying the guys were too local, too tacky.

"And anyways, I have a turnaround flight in the morning."

"Ugh, you sound like such an adult, it's scary."

Lindy laughed, "A lot has changed, hasn't it?"

She took one last sip and called it a night, and I went to meet another old friend. I was only in Taiwan for a couple weeks, as a much needed post-graduation break from reality. Mostly I was using it as a chance to catch up with old classmates and exchange students who had come back. Julie was neither.

I didn't remember how Julie and I met exactly, but I did know it all started with a German wannabe playboy named Ralph. He had brought her around to our favorite haunts a couple of times. All we had known was that (1) She was Taiwanese, (2) She spoke English with the most intriguing accent, and (3) She was beautiful.

At seventeen, she was a young Angelina Jolie: all lips, and cheekbones, and legs. It must have been strange meeting this ragtag pack of foreign teenagers who were starting to learn that they need not tiptoe the line; the line didn't exist for non-Asians. Here, the drinking age was English. (Or Spanish, or Portuguese, or German, or French, or Russian, or Italian, or whatever, though to be honest, most spoke English as well). People watched us in MRT stations, took photos of us on the streets, convenience stores never carded, students at our schools waited for us after class to give us gifts. It was an unearned celebrity, albeit a minor one, the kind that goes to straight to your head quicker than champagne bubbles.

For Ralph this feeling was normal. On top of his already being regarded as good-looking, with his tall stature and shock of white-blond hair, his father also owned a chain of hotels throughout Europe. Our host families may have had housekeepers, but in Germany, in his actual home, he had several.

Julie and Ralph's relationship was as painful as it was short and ended with her slandering him to pieces and me, inebriated, threatening to punch his lights out (though I hardly knew her at that time and no longer remember what all the fuss was about, just that Julie did a raucously funny, heavily-accented impression of Ralph that sounded like Arnold Schwarzenegger in slo-mo). The end result was that Julie was adopted into our group, and Ralph could no longer show his face.

It turned out Julie blended in effortlessly, having grown up in South Africa (hence the accent) and moved to Taiwan to live with her grandmother at the age of 8. Although, she wasn't visibly foreign, she had the confidence to strut amongst us as we traipsed about the city.

But now it was different, we had grown up, like Lindy said, and a lot had changed.

Julie met me in the MRT station, wearing a belly-bearing white top, which draped off of her shoulders, and high-waisted jean shorts, which were still cut strategically low enough to hint at the stretch of flat belly she had worked hard to maintain for the odd modeling job – mostly wedding dresses for catalogs and gigs in sports-car showrooms.

“Oh my god! It feels like nothing has changed,” she squealed, emerging from the ticket gate, and giving me a perfumed hug.

And then nearly in the same breath she started talking about her friend Giselle, who worked at corporate in Carrefour, who was going to meet us at her friend's restaurant for a private tasting in their wine cellar, which by the way I was going to *love*, and the owner's girlfriend is super sweet and pretty and she always hugs everyone she meets and, suddenly, “You're not wearing that tonight, are you?” She eyed my ankle-length skirt, and before I could get a word in, “Don't worry – there's time to change before dinner” – pronounced “dinn-ah” in that South African accent, had she always sounded so British?

It'd been five years since we had said our goodbyes in Taiwan; you'd think that five years would have diluted the accent of her childhood, but somehow it only got stronger, like white wine turning to vinegar. In fact, she'd been living in Taiwan nearly

three years before our group of exchange students had landed, so it was more like eight. Meanwhile the Australian exchange students had all but forfeited *their* accent to the generic American TV-announcer enunciation in a mere year.

I agreed to change into something more suitable, which to Julie's mind was a short skirt and tall heels.

At Descent, the French-inspired restaurant, she was entirely at home, flitting about, introducing me to various people. The owner of the place came around with the wine list, greeting her with kisses on both cheeks. A Taiwanese man, late 30's, apparently a regular at Descent, chatted with her familiarly and offered to buy her a glass of wine, and then out of courtesy, extended the invitation to me as well, which she accepted graciously on our behalf.

Julie joked around, flirted with everyone. Though some of her jokes missed the mark, or maybe it was my imagination. A French woman in her early 30s jovially introduced herself as Clara and said she was from, "Paris, you know Paris?" and Julie said, straight-faced, "No, actually I don't know." There was a little hardness in her voice, some glint of annoyance in her eyes. People in our immediate vicinity went quiet, watching. Then Julie cracked a smile and backtracked, "Actually, I studied in Lille for a year."

After we had finished our wine, she insisted we leave for the clubs.

While we waited in line, a group of tall, waif-like teenagers with sleek, long hair drifted to the front, which set Julie off. She went on about the "model table." It was a topic that could only be spoken about in hushed tones, and Julie did so with equal parts disdain and reverence. Though she was also working as a model, she wasn't a "foreign"

or “white” looking model. These were of a different caliber – elite models, ones who walked runways and appeared in ad campaigns for international brands, who only had to show their face to be let in: anemic-looking fourteen to seventeen-year-old Eastern European girls, and their sculpted twenty-something male counterparts.

But even as we entered Halo, a club full of gorgeous people, eyes turned toward her. “*Hao piao liang*,” murmured a possibly underage girl, her eyes trailing after Julie’s receding figure. *So beautiful.*

After getting our drinks, Julie made a beeline for the roof, over which Taipei 101 towered, like a glitzy pagoda, once the tallest building in the world. Julie, leaning an arm casually over the rooftop balcony, expressed her dissatisfaction with club culture, saying of Caucasian male expats, “They’re so spoiled,” all while being eyed by some tall western men lounging at a table nearby. The clubs were like a buffet for them, any Taiwanese girl was available for the taking.

Julie ranted about being treated “like a Taiwanese girl,” which in this conversation became synonymous with a casual fling, someone easy. First it had been Ralph and, more recently, her French beau, Gaspard, when they first started dating a year ago. But then, as she told me, she showed him how “very, *very* wrong that assumption was.” I laughed at how menacing she sounded.

A few shots later, we left for Electro. Julie’s friend, Giselle from Carrefour, got us wristbands for the VIP section, where a few painfully skinny girls danced clunkily on an elevated platform over the seating area. Julie yelled over the music, “They’ve all had plastic surgery... you can tell, they look so fake.” Their noses were identical, stitched-on buttons.

On the table in front of them was a rack of shots, and a model Lamborghini, sculpted out of cake, icing, and marzipan, which Giselle scoffed at as “tacky.” I couldn’t help but to agree, though the craftsmanship was admirable, the velvety texture of the car’s exterior, and the oil slick shine on the windows. It even had working headlights, which blinked to the beat of the bass.

As we danced, Julie’s hip bumped into the table and the shot rack tipped over onto the cake. She uprighted the glasses while she thought nobody was looking, and turned away innocently. The red food coloring of the icing began to melt and dribble down in streaks.

With Giselle was a Brazilian businessman who had come to Taipei for a few days. According to Julie, he had recently closed a multi-million dollar deal with Carrefour, and Giselle was meant to show him around, make sure he had a good time.

The networking was incredible, the intensity of it, the pace of it. Six shots deep, and they were still casually conducting business under the pretense of not conducting business at all. Julie’s crowd now was much different from when we were seventeen. These were adults, with higher stakes to their partying. No longer could she sip tequila in a back alley, or dye her hair in a public restroom. There were now the twin dangers of shame and consequences to be wary of.

An American, so impressed by Julie, suggested she should have her own show, “like the Kardashians.” She threw her head back and laughed, white teeth flashing blue-green in the strobe lights.

Meanwhile, a couple clusters of people away, Giselle was having an argument with a slender guy with coiffed black hair, who was gesturing towards his streaky Lamborghini, melting with tequila.

“She’s with you?” I heard him say, eyebrow arched, jabbing a thumb towards Julie, who was still dancing beside me.

Giselle turned to me, “Why don’t you take Julie out for some air. I’m going to handle this.”

And, just like nothing had changed, we found ourselves sitting on the stoop of a 7-Eleven, sharing a bottle of water and a plastic container of curry rice, high heels abandoned next to us.

“Just got a text from Giselle. About that Taiwanese-American guy with the Lambo cake, apparently he’s this new media mogul, about to put Instagram and Snapchat out of business.”

“Honestly Julie, I’m not even surprised anymore.”

“Right?” She dipped her spoon into the curry, mashing it about with the rice. “This city’s too small. You seriously never know who you’ll bump into, who you’ll insult.” She took a bite and closed her eyes, “Oh God, this is the best right now.” Julie handed me the spoon. “Seriously, try this.”

I took a spoonful, savoring the spicy-sweetness of the Japanese style curry. The commoner’s true comfort food, a hearty mix of carrots, potatoes, and chunks of what was quite possibly beef. “It’ll all blow over though. It was just an accident.”

Julie shook her head. “You think it’s that easy? If Giselle decides I’m out, I’ll be out. And I can’t go through that again.”

“What do you mean by that?” I said, scraping more curry rice onto the plastic spoon.

“Five years ago, you did it to me. In less than two weeks, I lost all my friends, as you guys left one by one. Taiwan was like a vacation for you, but that was my life. And I was again just an average Taiwanese girl, surrounded by average Taiwanese girls.”

“I never thought of you as average.” Julie was the type who would absolutely refuse to go through life unnoticed. Or maybe life wouldn’t let her slip by. With looks and a personality like hers, she was surely destined for some kind of fame, or infamy.

“Yeah, but I worked hard to get out of that rut. I modeled, taught English at cram schools, while working towards graduation. But when you guys left I realized how fleeting all my relationships had been.”

I must have made a face, because she followed up, “No offense. It wasn’t your fault you had to leave, that was just the nature of your exchange. The point is, I’ve worked hard to build up these relationships.”

I felt so naïve – she had seemed to blend into our group seamlessly.

“I don’t naturally fit in. Not quite Taiwanese, not quite South African. I’m not part of these business circles, and if I don’t open my mouth I’ll be treated like any other Taiwanese girl.”

“But you’ve gotten close to the expat circle here.”

“Yeah, but how permanent are they? Even Gaspard, he could be relocated by Carrefour in an instant. And if he were given the choice to go to Tokyo, he might go willingly. Everyone leaves eventually.”

“That’s not limited to just exchange students or expats,” I pointed out.

“Everywhere in the world, people are parting and moving on. We can’t be expected to stay in the same hometown, or college town, even the same country for the rest of our lives. Think how boring it would be if all the exchange students stayed here, rehashing the same old drama over and over, like a burned out TV series that won’t end.”

“But now it’s like a spinoff, with a whole new cast of characters, only I’m still here.” She suddenly threw back her head and laughed. “This is getting too deep. I wish Jack was here to tell us to lighten up and light up a cigarette.”

Giselle was walking up the street towards us. “You two look like a couple of hobos,” she called.

“How’d it go with that media guy?”

“Nothing a little sweet talk couldn’t fix. Anyways, Juliano sent them over a bottle of champagne. The cake’s still fucked up, but they scraped off some of the marzipan and frosting, and it tastes just fine. Nobody likes marzipan anyways.”

She eyed the half-demolished meal on Julie’s lap. “Ooh is that curry? Haven’t had 7-Eleven curry in ages.”

Julie handed over the spoon and Giselle sat beside her on the grimy curb, smoothing her sequined skirt underneath her. “I’m famished,” she groaned, tucking in.

“I’ve got to be honest,” I said, “I’m amazed by you guys tonight. Is every weekend like this?”

Julie gave me the side eye. “Are you seriously the same girl who puked at Luxy so many times that you were on a first name basis with their cleaning staff?”

“For one thing, that was five years ago, and we were seventeen. And we weren’t simultaneously getting smashed, and conducting business deals, and navigating social faux pas. Do you guys ever stop working?”

“It’s true, you’ve got to network,” said Giselle. “Whatever you do, network.”

“Networking at a club though? Isn’t that too close to mixing business and pleasure?”

Julie shrugged. “You never know who you’re going to meet.”

“It’s not for everyone. You’ve got to have a certain... personality,” Giselle added. “If you aren’t outgoing, you’re not a go-getter, life isn’t just going to hand you a job with benefits. Honestly, my work isn’t that hard, but it can be stressful. You can get thrown into situations that you never imagined. Sometimes they just want to have a foreign face at meetings.” Giselle laughed. “Half the time I don’t even know what I’m doing there, but you have to just roll with it. Whatever you do, just act like you belong, and soon enough you will.”

I sighed, “I don’t think I know how to do that.”

“Just remember, everyone’s faking a little bit. It gets easier.” Giselle pulled a slice of napkin-wrapped cake from her purse. Most of the velvety marzipan had been removed, but here and there, where it had been dampened with tequila, red coloring marbled into the layer of pink frosting beneath. “Some dessert?”

She handed me the slice first, and I peeled off the thin layer of napkin that clung to a patch of icing. All that effort and artistry, the careful sculpting and engineering of that gaudy Lambo, had come to this: a slightly soggy chunk of cake, faintly reeking of

tequila (or maybe that was us). I bit into it. Under the layers of icing and marzipan, it really was just a plain yellow cake.