

## Phở Tái

We'd been back together for all of two days. My friends had come to expect this sort of behaviour from us—they knew we were in love most of the time, but that oftentimes we hated each other more than we loved each other. For now, though, the love was there in abundance. I knew so because we'd had sex at her apartment an hour earlier and were now sharing a cigarette together, the way content younger couples do. Back and forth the cigarette went between our fingertips, up into the cold grey sky went the smoke from our lungs. She always bought Nexts or Pall Malls, both of which I detested, but I figured smoking something that tasted disgusting was better than smoking nothing.

"How about there?" I asked. I stopped walking and was pointing to the Vietnamese place by her complex.

"It's crap," she said. "Like super shit." She spit onto the sidewalk and put out our cigarette underneath her boot. There were at least a few drags left.

"Well, I've never tried it. Can I judge for myself?"

Without another word, she walked ahead of me into the place.

There was no one else inside. Classical music floated down from some old overhead speakers like we were in an empty hotel lobby at dawn. Even with the lights on, it was somehow much greyer than outside. It was an infected, depressing place.

“See?” she said. But instead of leaving she pulled out a chair at a table along the wall and sat down. She ran a hand through her thick dirty blonde curls. She looked very much at home.

“It’s not awful,” I said and took my seat across from her.

“How would you know?”

It took a while for a waiter to come. I reached out and held both of her hands with my own. Her skin was freezing no matter the season, and her bony knuckles dug into my soft palms like a handful of skipping stones. It was my constant desire to warm her hands during the city’s brutal autumn season, but after a moment she yanked them away from me and put them under her oversized wool sweater. Her eyes darted from side to side at cutouts of Playboy models on one wall and paintings of Vietnamese beaches and sunsets on the other. It seemed like she never looked at me. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time we’d made eye contact. Even when we had sex she closed her eyes. Or she asked me to do it from behind.

Finally the waiter came. He seemed very out of place and yet right where he should've been. He had a long blond ponytail, a crooked nose, and sunken eyes that couldn't have been peeled open with clamps.

"Oh, welcome back," he said to her. "Drinks?"

I looked at her for confirmation. She avoided the gaze of both myself and the waiter and ordered two Tiger beers. When he came back and dropped them off, we had written, without communicating, onto our paper slip the following order: one Phở tái, one Phở rau cải tàu hủ, and an order of vegetable spring rolls.

"What's the matter?" I asked her when the waiter had gone.

"Do you have to always ask me that. Like, find something original to say."

I sunk back into my chair. She remained such a mystery to me. It made no sense, the way she treated me or anyone else. But still I loved her.

She looked like she hadn't slept in days, and she kept fiddling with the rings on her finger and scratching her neck. When we'd last seen each other two nights ago, the night we got back together, I knew she was high on cheap cocaine. Her dealer was at the party, and I decided I didn't want her to do that crap unless I was there doing it with her. It wasn't safe to be around men like him, who dealt cocaine to women in their early

twenties. She was only safe with me, and I told her that. We locked ourselves in a bathroom and I told her, and she cried on my shoulder about how depressed she was, great big sobs, and then she agreed to get back together with me after I'd asked, and she thanked me for making sure she was safe. Then we did a few lines together and someone at the party started playing *Junk* by McCartney. It was romantic, I admit.

The waiter came back right as I was about to say something very thoughtful to her. I even forgot what I was going to say because of him.

He placed our spring rolls down. Then he put her vegetarian tofu pho down in front of me and my rare beef pho down in front of her.

"Nope, that's mine, and that's hers," I said.

The waiter looked at us. "Are you sure?"

"What? Of course I'm sure."

He hesitated. Finally he swapped our bowls and walked away.

"I just feel like you're acting weird," I said once the waiter was out of earshot.

She took a loud sip of her beer. She spooned some broth and took an even louder gulp of that. Another second passed and she plopped an entire half a spring roll in her mouth. She was a soft chewer, like you could hardly tell if there was actually food in her mouth. Like she had no problem putting the food in there, but actually chewing and digesting it was such a shameful act.

“Hm?” she said. “What’s weird?”

“You know, never mind. Okay? I didn’t say anything, forget about it.”

“Done.”

I put on a bit of a show then. I let out a deep sigh and gripped my entire forehead with my hand like I was contemplating my existence. Then I stopped paying attention to her entirely. That was sometimes what she wanted, I figured: to be left alone in the world.

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. Then I looked down at my bowl of Pho, and I almost said something to her before remembering I was ignoring her.

“Excuse me?” I yelled out.

“Oh great,” I heard her whisper.

“Hello, excuse me?” I yelled again, louder this time. I was leaning out of my chair with an entire arm in the air.

The waiter came back, and I realized I’d never seen a white waiter in a Vietnamese restaurant. I should’ve known right when I saw him that this was that sort of establishment—there were no actual Vietnamese people in the building, the place was a complete sham. I could’ve listened to her earlier about coming here, but I was already bending to her every demand and slight emotional shift, so where would that have gotten me? Plus she’d had no problem coming inside and sitting right down.

“Yeah?” the waiter said. He started rubbing the inside of his nostrils with the knuckle of his index finger.

“Look, right in my food. There’s an eyeball in my soup. Is that normal here?”

I pointed down at my bowl. And I wasn’t lying. There was an eyeball right there, a huge fat one, the biggest eyeball I’d ever seen, the size of a lime. It had adopted the pale brown-grey colour of the now cooked beef. Dark blue and purple veins intertwined all throughout it, and it bobbed up and down in the light gold broth.

He put his hands on his hips. He bent over and studied the eye. He wasn’t genuinely concerned though. “Okay. So like you want us to make it again or something?”

“Obviously I want you to explain how the hell this happened in the first place. What kind of establishment is this where cow eyes just drop into your food?”

I felt her grip my hand, hard enough to hurt, so I looked over at her. She was staring at the waiter’s shoes.

“Sorry about this,” she said.

Immediately, the waiter walked away.

“Hey, what are you going to do about the eye?” I yelled after him. But he had already gone.

“Would you stop,” she said, and she threw my hand away from her.

“What the hell was that?” I said.

She took a long gulp of beer. Then she took her spoon, readied some more broth, got a couple of noodles with her chopsticks, and took a bite. She chewed for a long time.

“Stop being such a pussy,” she said. “For once in your life be a man about things.”

After she said that, she plucked the eyeball out of my soup and put it on a side plate. For the rest of the meal the eyeball rolled back and forth on that plate. I'd put an elbow on the table and the eyeball would jiggle and stare into my soul.

I tried to ignore it as much as I could, but try as I might, I could only eat a third of my Phở Tái. I was disgusted, appalled. Meanwhile, she ate her entire bowl, every last drop. Occasionally she took a second in between bites to stare into the cow's eyeball. Like she was searching for an answer.

Ten minutes went by, and I pushed my bowl into the middle of the table. I announced I would never come back here. "You were right. This place is crap," I said.

She got up and went to the washroom then. She must've been in there for twenty minutes doing God knows what. While I waited, I took my wallet out to pay. Despite everything, I left our waiter a good tip.

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She went back to her apartment after that to get ready for a party all us English majors were going to. I asked if I could come get ready and pre-drink with her, and she told me she'd think about it and let me know. She turned her cheek to me when I tried to kiss her goodbye.



So I walked aimlessly around her neighbourhood for thirty minutes. I went into a convenience store and bought a bottle of J&B scotch and some good cigarettes. Obviously, I badly wanted to have sex with her, to calm my nerves, and I also wanted to tell her I loved her and was overjoyed at us having gotten back together, because I thought she needed to hear it. But she didn't text or call. So after a while I just sent her a text saying: *i love you, okay?*

The sun abandoned the Earth completely, and it got colder. I gripped my jacket and wrapped it tightly around me. I walked more, checking my phone a few times. Still nothing. After about an hour of dawdling through the downtown core, I called my best and oldest friend, Sofia, who'd come to university with me to pursue literary dreams. I went to her apartment, and she buzzed me up. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor with a book beside her, putting on makeup in front of the mirror she had between her couch and bed. She was dressed already, in corduroys and a denim button-up, and she nodded at me in the reflection of the mirror as I walked in. Her record player was on and playing Smokey Robinson, *The Tracks of My Tears*. He sounded nice. I wanted to smile listening, but I couldn't make myself do something unnaturally.

"What's bugging you? Her again?" Sofia asked.

"Honestly I'm not sure what you're talking about," I said. "I'm doing fucking great."

I pulled out the bottle of J&B and flashed it to Sofia. She nodded. I walked to the kitchen, pulled out two plastic glasses, and poured us both a few fingers. She thanked me when I handed hers to her, and I stood there and watched her applying more makeup. She was good at it. Like, patient and deliberate, whereas I was used to watching my girlfriend do it. There was never much patience there.

I sipped my scotch and saw Sofia was looking at me again in the reflection of the mirror. Her lips were parted slightly, and she was painting on red lipstick with soft strokes.

“Listen, and don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t think you should go out if you’re in some sort of mood,” she said. “Or if there’s going to be drama. Nobody wants to see drama.”

“I’m not in any mood. I’m great, actually. Maybe a bit tired cause I was up all night getting laid.”

I emptied my cup. Then I walked back into the kitchen and filled it up some more. My chest felt warm, but the anxiety I had before nights like these was starting to creep up and say hello. I took a deep breath, in and out, twice.

“Is she going to be there?” Sofia yelled.

I drank more scotch, finished my cup. Then I refilled my glass again and drank some more. There were no new messages or missed calls on my phone. And I started wondering, those eyeballs in the soup, how often were they there? Did people who went to eat there regularly just accept them? Was something wrong with me?

“Did you hear me?” Sofia said. She was standing behind me in the kitchen all of a sudden. She looked great, and I admired her for that. There were so many people our age who could look good, beautiful or whatever, but you could tell there was something missing. With Sofia, nothing was missing.

“What?” I said.

“Is she going to be there?”

I acted like I didn’t know. Like I had no idea.

“I don’t know,” I said, and my phone vibrated in my pocket.

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I couldn’t stop reading the message from her in our taxi over. Reading it made me wish I’d gotten ten times as drunk, or that I knew where to buy a gun. I read it and read it,

tried to decipher whether there was anything she was holding back, whether she'd mistyped a sentence or misspelled a word.

*it was stpid of me in teh first place to think we culd work this time ... im rly sorryy, srsly i am, but we jsut shuldn't again. dont hate me for it. ok pls? ill always lov u xxoo*

It was probably our shortest breakup so far. In the past, we'd broken up over the phone. We'd broken up drunk and on cocaine, we'd yelled and sworn, we'd broken up without actually verbally expressing anything. But this time was like she'd stuck her icy bony fingers down my throat and yanked my intestines out. There was nothing left inside me.

"What now? Her again?" Sofia asked.

"No."

"So what? Like, you expect me to believe you're just a moody drunk? Tell me."

I said nothing, and she rolled her eyes. Then I stared out the window of our taxi and watched the lights blur. I unzipped my backpack and took a sip of scotch right from the bottle. The taxi driver told me to put it away or get out.

"Jesus Christ," Sofia said. "Please could you not? Like maybe slow down?"

Timidly, I put the bottle away. I turned to Sofia too and said, “Don’t tell me what to do. No one tells me what to do.”

We got there ten minutes later. I waited outside the house for a bit. I had no idea whose house it was. I pulled out my smokes and lit one. Two cigarettes later, I went inside. Sofia was already standing by the fireplace with a beer in her hand, talking to a boy. She saw me, waved nervously, and continued her discussion with him.

Then I’m not entirely sure what I did. I must’ve walked around the house hugging my bottle of scotch and not saying anything to anyone. I just knew I had to find her. I had to know if she was there. But the house was like a maze. I would be in some hallway, open a door, walk into some bedroom, and when I’d leave the bedroom the hallway I’d entered through would be gone. I recognized a few people but never saw any of them more than once. Even Sofia disappeared for a while.

But finally, in the basement, where everyone was dancing, I saw her. My girlfriend. My ex-girlfriend. I guzzled down as much scotch as I could, and I watched her as the music blared and as cheap strobe lights taped to the ceiling pulsed.

She was dancing with a guy from our program. I knew his face and I remembered lines from his crappy poetry, but aside from that, I knew nothing of him. I took out a cigarette right there in the basement of this kid’s house and started smoking it, blowing the smoke all over the place, even as someone told me to fuck off with the smoke.

They kept dancing, getting closer to one another. Her legs wrapped around his thigh. I kept watching, trying to figure out if it was really her, or if maybe it was someone else, some other girl who looked exactly like her with the same shirt from earlier in the day and the same greasy curls and the same leather cowgirl boots that her mother had gifted her, the ones I only knew about because we'd been together so long, and I even would bet no other men but me knew about the boots.

I went out to the backyard after watching them. I wanted to punch something, or break a window or a glass or maybe rip the chandelier off the ceiling inside, but somehow I still wasn't as drunk as I needed to be. So instead I pressed my bare knuckles against the brick exterior of the house and I dragged my skin up and down along its rough grainy edges. I rubbed until I saw blood. I kept rubbing my hand against the bricks and watched the blood curl under the bottom of my hand and into my palm.

Back inside I saw Sofia. She gave me an alarmed look but I carried on past her. I think maybe she was calling my name behind me, I wasn't sure.

In the basement, my ex was dancing alone now. She looked upset, I could see that she was. The boy she'd been dancing with before was kissing another guy in one corner of the room. He had his hand on the guy's crotch, trying to undo his zipper. Part of me wished I had a paper copy of his poems—so I could go over and push the guy off him and tear his snobby poetry into hundreds of shitty little pieces all over the floor.

Instead I walked up to my girlfriend. She stopped dancing and looked at my hand and all the blood on it. She was whispering into my ear then, but somehow she still hadn't looked into my eyes. Not in so long. I couldn't even remember what colour her eyes were. Green? Brown? It didn't matter in the moment.

"Are you okay?" I asked. She started wiping the blood on my hand, trying to clean it but just making it smear all over the place.

She shook her head.

"Are you?" she yelled.

"No," I said, and I was crying a bit then all of a sudden. "No, I'm really not."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I shook my head. The truth was that I did want to talk, I always had so much to say, but when I spoke to her she never listened.

She took me by the wrist and led me back out into the backyard. There were other people out there with us but we couldn't see anybody or notice anybody aside from ourselves. On the bricks you could see my blood like hieroglyphs. She took out a

cigarette and lit it and folded her arms across her body. She was staring below us, at the grass. She passed me the cigarette and moved closer toward me.

“I’m sorry. I am, you know that,” she slurred.

I took a drag and gave her back the cigarette. I pulled her closer to me.

“I love you so much,” I said to her. I buried my head in her chest. I felt her taking a drag of her garbage cigarette as I nuzzled myself into her, and I slid a hand under her shirt and onto one of her breasts.

“I know,” she said. “I know you do.”

Then she pulled back from me and kissed my neck. She bent down on her knees. She unzipped my pants and quickly put me in her mouth, and she went back and forth, but I could barely feel anything. I moaned and told her to keep going even though I couldn’t feel anything. After a few minutes, with my penis still soft inside her mouth, she took me out and got back up.

“Come on,” she said. “I don’t want to be here anymore. This is a lame fucking party anyway.”



So I followed her. We passed through the house, and there weren't as many people there. The place was a mess, empty red solo cups everywhere and someone had Sharpied on the walls. Someone had puked in the kitchen sink, too. Near the front door, Sofia was waiting for me. I'm sure she had been there for a very long time awaiting my departure. As my girlfriend and I pushed through the front door, Sofia grabbed my arm.

"Don't," she said. "Don't be this dumb. I'm leaving soon, we'll go get late night shawarma."

But I kept going. I tore my arm away from her and together we kept going until Sofia and everyone else was so far behind us, the entire party and the wannabes from our program and our lives were gone and so far behind us.

"I love you so much," I said to her again, and she said nothing back.

We were headed to her apartment. I was drunk but I knew downtown well enough to at least know that was where we were going. After twenty or so minutes of walking without speaking, but smoking and sometimes kissing each other or fondling each other, we even passed the Vietnamese place.

"Look," I said, and I went up to the glass and pointed. "The eye," I said. But she didn't look.

After that we turned onto her street. It was so dark. The only light came from dim streetlights and from the balconies of her apartment complex on the very end of the street. And up on the left, behind some cars, I could see something else, something scurrying down the opposite sidewalk.

It was a cat. Or, it looked like a cat. But then we got closer and I let go of her hand and I stared at it, I stopped and stared even as she asked me, “What the fuck are you doing? It’s like two degrees, could you not be such a fucking moron right now?”

But I suddenly could see what was running across the opposite sidewalk. There was a thin orange fox with a black nose and black toes prancing along the concrete like a ballerina dancer. It was malnourished, it looked like it hadn’t eaten in weeks or months.

“Do you see that?” I said.

“Yeah? So what?” she said.

The fox was fast one second, then the next second it had slowed down for me. As it crossed the street and got closer, I noticed a squirrel was hanging from its mouth. And blood was dripping from the fox’s teeth, and the squirrel was completely stiff. It was dead, actually. I stared with my mouth open for another second, then shook my head and followed behind my girlfriend.