

My Street

A monologue from a radio drama by Betty Quan



Narrator:

Vancouver. Sunday morning. (Yawns) Early. After breakfast, Mom and I go to Chinatown to do the weekly grocery shopping. I park at the lot at Keefer because street parking is impossible to find. Then, with Mom ahead and me two steps back, just like the Royal Family, the shop-a-thon begins.

There's a method to it all, I'm sure there is. The whole routine has to have a master plan. I mean, every story in Chinatown basically has the same inventory, right? Wrong, according to Mom. Sure it's got the same

Betty Quan (Sightlines 10, pages 107-109)

merchandise displayed. Sure the prices are the same, pretty much. But, Mom sees it all differently: it's like her prescription glasses opened up a whole new world of comparative shopping and Epicurean discernment. The best barbequed pork buns here, but the egg custard ... Pender Street; cheapest price for quality oyster sauce; crisper bok choy there; and more aromatic long-grain rice way over there; and fresh carp ... (Beat) Where? We have to go all the way over where? Mom!?

Mom's first thought is not the week's groceries, but something more immediate: lunch. And heck, we've just had breakfast! But we might as well take something home for the rest of the family. And in my family, we're always thinking about ... the next meal. When we eat breakfast, we think about lunch. When we eat lunch, we think about dinner. Mom and me — we stop over at Maxim's on Keefer for curried beef, pineapple custard, and barbequed pork buns.

One box of baked good. I hold.

Next door has fruits and vegetables: pomelos and pomegranates; papaya and starfruit. Hey Mom, these onions look good, eh? "No. Only fruit good here. We go somewhere else for that."

So we buy a dozen BC reds and two pomelos the size of footballs.

That's one box. Two bags. I hold.

On Gore, the first street east of Main to intersect Keefer, is a shop that sells frozen dim sum. (*Calling out like a waiter pushing a dim sum trolley*) Hargow, *sui mai*, *wo tip*. Hey, Mom, didn't they have these back at Maxim's? "They make it here. Fresher." But they're frozen, Mom. (Beat) "Fresher frozen. Right here. They make right here. Better. Good."

One box. Three bags. Did you know "fresher frozen" stuff is heavier than nonfresher-frozen stuff? I hold.

From Gore we hit Pender. *Mgoi, mgoi*, excuse me. Excuse me. *Mgoi*. The streets, like any given day, are jammed. I'll accidentally knock unconscious any kid at height with my parcels. We head for Mom's favourite butcher shop. There, in the store windows, are whole roast chicken. Anise-scented duck, and of course barbequed pork, red and sticky and sweet. And in the back room, there's a whole variety of refrigerated meats and poultry. A sensory explosion of the raw and the cooked.

Mom gets some flank steak and a whole seven-pound roasting chicken. She says "I'll carry that. Too heavy by yourself." No, Mom. It's okay. I think my thumb can handle it.

We come upon some of Mom's friends who comment on what a big and strong son she has. And handsome too. Got that right, ladies.

One box. Four bags. One hunched back. I hold, my fingers curling in like mac tacs with the burden of a week's provisions hanging limply off them. We get off Pender and head north on Main to a general goods store so Mom can get some rice vermicelli, peanut oil, watercress and some soya milk. She's lactose intolerant, and I'm bagged.

"Here, I take this and put it in this. Better, heh?" She fits the box of pastries into one of the bags and takes that and the soya milk. It's her one bag against my six. To be fair, she is carrying a purse.

"But wait. We still need onion."

We go backward, past the butcher on Pender Street, the frozen dim sum shop on Gore, back to Keefer to the place we bought apples and pomelos where the onions sit. (*Slightly sarcastic*) Hey, Mom, I thought you said only the fruit was good here. (*Whistles*) And look, the peanut oil's a better price here. "Ay yah" is all Mom can say — I don't know what she's ay yahing: the onions, the oil, or me.

But I'm wrong on all counts. "Ay yah. I forget buy the chicken wing." What, Mom? "I forget buy the chicken wing. We go back to butcher shop." But Mom, we can pick up chicken wings from the IGA on the way home. She looks at me for a moment. "What for? Best price on Pender. Best quality. We in Chinatown."