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Chicken

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Fingers slide over the smooth, cool surface as I scroll through my Summer To-Do List. Written in red, "Room Makeover" perches atop little checkboxes. A picture of a scarlet bean bag chair hangs beneath it. Peeling my eyes off the bright screen, I skip to the kitchen, beaming as my white socks prance on the smooth wooden flooring. Air sweeps aromas of chicken into my nostrils. Mom stirs soup.

Plopping down beside the counter, I ask, "Hey Mom, can I get a bean bag chair?"

"What? Why?" she replies.

"I wanna redecorate my room."

"No. You do not have any space for it." Mom says, her voice stern.

"Mommmmmmm, pleaseeeeee," I whine, "then can I move upstairs?"

"We'll talk about it after we visit Jia Jia and Grandpa."

Loud fans suck the steam away, the wisps of white fading as they snake up. Bubbles pop in the pot on the stove. Gray-brown scum rises from the chicken and froths at the boiling surface. I huff and bury my face in the cold, granite countertop, my nose squashed against the dirt-colored swirls. A ding shoots out of my room. Jumping up, I race to my desk and snatch my phone.

Lissa: "I'm making origami birds to stick on my walls tmw, wanna make some with me?"

I scan my room. Portraits of a fuchsia butterfly and snail hog the surface above my bed while another painting loiters beside my closet, the pale pink paint hiding behind the sharp black frame. Noon sunlight pierces through my windows, splattering against the thin strips of bare wall in my room. I shift my gaze back to my phone. Fingers clack on the electronic keyboard.

I can't come, I have to go visit my grandparents in China tmw.

Plus, I don't have any room for decor. :(

Crystal chandeliers shimmer, the light cascading down on a spacious kitchen. On a white marble countertop, Jia Jia places a scratchless ceramic bowl on the stone surface. Countless noodles and multicolored vegetables bathe in clear broth.

"Look at the stars," Grandpa says, pointing up.

Tiny sparkles speckle the night sky. The bright full moon gleams at us, but as I reach out I hear--

"Time for dinner!" Mom shouts, jerking me from my nap.

Quiet chatter accompanies the steady rolling of suitcases and whoosh of airplanes. Through the wall-sized windows, little lights on aircrafts twinkle as they soar into the darkness. My reflection stares at me. Bags droop below my half-open eyes. Clumps of hair dangle around my face. My stomach grumbles.

"Let's go!" Dad shouts.

Oceans of people linger at the exit, each peering into the crowd of newcomers. To the far right, Jia Jia waves at us as she beams and strides to us.

"You've grown!" Jia Jia hugs me.

"And you look so pretty," she says to Mom.

"Mama!" Mom laughs.

"C'mon. Let's get going. You two must be tired from your trip."

Glass doors slide open. The midnight darkness envelops us. Soles grind pebbles. Faraway high-rises glow, the unlit rooms like chunks in the buildings. Skipping as I hum a tune, I ask Jia Jia, "You live in a *house*, right?"

“Of course I live in a house, where else am I supposed to live? On the streets?” she chuckles.

Tendrils of cigarette smoke slither around us. Crossing a silent street, an apartment looms over lumps of red brick and chicken droppings sprawling across the ground. Murky, gray water oozes from an entrance, the ascending stairs fading into black. Sheets of paint peel off dusty windows, trying to escape. Dying lights flicker above moldy balconies. Tiny white bumps erupt from my skin as a cold breeze shoves the summer air aside; Jia Jia’s pudgy hand grips mine, pulling me towards the building. She stops. My stomach gurgles. My grandmother squeezes my hand and drags me up the dark abyss as Mom jerks a metal string; yellow light floods the space with a click, bringing spider-infested cobwebs and scuttling fire ants to life. Something wet seeps from my nostril. I sniffle. A mewling crawls out from my insides. Jia Jia glances back at me. I shrug, pointing to a cat on my left. Suitcase wheels pound the dirty concrete stairs and shoes slap the ground. Jia Jia plops on a red plastic chair as balls of sweat tumble down her forehead and nose.

“Ok let’s keep on going. only two more flights of stairs to go.”

Our feet drag on the steps and mosquitos swarm around us. A “5” lures our shaking legs towards Jia Jia’s house.

“Go on inside, I’ve made some noodles for you.” She opens the door.

Dust imprisons peeling yellowed wallpaper. The TV throbs in the small room. Chips line the edges of three doors on our right and Jia Jia bustles in the kitchen, stirring boiling soup and noodles. Thin, steel counters pierce brick walls and a small fan sucks hot air out a dirt-smearred window. A tiny light shines on the soup as she hands it to me. I freeze and gawk at the bowl. Gray bones and meat bob in greasy, murky broth. Several strands of noodle worm their way down to the bottom of the bowl, hiding underneath a layer of floating chicken and oil. Jia Jia sticks a pair of chopsticks between my fingers; I nibble on a piece, the gray meat refusing to split like rubber.

“Why is it *so hard*?” I ask.

“It’s expensive free-range chicken. Do you like it?”

I shake my head.

“Go wash,” says Mom.

Fingers turning the doorknob, the wood groans as it reveals the bathroom. Crust squeezes in the crevices of the tile wall. To my left, a rim of mold surrounds a shower head and handle. Underneath it, water seeps out of a sink. I yelp as the toilet a few feet away gurgles, the water in the gray bowl tinted yellow. Plastic basins and towels sit on the interlocking metal grids of a shelf. Pinching the tip of the shower handle, I turn it on, the frigid water poking my face. As the cold melts into warmth, I close my eyes and sigh.

Peeling open my eyelids, I glance at the mirror above the sink. Two bright rivers of red gush from my nostrils, smearing into a lake of crimson on my mouth and chin. My reflection gapes at me.

“MOMMMMMMMMM!!!”

The wooden floor shrieks as Dad sinks into his bed. Cotton scratches my nostril as I wrinkle my nose at him.

“How can people even *live* here?”

“Suck it up, and don’t you dare complain to your mom,” Dad replies, his eyes narrowing.

I flop onto my cot, the metal hinges screeching as I bob up and down, up and down. Coarse fabric scratches my arms. Ticking emanates from a clock, its sharp needle pricking “1.” Black fringes my vision as the steady beat dies away.

Plates cling against tables. Music tickles my ear. Dust glides in rays of sunlight, dancing in the warm air. I pull myself up, the cot squeaking under me. Jia Jia snickers as I trudge in the living room. Her fingers reach up and yank the maroon ball of cotton out my nose.

“There’s a girl your age across the street from us, do you mind teaching her some English?” Jia Jia asks, setting a plate of dumplings in front of me.

“Sure...why not,” I reply.

She leads me outside. Racks of clothes flutter outside balconies and dragonflies somersault in the air, their multicolored wings glittering in the sun. Lines of small, open restaurants with dirty signs chop vegetables and fry eggs, onions sizzling in oil. Girls and boys wearing white and red uniforms laugh as they run out doors slinging backpacks; they ramble while stirring their chopsticks in sauce-drenched noodles. My monster pajamas flap in the summer wind while Jia Jia pulls me across the street. Chickens cluck in front of houses. My grandmother knocks on a door.

“Mrs. Chen, I brought my granddaughter!” she hollers.

A middle-aged lady opens the door, “Welcome!” she beams.

Red calendars hang from scratched walls; plastic chairs and pens scatter across the stone floor. Sitting behind a table, a girl gawks at a green textbook.

“Say hi to my daughter Daiyu!”

The girl peers at me.

“Hi,” she says.

“Daiyu, show her your English textbook.” Mrs. Chen whispers.

Daiyu pushes the green book towards me. The words “*Sarah is at the beach*” sit under a picture of a little girl playing with sand.

“Read it to her.” Daiyu’s mom urges.

“I can’t read it well.” Daiyu giggles.

I leer at Jia Jia, my eyeballs flicking upwards.

“Just read it,” I say.

Daiyu takes a deep breath, “Saarah is at zee bitch,” she musters.

I blink a few more times. Daiyu stares at me. A giggle crawls out of my mouth and Daiyu’s lips curve up. Forcing a smile, Mrs. Chen [eyes] Daiyu and walks to the kitchen. Daiyu peers at her mom disappear behind yellow walls and closes the book, the pages slapping against the cover.

“Wanna see my tadpoles?” Daiyu whispers.

“Uh, okay.”

Skipping to the bathroom, Daiyu swings open the door and snatches a plastic cup from a moldy shelf. Orange crust clings to the bottom of the container. Inside, little black tadpoles dart in murky water, bumping against the cup and sloshing the green-black liquid. Our fingers prod the little swimmers as they shoot away, leaving us with chuckles.

Lissa: How’s China?

Me: I’m mindblown. It’s disgusting and tiny!! My grandparents live in this super shady crumbling apartment place and it’s crusty and moldy and ughhh

Lissa: oof

Me: And guess what?? There are KIDS OUR AGE living there too! Like that place is legit uninhabitable

Lissa: NO WAY!!! I don’t believe it, send me a pic

Fingers hover over the camera icon. I gaze at the small room.

“Dinner’s almost ready!” Mom chirps.

Jia Jia hums as she prances around the kitchen, stirring and frying, laughing with my mom. Music wafts from a computer Dad and Grandpa crouch over. Steam swirls above a plate of scarlet carrots and bright green peas clasped in Jia Jia’s hands.

“Ooooo, it’s colorful! Thanks Jia Jia!” I say.

“I’m glad you’re having fun here,” she beams.

A smile tugs at my mouth as I turn off my phone.

Ripping the door open, I haul my luggage into my house, panting as I plop the suitcase on the floor. Hands burrow into my knees. Little circles of red splatter on the wood; my half-open eyelids thrust up as I shoot inside my house. Streams of sunlight surge into the spacious kitchen from giant windows. Pendants sparkling with glass crystals dangle from tall ceilings. Spotless granite counters gleam. As I shove a cotton ball in my nose, Mom runs behind me.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“By the way, we could get that bean bag chair for you, if you want to move into the bigger guest bedroom.”

I gasp, “Really!? That would be-”

Rays of light spill onto my smooth pink walls, shining in my eyes; the clean paint shimmers.

“-actually...I don’t need a bean bag Mom.”

“Okay.” Mom smiles.

My fingers slide over my phone. Lissa’s message lingers on my screen.

Lissa: NO WAY!!! I don’t believe it, send me a pic

Thumbs poke the smooth surface.

Me: Well...tbh, it wasn’t actually that bad. ig i just wasn’t used to it

Chimes vibrate my phone as a call icon hangs from the top of my messages. A swipe. Jia Jia’s blaring voice sweeps across the room, “Have you arrived at home yet?”

“Yeah,” I reply.

“What are you eating for dinner?” she asks.

“Free-range chicken.” I laugh.

