

SECOND COURSE

By Terence Toh

You know how they say when you dream, you dream in black and white?

Well, whoever said that was clearly mistaken. There was nothing monochrome about where I was. All of the colours were there. In all the right places. Every detail, every texture seemed carefully selected to give the undeniable effect of reality.

Café Salmon Surf.

I stood outside like an idiot, unsure if I should enter. Would I break the dream by diving too far inside? Instinctively, I looked around for a 2D code to scan, or a book to put my details into. There were none to be found.

The world around me warped: everything turned abnormally bright. This was followed by all-enveloping darkness for a few seconds. As if someone had switched off the lights on the universe.

When I could see again, I found myself inside the café.

It was exactly how I remembered it. From the stark fluorescent lighting to the cracked tiles on its floor. The wooden tables, their edges plastered with the sticky remains of chewing gum. The tacky seascapes on the walls. The Kitten-A-Day calendar above the bar, where no one ever sat. The fragrance of pasta sauce wafting in the air. Even a baby cockroach skittering in the corner.

It was almost enough to bring me to tears.

The café was semi-packed, with figures at every table. I could not recognise anyone: their features were shrouded in shadow. All were chatting and laughing. As attentively as I listened, I could not make out a single word.

I chose a seat by the corner. I used to sit here with my friends all the time, back in college. It had the best view of the television.

A memory stirred.

We had watched the 2010 World Cup Final here, hadn't we? We drank copious amounts of coffee, to keep ourselves awake for the live transmission. And there was free dessert for people who predicted the score correctly. The place was full of cheers and laughter...and I had bet RM50 on Spain...

Ah, the good old days. Simpler, happier days. Before words like 'social distancing', or 'herd immunity' forced themselves into our vocabulary.

"Hello, *lengchai*. Order?"

It was the café owner. A ruddy-cheeked, balding man, always in a faded white shirt and apron. He looked exactly the same as the last time I saw him.

“Hello, boss,” I responded. A familiar stranger: in all the years I came here, I’d never bothered to learn his name. I suddenly felt bad. Was it too late to ask now? Would it be awkward?

My stomach rumbled loudly. Why was I so hungry?

“Your usual?” the owner asked.

I paused. My memory banks turned up nothing. “Er...yes?”

“Coming right up!” The owner left, whistling a happy tune.

I looked around the café. Everything seemed normal. A quintessentially cosy scene. Shadowy figures, sitting and eating together. Couples canoodling by the entrance. About 14 people, gathered at four combined tables in the middle of the café.

It had been ages since I had seen something like that. It was oddly touching.

At that moment, I noticed someone at a table by the far end of the restaurant.

Holy shit.

Ramlah. In a green blouse and jeans. She was reading a book, while sipping a drink.

If this were a cartoon, my jaw would fall to the floor. I was suddenly light-headed. My heart was filled with panic, a raw desire to run away as fast as I could.

But I forced myself to remain. I couldn’t let this opportunity pass by.

I went to her, calling her name. She looked up from her book. Our eyes met, and I felt a bolt of electricity surge through my body.

Unlike the other people here, I could make out her features clearly. Her beautiful doe eyes. Her delicate heart-shaped face. She still wore the earrings I had given her all those years ago, and there was a pink bracelet around her wrist.

“Hi Fong,” she said.

“Ramlah!” I said. “Thank God. There’s so much I need to tell you! But how can you—”

She smiled.

And then Ramlah was gone. Only her half-finished drink remained.

What the hell?

I walked back to my table, seething. The owner was waiting for me with a plate of nasi lemak.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s been a strange day.”

“Come *lah*,” the owner smiled. “Eat. You’ll feel better.”

I doubted it. Café Salmon Surf wouldn’t be winning Michelin stars any time soon. The quality of its food was inconsistent, and passable at best. The only reason I kept coming here was because its prices were cheap, and it was just a 3-minute walk from college.

The food was the same as it always was. The chicken slightly undercooked. The rice dry and hard. The sambal overwhelmingly spicy, with an odd aftertaste of nutmeg. Yet somehow, it was the best nasi lemak I had ever tasted. I wolfed it all down, not letting a single grain of rice escape me.

“Nothing tastes as good as the past, right?” the owner said.

I nodded. “I’m glad you kept this on the menu.”

“How long has it been? Years?”

I blushed. “Sorry. After I graduated...I rarely needed to come to this area. You’re kind of out of the way.”

The owner smiled. “I wish you’d come back at least once. When we were still open. You missed a lot.”

I almost choked. Something had been bothering me ever since I came here. An odd, niggling feeling, poking and probing the back of my mind. And now I knew the reason for it.

“You closed down, didn’t you?” I said. “Last year?”

Another memory stirred.

I had come to Subang for an errand. Picking up some academic transcripts. I thought of stopping by for a drink, for old times’ sake. But the Café Salmon Surf signboard had been taken down. Its doors shuttered by an iron grille...

“How are you still here?” I asked. “Is this a dream?”

The owner smiled. “No. It’s not.”

He took the seat opposite me. “I have to be honest. I’m not who I seem to be. I just took a shape you’d feel comfortable with.”

The world warped again. Everything around us disappeared, and there was only darkness surrounding our table. Everything had been swallowed by the night.

“Then...what are you? And where am I?”

“Isn’t this efficient? Both your questions have the same answer!” The Not-Owner said.

He grinned. “Café Salmon Surf!”

Seeing my confused look, he continued speaking.

“Places can be ghosts as well as people, you know? Especially places once full of life. And what place has more life than a restaurant?”

I stared at him, stunned. “So you’re the spirit of this place?”

“A manifestation of it,” Café Salmon Surf said. “Every good restaurant has a soul of its own. Formed by the memories and experiences of its customers.”

He waved his hands. “Look around. This is a shadow of how I used to be. These customers? Echoes of my former patrons. My time has passed, but I can’t move on. I’m stuck here, in a never-ending dinner service.”

“Can’t move on? Why?”

Café Salmon Surf laughed. “Are you seated comfortably? Because this is going to blow your mind.”

He leant towards me. “You see, there’s a place where restaurants go after their last orders. A spiritual one, for eternal rest. You could call it the happy serving ground. Our Valhalla. Restaurant in Peace. But lately, it’s been overbooked.”

My mind was reeling. An afterlife for restaurants? This was insane. The theological implications were mind-boggling. How did it all work? Was there a heaven for good restaurants, and a hell for bad ones? Could you be reincarnated as a mamak stall or kopitiam?

“It’s a lot to take in, I know. But it’s true.”

The Café stared wistfully into the distance for a moment, before speaking again.

“Thanks to recent events, a lot of us have died recently. There hasn’t been a culinary massacre like this in ages. Great restaurants, some with the most glorious food I knew, all gone. All of us, cut down in our prime. Thanks to a bad crisis, and an even worse handling of it. Now there’s a long queue to the afterlife, with a lot of red tape to get through. That’s caused a lot of disagreements among the Powers That Be.”

“The who?”

“The Powers That Be,” the Café said. “The divine forces who usually manage all this. Like gods. Diet-ties, we call them. They don’t know how to deal with so many new dead. Not enough unreal estate for all of us. Each of the Powers That Be—and there are a lot of them!—have their own ideas how to govern us. But none of them can agree

what to do. So there've been clashes. Arguments. Schemes. Everyone playing their own little games at the top. Ultimately nothing gets done, and us little guys suffer."

I sighed. "Boy, have I heard that story before."

"I've been working overtime for almost a year. I'm drained," the Café mused.

"Sorry." It was all I could think to say.

"Well, it's not completely bad. Nice to keep serving customers. It's our purpose, after all. And I've been getting the best reviews of my career! When it comes to food, the dead are a lot less picky than the living."

"Wait. What?"

The meaning of his last sentence hit me like a thunderbolt. "Are you telling me...I'm..."

"Ah," the Café said. "Who else would visit the ghost of a restaurant?"

I suddenly felt nauseous. No. It didn't make sense. My head began to ache. And then, I was hit by a dozen memories at once.

Another evening of hunger, my stomach as empty as my wallet...

Refreshing my browser wildly, awaiting an email, that would never come...

My boss calling me to my office, a glum look on his face...

Speeding through traffic on my bike, trying to deliver an order on time...

Raising a white flag...only to be told it was against the law...

The beautiful view of Kuala Lumpur from my balcony...

A hideous feeling in my stomach as the ground rushed up to meet me...

Everything suddenly fit together with a dark, horrible clarity, revealing a world which I prayed was a lie.

"No." Tears ran down my cheeks. "No. No."

The Café gave me a few minutes to weep. Then he hugged me. My world warped, and the café surroundings emerged around me again.

"I'm sorry," the Café said. "But at least...your pain is over."

I took a deep breath, trying my best to stay calm. "What happens now?"

"You're going to be here for a while," the Café said, "Until your unfinished business is complete. Whatever that is."

He smiled. "There are some benefits of this, though. Remember Shakey's Pizza? The

Coliseum? That old Vietnamese place that used to be opposite us? They're all here. Go relive some good times. You'll probably meet a lot of old friends. Now let's have dessert," The Café said. "If there's anything true in this world, it's that ice cream makes every situation better. And don't worry. There are no bills in a ghost restaurant!"

He brought me a banana split. I savoured every spoonful. I hadn't eaten much in the past few months.

Around me, figures continued eating, chatting, repeating the daily rhythms of their regular lives. Once I finished eating, the world warped. Now I was on the street again. I cursed: it was hard to get used to this.

Then again, I realised, maybe the world had always been changing. At a pace way, way too fast for me...

I started to walk. Other restaurants slowly emerged out of the darkness. Many of which I hadn't seen in ages. My heart pounded. Who knew what else there was to see and eat?