

*Leave Me Alone, Chengdu*

Breadstick Lover Extract

1222 words

Dong Dong disco is one of Chengdu's most famous places. Originally it was a civil air defence shelter. After the city started opening up to the outside world, one part of it became an underground market, while another part housed a number of hostess bars. They claimed to be discos but I'd never actually seen people dancing there. Men went there to hold a girl in their arms and rub and touch her everywhere while having evil thoughts. At the end of a song they'd hand over a 10 yuan tip and reckon the transaction finished.

I'd just walked into the disco when this tall girl I'd had dealings with before came up to me. She said that she hadn't seen me for a long time. I patted her butt and said I wasn't dancing today, just looking. She turned and embraced some fat guy instead. The two seemed to be stuck to each other like glue. The girl's waist swayed as she used her hipbones to rub rhythmically against Fatty's crotch. Fatty slobbered and his hands, like two pig's trotters, went wandering up and down her body. The girl smiled at me with an 'I can't do anything about it' look. Suddenly I remembered that she had a huge black mole on her back. It was definitely enough to scare a brother into losing his libido.

At that moment all the lights went out. The disco was full of ghostly shadows. My eyes couldn't get used to it and I staggered around like a blind person. Someone lightly tugged at my clothes, asking me to sit down. I obediently sat, and in the shadows a face gradually appeared before my eyes. My breadstick lover was smiling at me.

After Li Liang's graduation he lived at my house for a fortnight, then rented his own place in Luoguo Alley. By then I was depressed at home and so I moved in with him. At the mouth of the alley was a snack restaurant. It was there that I first bumped into my breadstick lover. She had only recently moved from her village. She wore old, faded clothes, and even in July she kept her buttons tightly fastened as she toiled over the fried breadsticks in their seething pots.

Aren't you hot? I asked her.

Her face turned red. It made me think of a girl on our class's study committee, Ning Dong Dong ... The night before graduation, Ning Dong Dong and I enjoyed a long kiss behind the rockery. As I quietly unfastened her bra, Ning Dong Dong murmured indulgently. Just as I was ready to progress to third base however, she regained her senses, said 'I won't' three times and ran away to her dormitory. This was one of the three greatest regrets of my university career.

It seemed my breadstick lover was interested in me from the very beginning. The breadsticks she chose for me were always large and juicy, which made Li Liang very jealous. Behind Li Liang's back, I went to flirt with her a few times. She usually laughed at my teasing, but didn't give in to it either, which fascinated me. Then the day came when she asked whether I could help her find a place to live. I was wild with joy and told her that was no problem. On the day she moved house I had my way with her. She didn't call out or shout, just struggled incessantly, grabbing at me so my whole body was mauled. After I'd finished, I was suddenly afraid and said dejectedly, You should report this.

She didn't reply, but after a while took my hand and said, Let's do it again, but be gentle this time.

After that my breadstick lover lived with me for three months. Every day she would wash my clothes and make food, tidy and clean the room. When she saw me walk in the door, her face would light up. That period of time is clear in my memory like a mirror. Day after day I would go to work, go home, watch TV and make love. Afterwards, I thought it was probably the closest I'd come to real happiness in my whole life. Once, because she'd eaten a clove of garlic, I cursed her and made her cry. That was the strongest memory I had from that time.

When Zhao Yue was ready to come to Chengdu I told her, My girlfriend is coming. We have to split up.

She froze with terror. Tears flowed down her face.

It's no good being like this, I told her.

She didn't say a word, just cried soundlessly all night. I couldn't get her to stop and it made me very sad. When the sky was nearly light she wiped her tears away, kissed my face and said, Chen Zhong, give me a little money. I need to go and have an abortion.

I admit that I'm not a responsible guy; I was just interested in her body. After we split up she called me a few times. Because I was afraid Zhao Yue would start to wonder, whenever I heard it was her I just hung up. I'd never imagined I'd meet her again one day in a place like this.

Do you want to dance? she said. I won't ask you for money.

My heart suddenly flooded with sorrow. All around I saw men and women packed tightly together, using every revolting posture you could think of to rub against each other. Turning my head, I looked at this once so simple girl. What did she feel when these men groped her? Did she think of me?

Why are you here? I said.

She lowered her head. For money, do you really need to ask?

Don't you want to go home?

On the day we split up, I'd asked her what she would do in the future. She said that she would return to her village and never leave again.

The disco was filling up with more and more people. A few men reached out their hands and touched her, but she rejected them. Leaning against my shoulder, she sighed and said, I don't want to go back to the village. I can't take the suffering. It's hard to be a peasant now.

Her hand felt unfamiliarly soft and smooth. I remembered that when I first knew my breadstick lover her hands were still hard and rough to the touch. What was it that had made this simple unaffected girl become a dance girl, maybe even a prostitute? In that gloomy, dirty disco, I thought, was it me? Was it the city? Or was it just life?

When the disco hall began to empty, I got out 1000 yuan. She refused passionately. I said, OK, let me see you home.

She laughed. No need. I live with my boyfriend so it's not that convenient.

I asked her what her boyfriend did.

He works on a construction site.

After a pause, she seemed to read the question in my heart.

He knows where I am.

I opened the taxi door, and then heard her call my name. I turned my head to see a glimmer of tears in her eyes.

She said brokenly, If you ever think of me, text me. OK?