

Samson had invited me to a roadside restaurant nestled deep in a popular night-market. Despite my massive advance planning, sketching out how I would transport myself from shower to Samson without getting sweaty and red-faced, the night-market air drenched me as I walked, and I had to dab at my forehead to prevent my whole face sliding down my chin. The population were seeping out of warehouses and schools, young and old, eager to eat and wander. Taipei was the most nocturnal place I had ever known, and the dreary air of the morning, as workers shuffled into their sad offices, was counterbalanced by the delight that hummed all around me now. Evening-time was the free time here, the happy time. You could eat well, spectacularly well, on these streets, for little money, and be bothered by no one, surrounded by life. There was a word for this feeling, according to my students: “ru nao.” It meant, literally, “hot noise,” so I had been told, and it was a sort of emblem of life here. To finish work or studies, and to go out, no matter the hour — one saw tiny kids in the night markets, and the elderly, too, leaning on canes; to be happy among hundreds of unknown others. There was nothing like it where I was from.

Samson waited for me at an outdoor table, and he waved, pleased, when he saw me coming. I sat opposite him, and grabbed one of the ice milk teas he had brought. These tall drinks came with a thick pointed straw, and I stabbed through the plastic film, hard and direct, while he beckoned over a waitress.

I loved the bustle of this place, the couples sitting at tables, the flushed faces of the girl delivering plates of rice and gravy, and the two heavyset cooks, set up at their outdoor station, scalding green onions and pork over raging flames. And I had grown very fond of my cold milky teas, a treat for the evenings, creamy and mild, with the strangely appealing tapioca balls, chewy and starchy, sliding up the straw.