

WHY WE EAT

Written by

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EXT. ROYAL CAPITAL - DAY

We observe the royal family's ostentatious procession down the street. Everybody's dressed in their best, including the crowd watching the ceremony.

YING (f, 10) is also in the crowd. Her clothes are baggy, and there's a smudge of dirt on her temple. She moves from one person to another, panhandling.

YING (V.O.)

The woman who raised me told me I
was a selfish baby. That I nearly
sucked her dry.

A bun is placed into Ying's small, dirty hands. She scarfs it down in seconds and holds out her hands for more.

Nobody is looking at her anymore, distracted by the royal family approaching the dais, where a large treasure chest rests.

The king breaks out of formation and approaches the dais.

YING (V.O.) (CONT'D)

It's been like that my whole life.
I'm starving. I need. More than
anyone else.

The king reaches out toward the treasure chest's keyhole. Something green glints in his hand. The HOARDER plummets down from the rafters, a dark figure in disguise.

His entire face is covered except his eyes. As he falls, there's a split second where it seems that he meets Ying's eyes. Ying is mesmerized.

The Hoarder hits the ground and disappears from Ying's view. Shrieks of surprise, a blur of a fight.

GUARD

(shouts)

It's the Hoarder!

Ying cranes her neck and weaves between legs to the front. Everyone is running away, she's pushing forward. She staggers out of the crowd and onto the dais, only a few feet from the Hoarder.

YING (V.O.)

The Hoarder is supposed to scare us. Make your bed, don't trek dirt inside, don't be ungrateful, or he'll eat you.

(MORE)

YING (CONT'D)
He'll stash you in his infinite
stomach and make sure you never
breathe fresh air again.

Frozen in place, Ying watches as the Hoarder cuts through the guards. He's incredibly skilled, almost mocking his opponents.

Then ZAINUB (f, 35) interferes. She gives him a good fight, slowly gaining the upper hand.

The fight sharply veers toward Ying. Ying reaches out and -- her arm is harshly grabbed by Zainub, who yanks Ying behind her. Protecting Ying gives the Hoarder an opening.

Schlick sound of a knife through skin and bone. A shout of pain. Severed fingers fly.

YING (V.O.) (CONT'D)
That day was the first time I saw
him. It wasn't scary at all.

Zainub bows over in pain, and the Hoarder slips away. As if connected by a string, Ying begins to follow him. Once again, Zainub grabs her with bloodied fingers, glaring at Ying in incredulous rage.

ZAINUB
(thundering)
What are you doing here?

Reinforcements arrive. Ying turns away from Zainub, searching for the Hoarder in the dispersing crowd.

GUARD 2
Where did he go?

Zainub shakes Ying.

ZAINUB
Did you go deaf, girl? What are you
doing here?

GUARD
(in the distance)
Move out of the way! Move! We have
a thief to catch!

YING (V.O.)
The Hoarder takes. He takes what he
wants. He takes, and he takes. But
everyone wants him.

EXT. UNDERWATER - EVENING (SIX YEARS LATER)

Food scraps -- egg shells, half-eaten meat, wilted vegetables -- are dumped over us. Immediately, dark shapes swarm toward the food.

EXT. PIER - SAME TIME

We are above the water now. The dark shapes are revealed to be fish, which appear from the depths. Water splashes everywhere in the mad scramble for the food scraps.

Ying (16) stands at the pier. There's a smudge of brown sauce at her temple. A perpetual unsatisfied frown ticks at the corner of her mouth.

She is dumping the contents of a trash bag into the water and is unperturbed by the fish's greed. The water stills as the fish finish their feast, and Ying is left staring at her reflection.

Ying heads back inside a dingy restaurant located on the pier, among a hodge-podge of other shops and stores.

INT. DINGY RESTAURANT KITCHEN

The kitchen is as cramped a space as the pier.

WILLOW (m, 12) is watching HANI (m, 70) ladle soup into a bowl. Zainub (40) is cracking eggs. It's a tight fit, with four people in the kitchen.

Ying maneuvers around them toward the trash can. She puts the old, now empty trash bag over the trash can. The bag has been reused multiple times before.

ZAINUB

Ying! Where were you? We have no more clean plates!

Zainub gestures with her head at the sink, where a pile of dirty dishes await. Ying sets her jaw and stays put.

ZAINUB (CONT'D)

Hurry up!

YING

Make Willow wash the dishes. I'm hungry.

ZAINUB

(scoffs)

You'll need a better excuse than that. Go wash the dishes, I'm not paying you to be a tree stump.

HANI

(carefree)

Come on, Zainub, let the girl eat.

YING

I'm not washing the dishes, I'm eating my lunch -- dinner now. Make Willow clean this time --

WILLOW

I'm busy.

YING

You always make me handle the gross stuff --

Zainub reaches over and hits Ying on the back of her head. In doing so, we notice that four of Zainub's fingers are gone on her right hand, so she's left with only a thumb. Ying falls silent. Hani looks away. Willow winces.

ZAINUB

When you waited on customers, they ended up with smaller portions. When you "helped" Hani cook, we had to restock ingredients twice as often. You are not as discrete as you think you are. Wash the dishes.

Ying clenches her fists. Hani silently passes Willow the bowl of soup. Willow squeezes past Ying to the dining area. Zainub raises an eyebrow, and Ying stomps to the sink.

ZAINUB (CONT'D)

Wash them thoroughly, we can't afford a repeat of last week.

WILLOW

You weren't the one who had to clean up the puke.

YING

(harsh whisper to herself)

I did.

Willow exits through the saloon doors. Hani leans toward Ying.

HANI

Ah, don't feel too bad. Here, taste this.

Hani waves a sample of vegetable pancake in front of Ying's mouth. Ying glances at it and becomes angrier. The portion is too small. Everything is unfair. She turns away and picks up a dirty plate.

Holds out only for a moment. Turns around and chomps the pancake from the chopsticks, chewing angrily as Hani chortles.

Ying washes the dishes as if she's fighting them. Aggressive rinse, violent wipe, loud clatters as she sets plates down.

In time with one of those clatters is the sound of a commotion from the dining area. Willow charges in.

WILLOW

The representative is choking!

Zainub, Hani, and Ying are unmoved. They don't take Willow seriously. Zainub, in particular, is fed-up. She doesn't have time for any nonsense.

HANI

Did you see the Queen out there, too?

ZAINUB

Ying, get out there and see what's up.

WILLOW

I'm not lying!

ZAINUB

Ying!

Ying petulantly drops the plate she's holding, nearly breaking it in the sink, and stomps out into the --

DINING ROOM

REPRESENTATIVE XIA's (f, 30s) face is red, hands at her throat, a half-finished fish dish in front of her. The restaurant is in a frenzy.

Ying blinks in surprise, then resolutely pushes past the commotion.

She tries to wrap her arms around Xia's waist. But it's difficult for Ying to do, as her arms don't wrap fully around.

Xia is foaming at the mouth. Ying leans her forward, goes to the front, and socks Xia in the abdomen.

Instead of a fish bone, Xia coughs up a skinny JADE KEY, the length of a pinky. It bounces across the ground.

Ying's eyes widen.

YING (V.O.)
Impossible. I saw him take it ...
is he here?

Her body stills, but her eyes flicker wildly across the crowd of people, searching their faces. Ignorant expression after ignorant expression.

Ying tries to suppress her growing excitement. She reaches out to the key, only for Xia to catch her hand.

XIA
Do you recognize this key?

YING
(quickly)
No.

Ying cannot take her eyes off it when Xia picks it up. Xia is just as transfixed.

XIA
It must be ...

Xia glances at Ying. Bashfully, Xia laughs, pockets the key and tries to drop Ying's hand. Ying holds on for a moment, realizes what she's doing, and allows Xia to let go. Xia helps them both stand up.

XIA (CONT'D)
Sorry, that was rude of me. What's
your name? I want to know the
identity of my savior.

YING
The key. Can I see it? How did it
end up in your food?

CUSTOMER 1
That's right, how did it end up in
Representative Xia's food!?

Xia raises a placating hand.

XIA

I'm sure it wasn't purposeful. I just as well could've choked on a fish bone. Which, speaking of, was delicious. Aren't you enjoying your meals? We should support each other's businesses, and not go around spreading rumors.

Mutters all around. Everybody is touched by Xia's kind words and calm tone.

CUSTOMER 1

Of course, Representative Xia.

CUSTOMER 2

Representative Xia always makes good points! This soup is the best I've ever had!

Gradually, the dining room settles down. Ying does not. Xia glances at her and smiles warmly.

XIA

Thank you, you saved my life, ...

Xia trails off pointedly for a name. Ying does not answer, fixated on the pocket Xia put the key in.

XIA (CONT'D)

Well, thank you. I know this isn't standard customer service, but can you show me to Zainub? I have something to discuss with her.

Ying slowly tears her eyes from the pocket and nods. Silently, she leads Xia into the --

KITCHEN

Ying goes to the sink and the pile of dirty dishes.

HANI

Oh! Representative Xia! You're actually here.

XIA

(distracted)

Yes, everything is fine, thank you.

She heads to Zainub. Hani narrows his eyes at Xia.

HANI
(to Ying)
Was she not satisfied with the food?

Ying keeps an ear and eye out on Xia and Zainub, who huddle together. They exit through the back door. Ying inattentively cleans two more dishes, then follows them.

HANI (CONT'D)
Hey, where are you going?

Ying glances in the trash can, which has not accumulated anything. She yanks the trash bag up.

YING
I'm taking out the trash.

HANI
Already?
(to Willow)
What did you put in it?

WILLOW
Why is it always me?

Ying exits.

EXT. DINGY RESTAURANT

Xia and Zainub are in the middle of a conversation. Ying presses herself against the wall and peers out.

ZAINUB
Was the food to your liking?

XIA
I always tell you, it's delicious.

ZAINUB
What did you want to talk about, then?

Xia fishes out the key.

XIA
Zainub, do you recognize this?

ZAINUB
Ooh, that's a beautiful key!

XIA
No, Zainub, look.

Zainub does. She blinks.

ZAINUB
It can't be.

XIA
It can be. I'm surprised nobody else recognized it. Well, nobody else except the dishwasher girl.

ZAINUB
Nobody else from this town was there except Ying. It's surprising she still remembers what it looks like. It's hard to get anything into that empty heads of hers.

XIA
Has Ying been working for you long?

ZAINUB
You can say that. She's been staying with me for some time. But I don't know what to do with her. She can't cook, she's terrible at customer service, she can't even wash the dishes well. Not even a nice personality to make up for all of that, either. The only great skill she has seems to be eating. It's like housing a parasite.

Zainub tries to laugh it off. Xia's expression is uncomfortable and disapproving. Zainub also feels awkward about revealing her struggles and changes the subject quickly.

ZAINUB (CONT'D)
Where did you find the key? Once the Hoarder steals something, it's usually never seen again.

XIA
It was in my food.

ZAINUB
In your food?
(beat. In horrified disbelief)
Did you -- was Willow actually -- he's always fooling around, I thought -- did you actually choke on it?

XIA
No worries. I'm okay all thanks to
Ying.

The pair gaze considerably at the key.

XIA ZAINUB
We have to figure out a way We should contact the king
to get to that treasure chest immediately --
--

Xia blinks in disbelief.

XIA
The king --? No. No. I've watched this town hanging on by a *thread*. Things get worse every day, and we continue like it's normal. You better not give up on us, just because you want to act like a footstool for a man who sits on a glorified chair all day.

Xia's vitriol is uncharacteristic. Zainub is shocked into silence, allowing Xia to grab Zainub's right hand, which is missing all fingers but her thumb.

XIA (CONT'D)
You used to guard that king with
your life, right? Now look at you,
slaving away in a dumpster town. He
doesn't care.

Zainub snatches her hand away.

ZAINUB
Watch what you're saying. I'm not giving up on anybody. I'm just saying, one town doesn't need all that wealth.

XIA
Who says we don't? How do we even know if the treasure chest can help one town, let alone the whole kingdom? That key was only recovered five years ago, and was immediately lost again. Who's to say the treasure hasn't already been picked clean in the centuries before the king found it?

ZAINUB

So our best choice is reporting to
the king. He'll know what to do,
and it's rightfully his, anyway.

XIA

Nothing and nobody is rightfully
his.

Zainub blinks at the vitriol, glancing around. Xia's attitude is blasphemous.

ZAINUB

Xia, watch what you say next.

Xia takes a deep, calming breath, trying to regain her composure.

XIA

I just don't think giving the key
to the king is the smartest choice.
He lost it once, already, and he
doesn't know what the treasure is,
either.

ZAINUB

Do you think the Hoarder is near?

XIA

Why? You think he knows what the
treasure is?

ZAINUB

He could.

XIA

He doesn't.

Ying's hand clenches in the old trash bag, tears it accidentally. Xia's and Zainub's heads snap toward the noise. Xia immediately hides the key.

ZAINUB

(to Xia)

You don't have to do that, it's
just her.

(to Ying)

Might as well come out. Nobody
slack as much as you do.

Cover blown and humiliated, Ying steps out.

YING
(shaky)
Give it to me.

ZAINUB
Why are you out here?
(to Xia, in a whisper
that carries)
What did I say? Can't even wash the
dishes.

YING
(more assertive)
The key. Give it to me.

ZAINUB
What key?

Ying stands there, staring and silent. Xia clears her throat.

Before she can say anything, Ying rushes into Xia and Zainub. She jumps up, wraps the trash bag around their heads, and stuffs the ends into their mouths.

Ying grabs the key and takes off, Zainub shouting after her. Ying sprints down the road, legs splaying out. It's a haphazard, almost desperate gait. She's not a fast runner.

A strand of hair whips across her face, and she brushes it away. In doing so, she also wipes away the smudge of brown sauce on her temple.

As Ying nears the tree line, the sounds of the townspeople chasing after her crescendos. Ying's smile falters as the distance between her and them shrinks.

The tree in front of her has an old, worn piece of paper nailed onto it. Despite the yellowing tatters, we can still make out what was originally on it: WANTED HOARDER.

Ying stops running abruptly. She throws her head back, inserts the key into her mouth, and swallows.

The townspeople catch up to and restrain her. Xia and Zainub come to the front as the people pat her down.

ZAINUB (CONT'D)
Where is it?

TOWNSPERSON 1
What are we searching for?

CUSTOMER 1
Representative Xia said it was a
green key!

Ying glances to the side, at the WANTED poster.

XIA
(gentler than Zainub)
Where is it?

CUSTOMER 2
Come on, give it up, then. Come on.
Why is she being so insubordinate?
Who raised this child?

TOWNSPERSON 2
What are we searching for?

ZAINUB
Ying, give it up!

XIA
Be a good girl, Ying.

Ying yanks away from the townspeople. She tears the Wanted Poster from the tree, and sprints away, faster and harder. Xia and Zainub chase after her, and the town follows.

Through the pounding of footsteps and various emotive yelling, we hear Ying. She's laughing in exhilaration.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. ROYAL CAPITAL - DAY

Ying (10) is running away from a small, modest home. Zainub is at the door, shouting for her to come back. Those shouts gradually fade into the distance.

Ying is triumphant about her great escape, until she begins to get hungry. Wandering around the food stalls, she only gets a few pitiful donations. The rest scorn her.

She returns back to Zainub.

EXT. WOODS - A FEW YEARS LATER

Ying (13) is running away from an old shack. Zainub slams open a window and shouts at her.

There's a bag full of food over Ying's back. She sets up camp in the middle of the woods and tiredly places it down next to her.

The next morning, the food is all gone, consumed by Ying herself.

EXT. SHACK - CONTINUOUS

She returns back to the old shack, standing sullenly outside the door. The door bursts open seemingly on its own, and Zainub's right hand appears to yank Ying inside.

EXT. RANDOM TOWNSPERSON'S HOME - A FEW YEARS LATER

Ying (15) is running out of a rundown shack, a few moldy pastries clutched in her arms. She bursts out the back door, shoving those pastries in her mouth as she falls down.

When she hits the ground ...

END FLASHBACK.

INT. JAIL CELL - PRESENT DAY

Ying wakes up suddenly, squinting into the bright light.