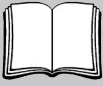


Name:



Directions: Read the following story and answer the questions that follow.

Working in My Parents' Chinese Restaurant

By Jessica Jiang

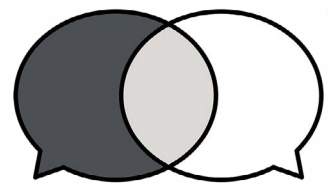
Name of the restaurant has been changed.

I first started officially working at my parents' takeout restaurant when I was 9. One night, my mom handed me a menu and the phone and said, "Take this order."

I said into the receiver, "Hello? Lucky Noodles?" My hand shook as I wrote the dishes down, and I kept asking the person to hold on so I could ask my mom for help. But I did it: I took my first order. My parents were beaming, and even though I was confused and nervous, I was beaming too.

I had helped around the restaurant before, doing small jobs that a little kid could do. When I was 7, I assembled the takeout bags by unfolding paper bags, putting them into plastic bags, and then folding them back together. I also spooned cups of rice into microwaveable containers.

But after I took my first order, my hours and tasks at the restaurant increased; they varied based on what my parents needed. Sometimes I worked for just an hour after school. Sometimes on Sundays, I worked a six-hour shift. I worked



This is a true story written by a teen in Youth Communication's writing program. To read more stories, visit ycteen.org. To find out more about YC, visit youthcomm.org

at the register, taking orders and translating for my dad over my shoulder in my half-broken Chinese, so that he could hear in the back and start cooking. I also worked at the frying station, frying chicken wings, General Tso's chicken, and fried rice, and at the soup station. It was always 20 degrees hotter back there than outside, which wasn't so bad in the winter. But in the summer, my back was always drenched in sweat.

Owning a restaurant was a great achievement for my parents. They came from a poor part of Fujian, on China's southeast coast. My mom told me her mom woke up at dawn to retrieve water from a few miles away and then carry it back to their house. "I was lucky that my older brother worked his butt off so I could go to school," she said. But she only went for a year to learn English. My dad's parents made him stop going to school after completing 3rd grade so he could work doing odd jobs for neighbors. Still, there was never enough money and he says he was always hungry.

Although my parents were poor when they arrived in the United States, after about five years they had saved enough money to buy their own business. My mom told me they were once so poor that all their possessions fit in two large plastic bags. She would swing her bag around her shoulder, and my dad would swing his, and they went across the country doing odd jobs, mostly working in restaurants, before settling in New York.

When I was 10 years old, after I had been working for about a year, I did my first 12-hour shift. When I got into bed that night, my legs hurt from standing too long, and my hands ached from repeatedly lifting the frying basket up and down. I no longer felt proud that my parents thought I could handle this job. Instead, I felt tired.

"I thanked the gods when you started working. Everything was too tiring without a backup," my mom said. I felt both a rush of happiness and a pang of guilt. Happiness because she was grateful to me for

making her life easier. Guilt because of how much I hated it.

I began to resent the responsibility. Instead of frying chicken wings and cooking pans of fried rice at the age of 10, I felt I should be hanging out with my friends or at home watching TV. Any place where every breath I took did not smell like oil.

The smell, the heat, and the ache from standing too long made me feel like I was suffocating. Sometimes I wanted to scream.

By the time I got to middle school I was ashamed of working in the restaurant. I didn't understand why at the time, but now I know it's because it made me different.

I had to go to the restaurant every day after school even if my parents didn't need me; they didn't want me and my younger sisters home alone. Whenever I wasn't working, I'd be reading. Books allowed me to do things that I couldn't do in real life, like fall in love, laugh with friends, and eat in a fancy restaurant where nobody would ask me to help in the kitchen. I fought dragons, saved nations, breathed fire and watched the world burn.

There was no TV or internet at the restaurant. I didn't even know that social media existed.

One day in the school cafeteria, one of my friends was talking about her favorite anime, and I interrupted her monologue with "What's anime?" Everyone at the table laughed and she said, "You don't know what anime is?"

I shouldered it, but it hurt. I couldn't relate to anything they got excited about. Whether it was anime, K-drama or K-pop, having to always be in the restaurant isolated me from my friends and made me feel like an outsider.

To my parents, maintaining good grades was of the utmost

importance. So while my friends hung out, I was at the restaurant studying or reading. Customers commented to my mother, “All of your daughters will grow up to be doctors and lawyers.” My mom would laugh, and I would blush and hang my head lower, hoping to hide myself in the mountains of textbooks spread in front of me.

In 7th grade, my parents finally got internet at the restaurant. My parents supplied me with an ancient HP computer and told me to use it for educational purposes only.

I made a Facebook account right away and I started to watch anime. There were two tables in the restaurant for customers, but I usually occupied one. I sat facing the register, with the computer screen facing me and the top of the computer facing my mother. Whenever my mom popped over up to see what I was doing, I switched windows and pretended that I was watching a Discovery Channel video on World War II or something else educational.

My grades slipped a little. I went from having the highest grade average in the school to not qualifying for valedictorian. I felt guilty, but I had never been happier. I made friends that I actually cared about and could relate to. For the first time in my life, I was able to smile and laugh at their jokes and not have to pretend that I knew what was going on.

Throughout 8th grade I continued working for my parents. I had many conflicted feelings. Besides the joy of having friends and the guilt of sneaking behind my parents’ back, I also felt shame and anger toward many customers who treated my mother with disrespect.

Just because she didn’t finish high school doesn’t mean that she isn’t hardworking, beautiful, and intelligent.

One day a regular customer didn’t have the money to pay for his order.

“I’m saying that I left my wallet at home, and all I’m asking is to pay for it tomorrow. What’s the big deal?”

“You have no money, no food. Sorry, we can’t give food,” my mother replied.

“Don’t f-ck with me; I’ve been coming here for almost a year. What’s wrong with you people? You know what? After this, I’ll never come here ever again. Just because you couldn’t trust me with a few dollars, you’ve just lost a customer.”

Their voices grew louder and louder, as my mom tried to reason with him respectfully. I kept thinking, “He said the F-word.” I glanced at my sister. I was 12 and she was 8. She’d gotten so used to customers treating my mother rudely that she didn’t even look up at the exchange. Instead, she sat, happily coloring in her coloring book. I don’t know which upset me more: that the customer was yelling at my mother or that my sister was so used to seeing my mother treated like this, it didn’t affect her.

Last year, when I was accepted to Stuyvesant High School, my parents knew that the workload would be double that of my middle school, so they decided that I wouldn’t work anymore. I still go directly to the restaurant after school, but only to grab a snack. After that, I head home to start my homework.

Now that I have some distance, I feel grateful toward my parents. They have spent so much of their earnings on SHSAT prep, SAT prep, piano classes, karate lessons, and Chinese lessons for me and my sisters. I am also proud of them. They started off with so little and they have managed to establish a successful, although small, business.

One night last summer, my mom handed my 10-year-old sister the phone to take her first order. Although we haven’t talked about it, I know she hates working there too. I can see it in the annoyed face she makes whenever the phone rings, and how she drags her feet when she

walks to the register. Recently I told her that one day she will likely feel the pride and gratitude toward our parents that I feel now. She laughed and I know she didn't believe me.

I know she cannot understand that yet; the resentment and bitterness of feeling chained to the restaurant leaves no room for feeling anything else. When I was working 12-hour shifts, all I wanted was for someone to hold me and promise me that everything would get better. So that is what I do for my sister when I feel like she needs it.

It also helps me feel less resentment that I have recently met other kids at my school who have had to work at their parents' restaurants. Even though it wasn't enjoyable, working at the restaurant has allowed me a glimpse into my parents' lives. I know that they do everything for their children, and that requires determination, perseverance, and love.



Directions: Answer the following questions about the story you just read.
Use complete sentences.

State the writer's main idea.

List three supporting details the writer includes to get across the main idea.

1.

2.

3.

What's your opinion about what the writer wrote?

Continued on next page . . .

What connections can you make to the writer's experiences?

What's one question you have for the writer?

Below, write one phrase or sentence that sticks out to you. Explain why.