

High School Short Story Honorable Mention

Scrambled Eggs

By Avana Wang, Thomas S. Wootton High School

“Didn’t you ask for scrambled eggs?” he asked with genuine confusion when she hesitated to accept the neatly wrapped, steamy Jianbing from his hands. His breath visible in the freezing air between them, twirling, dispersing and eventually vanishing.

She did not, in fact, ask for the eggs in her breakfast crepe to be scrambled. On days like these where she had no time to make breakfast for herself at home, she would buy a Jianbing from the street vendor on her way to work. She wanted her eggs dense and flat so that they wouldn’t scatter and spill when she ate while driving. She thought about asking him to remake it, but it was 6:40 in the morning on a frosty Monday in early March, and she knew that the old man had probably been hunched behind his portable food stand by the roadside since 5. Besides, she thought, there was really no difference between her job and that of the street vendor. Same cold mornings, same long days, same repetitiveness. So when he started to apologize, she told him it was fine and accepted the crepe from his rough, overworked hands. She peeled off one of her gloves to get out 10 yuan from her purse, handing it to him with a nod. “Keep the change,” she murmured with much courtesy before returning to her car parked across the street.

On her morning commute, she enjoys looking across the horizon at the winter sun peeking out between the silhouettes of skyscrapers downtown. Sometimes when she glances at the rearview mirror, she can catch a glimpse of the moon slowly fading away.

Then she reminds herself to shift her focus back on the road. She has always been a careful driver, so there is no way she could have expected that exactly 24 hours from now the airbag inside the steering wheel that she is currently sliding between her hands would fatally fracture her skull in a head-on collision with a skidding car, leaving her panting in the pool of her own blood as her vision blurs and heartbeat stops.

Right now, under the rising sun, she is contemplating a new beginning. The monotony of her adult life isn’t part of what she has imagined for herself as a child. She has always wanted to create some sort of miracle in her life, to leave some sort of mark in this world before vanishing. She feels like she’s stuck in a cycle between the sun and the moon. It dawns on her that as long as she keeps her dull and repetitive office job, she would never get to explore her dream of becoming a freelance writer. “I’m quitting by the end of this week,” she muses as she takes a resolute bite into the Jianbing with messy egg fluid overflowing everywhere.

Office buildings are only beautiful when admired from afar. Inside, every day is the same. Everyone paces hastily and mindlessly around the building, like ants trapped in a cup. She finds herself counting down the hours and minutes till she gets off work.

They hand her a report; she submits her spreadsheet. Few more hours to go.

They brew their coffee; she refills her tea. Tick. *Tock*. Tick. *Tock*.

In anxious anticipation, she begins drafting her resignation letter, unaware of the countdown on her life, unaware that the end will arrive sooner than the new beginning.

When 5 o'clock strikes the city in silent triumph, she has already pulled her car out of the parking lot. The sun is gone, its remaining glow trapped in the crevasse between suffocating smog and nimbostratus clouds. She thought the strip of light looked like a long, flattened peel of a tangerine.

It has started snowing overnight. Not the kind of feathery snow that one could lay on and make snow angels, no, the kind that melts into sluggish chunks on the sidewalk and leaves brown stains on the sides of shoes. She can feel the flakes cutting her cheeks as she crosses the street to reach the food stand.

"One Jianbing, please. With a flat omelet inside the crepe this time." She smiles. The old man smiles back and she can see wrinkles grow around his milky eyes.

She watches as he spreads the batter over the entirety of the frying pan and cracks two eggs on top. Snowflakes melt away in the steam before they could reach the sizzling yellow liquid.

The countdown continues.

Sweet bean paste in the color of blood drizzles on the solidifying eggs and gradually spreads into a circle.

Minutes now.

He sprinkles minced scallion and cilantro on top of the bubbling sauce before precisely folding the crepe into a rectangular stack.

Seconds closer.

She accepts the neatly wrapped steamy Jianbing from his hands.

Anytime now.

She hands him the cash and begins walking across the street to her car. Within the next few minutes, she will proceed to shut the door, buckle her seatbelt, start the engine, shift the gear, hit the gas pedal, merge onto the highway, look across the horizon at the sun and the moon only to feel the collision and the sudden force of a void engulfing her body, her mind, her soul and her new beginning as she tumbles and falls and breaks.

“Ma’am, hang on a second!”

She stops and turns before reaching the other side of the road.

Seconds pass.

The old man slowly unscrews the cap of a thermos flask, and warm vapor ascends into the air.

Minutes pass, minutes missed.

A mile from the street stand, a car swerves violently across the empty road, jerks itself back in lane, and speeds away. Snowflakes dance above the asphalt pavement where her blood could’ve been.

“Thank you for yesterday,” the old man says as he tilts the thermos flask and pours the creamy soy milk into a paper cup. “Take some with you on the way,” he offers, “keeps you warm.”

She takes a sip from the cup and shuts the door, buckles her seatbelt, starts the engine, shifts the gear, hits the gas pedal, merges onto the highway, looking across the horizon at the sun and the moon. Heading towards the same sunrise, she remains unaware that a single act of kindness at 6:41 Monday morning has brought her countless mornings more.