

What I Did For Pho

by J.A. Pak

Once upon a time there was a Vietnamese restaurant. And then there were two, and four, and eight, until one corner of downtown had hundreds, all clumped together and indistinguishable. Little Saigon was one of the first. It's the one I always went to, maybe once a week, usually with my wife Phyllis. One Sunday we went down for a late lunch and walked straight into the wrong restaurant. We didn't realize it until we had the menus in our hands. Identical menus, only the menus were spanking new.

"They didn't change owners?" Phyllis asked.

I looked at the menu cover. It said Golden Saigon. I looked around and realized that all the furniture was ever so slightly different, the colors brighter on the wall. We walked outside and looked at the building.

"Look, there's Little Saigon," I said.

Golden Saigon was smack next to Little Saigon, the doors only three or four feet apart. If you weren't careful, you'd walk straight into Golden Saigon and never know it wasn't a part of Little Saigon. Even the sign was in the same yellow color, same style, same size.

"Clever," Phyllis said.

We went into Little Saigon and ordered lunch. Mr. Nguyen, the owner, came out of the kitchen and greeted us warmly. We told him what had happened to us. Mr. Nguyen's blood pressure shot through the roof. He started choking out Vietnamese sounds.

"Can you believe the nerve? Can you believe the nerve?" he spat. "I work hard, work very, very hard to establish my restaurant. It's a good restaurant, I have a good clientele, we work hard, seven days a week—we work sixteen hours a day, my family, for ten years and they have the nerve to steal it! Just steal it! It's highway robbery. How can this happen? Why do they let this happen in America?"

We shook our heads in sympathy.

"It seems silly to have the same restaurants all in the same neighborhood," Phyllis said. "It happens all the time. All the Chinese

restaurants are right next door to each other. All the Korean and Mexican. There's a street with five burrito restaurants where I work."

"Crazy. Crazy. The world is crazy," Mr. Nguyen said. "I thought it'd be different here, but it's worse."

"I wish there was a Vietnamese restaurant where we live," I said. "I'd eat there all the time."

"Where do you live?" Mr. Nguyen asked.

"Uptown. Near the 60s. Why isn't there a single Vietnamese restaurant past the bridge?"

"We've all got to stick together," Mr. Nguyen said. "Safety in numbers. It's crazy. Now we can't make money. None of us can make money. There's only so many customers. It's crazy. We used to be full all day. Now we're lucky to have a full house during lunch. Our food's good, but we're not as cheap as the new noodle houses. Cheap ingredients, cheap food. I'm not even going to tell you where they get their fish. I wouldn't let my cat eat there. I never buy anything but the best. I have pride. They have customers. Why eat cheap food? I don't understand."

Mr. Nguyen was always modest. The food at Little Saigon was the best. It was Mr. Nguyen, his hawk-eyed fervor. He knew what every one of his customers was eating, how much, what they ate, what they left behind. And if you left even the tiniest morsel, he was there at the table like a shot, asking what was wrong. His specialty was the noodle dishes. There were fifty different kinds of pho alone, rotating on a daily basis in accordance with what was fresh that morning.

"So here's a suggestion," I said. "Why don't you open up a restaurant uptown?"

"No," he said, waving his hand. "All the customers come here for Vietnamese food. They wouldn't go uptown."

"If you moved up, they would."

"Rents higher. Wouldn't make money."

"But you could raise your prices. They expect to pay higher prices uptown. You'd be the only Vietnamese restaurant around. No competition."

Mr. Nguyen laughed. More customers came in and he went to greet them.

About a month later, I noticed one of the restaurants in my neighborhood had closed. There was a "for lease" sign on the window. It was a small intimate space, right across from where I lived. Done right, it'd be a perfect place for Mr. Nguyen. I just couldn't let it go. I called Mr. Nguyen and persuaded him to come up and look at the place with me. I pitched him the idea again, told him I'd draw up the plans for the interior for free. I was a graphic designer. The more I talk, the more persuasive I get. His eyes lit up. An upscale Vietnamese restaurant.

"I have to talk it over with my wife," he said. But I knew he'd caught my bug. I knew I had him. The best Vietnamese restaurant in the city was moving across from me, and I couldn't be more excited.

Hammering out the details of the lease was a nuisance, but after Phyllis's brother, the big-time lawyer, got involved, things happened quickly. I had my pals move in and we practically gutted the place. Spanking new kitchen, the stainless steel shimmering like a mirage in the desert, funky fun furniture, warm wooden floors, huge panes of glass etched with shimmery gold paint, bamboo leaves and birds evoking glamorous orientalism. My friend Alice, the landscape artist, did that for free. She loved her pho, too. In fact, all my pals were doing things at cost—we felt part of something important. Like we were making some kind of declaration, although exactly what that was, none of us could really say.

The grand opening was a complete success. The Nguyens laid out an emperor's buffet and we partied until two in the morning. Phyllis and I'd sent out invitations to half the town. And of course there was the neighborhood, people who'd been curious for weeks, their eyes peeping in through the big panes of glass, pointing to the sign and asking when, when, when? Some were already fans of Vietnamese food, others had never even heard of it. Phyllis and I had sometimes

stood for hours outside the door proselytizing. For those of the brave who'd ventured inside, Mr. Nguyen would hand out tiny samples of spring rolls. Or cups of iced Vietnamese coffee. Tantalizing them for the grand opening.

The next day was business as usual. I couldn't admire the Nguyens enough. The entire family stayed up all night to clean up the place. By lunch time they were open and greeting guests. The restaurant was booked solid the entire first month. For dinner. Lunches were a hit-or-miss affair. Most of the businesses were a few blocks east and people were still slowly finding out about the place. And like I said, some people weren't quite sure what to make of it. I sat at the bar for lunch every day. The Nguyens wanted to give me everything for free, but I wouldn't hear of it.

Working from home, the hop over to the Nguyens' was too easy. Pho, a cup of Vietnamese coffee, snacks—I was constantly running across the street for something to eat. Once, I ate five bowls of pho in one day. It wasn't unusual for me to sit at the Nguyens' all day long, working on the laptop, nibbling on spring rolls. Finally, I had to make myself go less. Limit myself to once a day. I was really putting on the pounds.

Phyllis could never understand my fanaticism.

"There's only so much pho a person can eat," she said.

"Speak for yourself."

About six weeks after the Nguyens' grand opening, my workload doubled in one of those freak cycles and I forgot about the restaurant. I was living off yogurts and pizzas-on-the-run between meetings. And then one night Phyllis asked me if I'd gone past the Nguyens' lately.

"Of course I've gone past them," I said. "I pass them every day."

"Yeah, but have you looked inside?"

"Looked inside?"

"Yes, big boy. Looked inside. They have no customers. The place is completely empty. All day long."

"What? That can't be."

"See for yourself."

I ran into my office. From there we had a perfectly clear view into the Nguyens'. Phyllis was right. I couldn't see one customer.

"Hmm. Let's go over for dinner," I said. "See what's going on."

Mr. Nguyen was sitting at one of the back tables reading a newspaper. The place was a ghost town. Mr. Nguyen greeted us warmly, a rueful smile on his face.

"It's been a while, Tom," he said.

"I've been so busy with work—this is the first time I've eaten out in weeks. Phyllis will tell you—I've been living off yogurts. I can't tell you how I'm looking forward to this."

"Sit here. At the best table, as usual."

"So how's everything?" I asked.

"Well, as you can see, business is slow. Very, very slow."

He got us a couple of beers and started pouring.

"But I don't understand. Things were so good."

"Yup. Yup. Sometimes that happens. When a restaurant is new, everyone comes. And then sometimes they forget about it. People always want something new. Novelty impact."

"Novelty syndrome," Phyllis said.

"Hopefully it'll pick up soon," I said.

"Yup. Hopefully."

I was truly distressed. Making up some excuse, I went back to the apartment and started calling everyone I could think of.

"It's an impromptu party—you have to come—now—quick or you'll miss all the fun. We're having a huge banquet at the Nguyens'," I said. "The Nguyens'. Our Vietnamese restaurant. Yes, that one. Yeah, they do have great food. Have you gone back since the opening? Yeah, yeah, I know. Me, too. I've been living off yogurts. Listen, call everyone you know. See you there!"

As soon as I got back to the restaurant, Phyllis did her turn, calling up everyone she knew. By nine o'clock, the restaurant was filled with revelers.

But you can't have a party every night. Phyllis and I started having almost all our meals at the Nguyens'. We cajoled our friends, even strangers, into making reservations. I met my clients there,

even if it was just for coffee or drinks. I knew a friend who was a friend of a restaurant critic. She wrote a favorable review. I got them listed in tourist guides. I did everything. But the damn restaurant was cursed.

I didn't get it. How can you have great food, good location, and empty tables? I couldn't get any work done. I'd just stare at the restaurant from my desk. It got to the point where Phyllis and I would avoid walking past the restaurant. We'd go around the back block. We were so ashamed, we couldn't even show our faces. After all, it was our fault. We'd persuaded Mr. Nguyen to close up a perfectly good restaurant in Vietnam ghetto to move all the way uptown for what? Our convenience? Only we'd really believed it'd work. Why hadn't it worked?

In only eight months the restaurant was closed. God, it's a cruel business. The site stayed vacant for several years. My heart skipped a little every time I saw the "for lease" sign. We didn't know what happened to the Nguyens. We were too ashamed to try to find out. And then three years later, Phyllis and I ran into Mr. Nguyen. He was working as a waiter at a Vietnamese restaurant near Chinatown, one his brother-in-law owned.

"It's so good to see you," we both said, genuinely happy. "We'd wondered where you'd gone. How's your wife?"

"Fine, fine. She's working at a dim sum restaurant nearby. Maybe by the end of the year, we'll have enough money to open another restaurant. We'll see, we'll see."

"Oh, Mr. Nguyen," Phyllis said, breaking down.

"We're awfully sorry about what happened," I said. "We should never have talked you into moving uptown. I can't tell you how bad we feel about the whole thing. If we could only make it up to you—but I imagine you don't want anything to do with us, considering—"

"Not a problem, not a problem," Mr. Nguyen said, curtly. He sort of waved his hand, as if the past was a pesky fly.

