

Take Out

by Tonya Plank

You're stupid drunk. And not feeling so good. You know you should stop doing this. But what else is there to do, especially since your brother went in? And now Roberto's gone to pick up his lady and left you alone, empty. Couldn't even drive you home. You don't know how much you got but you know it's not enough for a cab. Not that far. So you start walking. A few blocks on, you see a place in the distance. All lit up inside. Still open. Food should make the sick feeling go.

You open the door, walk in. Everyone stops what they doin', looks up at you. Two guys behind the counter. Some people at the tables by the window. Everyone's Chinese, except for a couple of whites. You look at the menu above the register. Your eyes are blurry. You can only see little stick pictures. You can't understand. Fuck it. You know what you want.

"Chicken fried rice," you say to the guy behind the register. "Take away."

"Uh?" He cocks his head at you.

"Chicken fried rice. Rice. Chicken, you know?" You flap your arms a little to demonstrate. Makes your head whirl. Guy behind the register straightens his neck and steps back. Widens his eyes. Shakes his head.

"Hey, go ask him. This guy don't understand shit," another black guy behind you says — the only other black guy in here, besides you. He points to the guy further down the counter.

You shuffle down to him. "Chicken fried rice," you say to him, enunciating all your words. But he does same as the other. Lifts his chin, eyes growing like a scared animal. He backs away. Jesus Christ, you know you're a big guy, but you just want fucking food before you keel over.

"Chicken. And rice," you say again, trying to make your voice go softer. He frowns, chin up, takes a step forward now. Like he's

working up courage to be tough. But he says nothing. He doesn't want any money. Not from your pocket anyway.

Whatever. You turn around to leave. But this is the only place you seen open. Up the street's an empty Navy yard, a bunch of factory buildings and some studios belonging to ghetto-lovin' artists. You turn back. You walk up, grab him by the collar. "Chicken. With. Rice," you say slowly. "It's not that hard."

A lady by the window screams.

When you turn to look at her you see the shiny silver the other black guy is pointing at the guy behind the register. "C'mon, hurry the fuck up," he says. Chinese guy's poking on every key, frantically, looking back and forth from register to gun.

"Shut the fuck up. You all don't move or you gonna be sorry," guy with the gun waves at the customers. Drawer opens with a clink. "C'mon, hurry the fuck up!" He throws a plastic bag at the Chinese guy.

You hear pounding on the glass window. "Fuck!" yells the guy with the gun. He flies out the door, plastic bag in the air above the register, falling slowly, like a deflating balloon.

Guy behind the register looks around, swallows. Slowly, corners of his mouth turn downward, eyes narrow, his fist rises. He grabs the balloon bag from the air, turns his glare on you.

You feel a hard jerk from your left, hear your jacket rip. You realize you're still holding the other guy's collar. Or you were. You feel a fist connect with your cheek, your face knocked sideways. Skinny arms whip you all the way around, an elbow locks around your neck from behind. You're in a choke-hold. Words you can't understand. Like angry cellos.

The door bangs open. A white freckled kid in a uniform comes breezing through, an older white guy trailing him. Both make eye contact with you immediately. And you with them. "Him?" freckles says walking quickly toward you. Now a whole orchestra of those cellos. Begins to sound like a siren.

"Jesus. Get Shen on the phone," the younger officer says to the older. When he turns, takes his attention off you for a second, you

see people near the window pointing at you. Your neck's starting to hurt. You struggle to pry the guy's fingers off. But the Long Island iced teas are having their way. Your fingers are like water.

"Bang bang," says the lady who screamed earlier. She points her index finger in your direction, works her thumb, demonstrating a gun.

"Ye, bang bang, gun," says the guy behind the register, pointing to you.

"Wait, I ain't have no gun," you hear yourself say. Or try to say. You can't get words out well with the elbow in your esophagus. Now you're mad. You punch at the air. You curse. The officers are too busy getting the cell phone to the guy behind the register guy to care. You do the only thing you can think, bite into the meat of the guy's arm. Hard. He's skinny and you hit bone. He cries out, releases. Your feet slide out from underneath you and you go down. You pick yourself up quickly, walk forward, before he can get you again. But the cops are in your way.

"Where ya think you're going?" says the older one.

"I need to get some food," you say, knowing you ain't going nowhere.

"We got about twelve witnesses here say you just tried to commit armed robbery," he says, bending your arms behind your back, snapping the cold metal around your wrists.

On your way into the car they push down hard on your head. Your neck hurts from the chokehold. "Ow," you say. "Shut up," the younger one says. "Don't wanna get hurt, don't rob no one. Simple."

"I didn't have no gun."

"Don't matter who had the gun. It's called acting in concert."

"I never seen that gun in my life."

"Yeah, right," he laughs. "At the station, you're gonna give us his full name, lead us straight to him. And if you don't, you're going down alone."

"I don't know him. How'm I supposed to know his name?" you say as the door slams shut.

