

iced teas and teh tarik, milk teas just barely reminiscent of 波霸奶茶. “It will come,” my mother kept reassuring me, tussling my hair even as it grew into a thick ponytail. “It will come.”

I was in high school when my brother called from UCLA, the two of us speaking exclusively in English by then. He announced, “It’s here!” In the kitchen, my mother was fashioning broiled pork loin and charcoaled asparagus with parmesan. Her rice cooker was steaming, fogging up our windows. “Boba is becoming more and more popular in Los Angeles!”

“Boba?” I asked. “What’s that?”

“It’s what Americans are calling 波 bō 霸 bà. Boba. I don’t know. I think it’s because they can’t pronounce it. Anyway, it’s in LA now. I think it’ll get to Jersey soon!”

Within ten months, 波霸奶茶 reached suburban New Jersey without fanfare—in frozen boxes, powdered mixture, and an anglicized name. Somewhere along its journey through the heartland of America, “boba” was further chiseled and reshaped into “bubble tea” that I barely noticed when I stumbled upon it in the food court of our Asian grocery store.

“Are you sure this is 波霸?” My mother asked, clucking at the menu. “Why is it so expensive?”

“It traveled really, really far!”

In the parking lot, my brother was holding an arm full of our favorite childhood snacks: shrimp crackers, wan-wan, and hey-song soda. As I curled my tongue around a half-frozen tapioca pearl, somehow both mushy and hard to chew, he asked, “So? Is it the same?”

The plastic cup crinkled in my hand like a cheap knock-off. The milk tea powder lodged uncomfortably between my teeth.

I wondered, even then: was it possible for it to ever be again?



In my mid-thirties, I arrive at my grandparents’ suburban house in a mountain just outside of Taipei. My grandmother is lying on her leather