

# The Usual

ANNIKA DAISY MENDOZA

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*“The Usual” was written to be a flash piece under the genre: story. The requirements for the assignment were to span a long period of time focusing on character development. This development is seen from the character, “the daughter.” The narrator gets to witness the daughter growing up into an adult. The development in the story was guided from a single line, “That’s big” said by the daughter. It became a steeple in the writing as it helped support the aging of the daughter. Initially I wrote this piece to tell a story about strangers connecting through food; however, that changed when the birthmark subplot was developed. The birthmark characteristic for the daughter was not in the initial paper and was suggested by my classmate. Now it is what connects the narrator to the daughter. The story is based on my personal experience as a regular to a locally owned restaurant. If I had to describe the piece in three words, it would be nostalgia and family love.*

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## Artist Statement

This piece was originally written for a creative writing class that focused on flash fiction and nonfiction literature. I had a unique experience where all my experiments were focused on food. “The Usual” was my last experiment. We were to choose from three flash genres: fantasy, story, and fixation. I chose to write a story that centered on a family and a restaurant worker who only interacted with each other through food and entitled, “The Usual.”

The requirements for the assignment were to span a long period of time and focus on character development. This development is seen in the character, “the daughter.” The narrator witnesses the daughter grow into an adult. The growth of the daughter is shown through the food she eats. Specifically, from the size of portions of her food. The line, “That’s big!” said by the daughter, was originally often stated in the writing.

Character development focused on the pattern of describing the portion size of her food throughout the story. However, most development came from the birthmark subplot, which was not in the initial paper and was suggested by my classmate. The birthmark is what connects the narrator to the daughter and was added so that the narrator could recognize the daughter as she grew up.

The second revision focused heavily on the relationship between the narrator and the daughter. This meant that the narrator also had to go through a type of development. The narrator’s development is seen in how her family history is slowly revealed. The narrator continuously mentions her sister and how her sister grew up with a birthmark. The sister was once a significant part of the narrator’s life, the piece implies, but as they grew up and her birthmark determined her choices, they were eventually split apart. The intensity of this separation is left to the reader’s interpretation.



I am an undergraduate junior majoring in studio art. As a kid I enjoyed drawing, reading, and writing which led me to my dream to become an author and illustrator. Currently, I am pursuing my passion in drawing, but I wanted to develop my skills in writing and took the English 273 Creative Writing class this past semester (Fall 2022). This piece is a product from that class.

I intended for the narrator to be left ambiguous and up to the reader's interpretation, so the implication mentioned earlier about the narrator and her sister is flexible. I believe that not every story needs to be fully explained, and leaving room for interpretation can add to the reader's experience.

The story is inspired by my personal experience as a regular customer at a locally owned restaurant. My family would go to this restaurant every Friday night for dinner. Just like in the story, we went for many years. We would call it our "family date night." The daughter's food choices are based on my food choices. Since I was a little girl I could only eat a small bento, until middle school when I could eat what my older sister ate, a nabeyaki udon. After that, I always ordered a nabeyaki udon. We stopped going to the restaurant when I was in high school

## The Usual

The little girl stares at me with wide eyes from across the counter. I smile at her, just to be friendly, but she continues to watch in silence. I notice, right away, the birthmark above her right eyebrow—it reminds me of my sister's. A caramel-colored, nickel-sized blob, or so I liked to call it as a kid. My sister never liked that birthmark, even as she got older. She felt like her identity was lost in the presence of the mark, which is why she never helps out at our family's restaurant. I try not to stare at the child's forehead.

The girl's mother places a small bento on the counter. "This, and one chicken katsu plate, and . . ." She turns to her husband behind her.

The husband looks up at our menu board and says, "The nabeyaki udon. How big is that?"

I grab the container that we put our soups in. The daughter's eyes open wider.

"That's big!" she says.

The father pats his daughter's head as he says "That'll do. Thank you!" He takes his daughter's hand and sits down at the table across from the front counter.

Business is slow around this time, six at night. People are either at the grocery store buying ingredients for dinner, or they're here grabbing takeout if they come at all. But starting that day, my restaurant is no longer as quiet as it once was.

Next Friday arrives, and at six, so does the family. "Welcome," I say. The mother smiles and pushes the same small bento toward the register and says, "The chicken katsu plate and the nabeyaki udon again, please."

"Hi!" The daughter says to me this time. She sways side to side, playing with the flow of her dress.

I smile back. "Hi there!"

The father grabs his daughter's hand again and sits at the same table. Her restless swaying reminds me of my sister. Her favorite outfit was her pink princess dress and sandals. A whole set was given especially for her on her 6th birthday. My

as my family became heavily involved in our high school band. But occasionally we would go back and the owners would remember us again. We would chat and catch up at the register while we waited for our food. But the ending for the real local restaurant was different. In reality, the restaurant owners retired shortly after I graduated from high school.

From then on, I would always think of the restaurant whenever I ate udon. I also often wonder if the owners would think of us, too. Nowadays, seeing the closed restaurant feels bittersweet and fills me with memories I sometimes wish to relive. I hope to share this tender experience with whoever reads this story.

If I had to describe the piece in three words, it would be nostalgia, family, and love.

sister was always stubborn and set in her ways. Very rarely was she moved enough to change what she believed. I admired that about her.

After their fifth visit, I bring the family their food to their table like a waiter. With few customers in the hour before closing, I was able to dedicate my time to them. After all, they haven't missed a Friday yet.

"Here's some gyoza, on the house," I say. "Thank you for supporting our restaurant for so long!" Gyoza was my sister's favorite dish and the first dish I learned to make. At my restaurant, I make the gyoza and my family's secret sauce on demand to keep them as fresh as possible.

"Whoa!" The little girl stabs one of the gyozas and attempts to eat in one bite. Her cheeks puff like a chipmunk eating peanuts.

"You didn't have to," the father says as he scratches the back of his head. His large grin tells me how grateful he is.

"Enjoy." I depart with a smile.

Like a ritual, they come every Friday night around six. The last hour before closing. I have already lost count of how many times. They order chicken katsu, nabeyaki udon, and the daughter's little bento; they sit at the same table across from the front counter and take the first bite into their meals in sync. Each visit made me recall old memories. Some I had forgotten ever happened.

"I don't want the bento!" the girl complains. Her mother smiles, tight-lipped and patient. "What would you like then?"

"I want the same thing as Daddy!" For once, the girl changes their usual Friday routine.

"You've gotten taller, haven't you?" I said. "A growing girl needs a good meal. We can make a smaller portion of the nabeyaki udon."

"Really?" The daughter's frown curls into a large grin.

"I'm so sorry—thank you so much," the mother says.

The girl's height helps me determine the size of her special order of nabeyaki udon. An Extra Small for when she could rest her chin on the counter. A Small when I could finally see

the collar of her shirt. A Medium for her 6th grade graduation. And eventually, a Large for her first middle school band concert.

“Congratulations! Were you nervous?” I ask.

“It was a lot of fun! Have you ever been to a concert before?” She asks and leans in. Her eyes sparkle, awaiting my answer.

“Unfortunately, I haven’t.”

“What!” The daughter slaps her left hand onto the counter. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I will invite you to my next one!”

“Aw, thank you. I’d be honored to watch you play.”

The daughter nods constantly, “The usual, please!”

“The usual for all three of us.” The mother says, smiling behind her.

“I remember you telling me your sister had a birthmark on her face, too,” the girl says. Her parents sit at the usual table while I prepare the utensils and place them in the bag. Today they ordered take-out for the first time.

“Yes, she does. Right in the center of her cheek. She was called ‘Target Girl’ in middle school, and I would always have to fight her bullies.”

“Did she ever cover it up with makeup or get it removed?”

I shake my head. “My sister didn’t want anyone to determine what she should look like. In fact, she chose to call it a beauty mark.” I smile as I remember what my sister would say. “She said it helped enhance her facial features and ensured to make her memorable to anyone she met. She wasn’t wrong.” I push the bag of food toward her. “Enjoy your dinner.”

“Thank you.” The girl smiles as she grabs the bag. “Really, thank you.”

Friday nights are different now. The family continues with take-out and stops dining in, coming once a month if

at all. Despite this, as soon as six o’clock comes around, I wait for their family to walk in, to order their usual, to sit at their usual table. I wait for their daughter’s usual smile. But the nights continue to stay quiet until they remain quiet for years. The table right across from the front counter remains empty.

I return to my old routine, cleaning the kitchen at six, starting early in the last hour before closing. Other regulars come and go, thirty-something-year-olds stopping for a bite. But the empty nights remain until I no longer remember what it was like to see that table across from the counter filled again.

Once again, I’m left alone with these bittersweet memories. They replay in my head, the smiling family together at their table, eating their favorite meal. Then, memories of running the restaurant with my parents and my sister. A routine that I thought would stay forever but slowly faded away.

“I’d like the usual: chicken katsu, nabeyaki udon, and this bento for my daughter.” The woman pushes a small bento across the counter for the shy little girl beside her. I scribble down the order, confused as to why this woman asked for “the usual.” I don’t recall anyone placing this order any time recently, or with any consistency.

“Is that all?” I look at the woman and get a hint of growing nostalgia from her smile. The little girl’s silent and intense yet familiar stare, the woman’s birthmark above her right eyebrow. The birthmark had faded and shrunk with time, but she bore it proudly.

“That would be a regular sized nabeyaki udon, right?” the woman asks.

“How’s about I make it an Extra Large, adult-sized nabeyaki udon. Just for you.”