Between Plates and Memories: A Story of Us

Odbayar Dorj

The first pasta I had after returning to Japan tasted different. It wasn't bad—just different. The sauce was lighter, the seasoning subtle, and yet it stirred something inside me: a memory of a meal in a small restaurant tucked away in the mountains of Anan. A memory of Yuto.

Before I left Japan to return to Mongolia, Yuto and I made a list of things we wanted to do together—a way of holding on before we had to let go. At the top of that list was visiting the Hina doll exhibition in Anan for Hinamatsuri. I had always wanted to see the dolls, and although Yuto had already been there earlier, he agreed to go again without hesitation. That was the kind of person he was—quietly kind, unselfish.

We set off in his dark blue Jimny on a spring morning, the sky soft with early light. The Hinamatsuri display was stunning. Thousands of dolls were arranged in grand pyramid-like structures—some antique, some handmade, each with its own charm. On the second floor of the exhibition hall, a global collection of dolls caught my eye—and among them, to my delight, was a Mongolian doll. That little figure, so far from home, made me feel seen.

Downstairs, we took a seat to watch a series of volunteer performances—people singing, playing traditional instruments, even dancing. Some of the songs were familiar to Yuto, and as I leaned on his shoulder, he began singing softly. I held his hand and listened, caught between the music and the man beside me. One song lingered in my heart: "Hanamizuki." Even now, whenever I hear it, I return to that moment, to his voice in my ear and the scent of spring all around us.

Hungry, we searched for a place to eat. Rural areas don't always make dining easy, but we found two options. Yuto had been to one, so we called the other—an Italian place named Okamoto. The owner said they could take us in in thirty minutes. We had time, so we stopped by a small cherry blossom grove nearby. The petals were just starting to open, soft pink against the cool blue sky. Yuto, my unofficial photographer, took photos of me as always. His pictures never need editing; he sees me the way I hope to be seen.

When we finally arrived at the restaurant, it looked like something straight out of a European fairy tale—an adorable yellow cottage nestled at the foot of a mountain, with Italian flags fluttering by the gate. The owner greeted us politely, asking us to wait a bit while the guests who came before us finished. We stood outside, taking in the charm of the place. It didn't look like any house I'd seen in Japan. It felt like something from a dream.

Inside, the husband wore a black hat and a white chef's coat, accented with a green scarf—just like an Italian chef. His wife wore a matching white coat with a red scarf. They welcomed us warmly and explained the menu. There weren't many options—only two kinds of pasta sets and a non-alcoholic wine, which they recommended. We ordered both pasta dishes and the wine.

They told us they have been running this place for forty years now. The restaurant opened only on weekends and took just three reservations on a given day: two lunches and a dinner. There were only two tables. It was so quiet, so personal, and we could see the couple cooking together in their small kitchen. Even though they had already filled their reservations that day, they still made space for us because we had come from far away.

The salad came first, fresh and colorful. The bread was soft and warm. We toasted with the wine, its elegant flavor light and unexpected. Then came the pasta—rich, smooth, and completely different from anything I'd ever had before. It felt like I was tasting pasta for the very first time. Even Yuto used his bread to soak up the last drops of sauce.

We spoke with our hosts and I told them that I was from Mongolia and that I would be leaving soon. When I told them that I was flying back on March 29, the husband smiled. "That's my wife's birthday," he said. "You're leaving on her birthday—how special!"

After dessert—a light, creamy yogurt—we were invited by our gracious hosts to choose cups from their personal collection for our coffee. They had a hobby of collecting unique cups and let the guests select their favorite. I chose a cup with soft blue swirls. Yuto picked one shaped like a small mountain. We sipped quietly, our meal drawing to a gentle close. Before leaving, we took a photo together with the couple to remember the moment.

Looking at them, working side by side in their cozy restaurant, I saw something more than just hospitality. I saw a reflection of the future Yuto and I used to dream about. I'm not very good at cooking, but Yuto always said I was good with a knife; he always encouraged me. He talked about retiring one day and opening a tiny izakaya—a place with a few signature dishes, where people could relax, eat, and talk with him as he cooked. Sometimes he'd sit down and share a drink with the guests. It was a simple dream but a beautiful one. I supported it with all my heart.

I used to imagine myself standing beside him in that izakaya, helping him prepare the vegetables, listening to the stories of customers, learning about their lives. I didn't need to be good in the kitchen to be a part of it. That shared dream was enough.

In that quiet little restaurant in Anan, I saw it come to life—if only for a moment. The couple reminded me that such a life was not only possible but worth dreaming of.

So, yes, the pasta I had today was different. But maybe that's why I missed the other one so much—not just for its taste, but for the day it belonged to. That pasta carried the flavor of memories. Of Yuto. Of spring. Of dreams I still hold close.

He lives in my memories now, and those memories are alive—because he still lives in them.



Odbayar Dorj is a Mongolian writer, educator, and graduate student currently based in Japan. With a background in English education, her work explores the themes of memory, culture, and personal transformation—often inspired by her lived experiences between Mongolia and Japan. She believes in the power of storytelling as a way to bridge cultures and evoke empathy. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in various literary platforms and she continues to write about the subtle moments that shape human connection. When she's not writing or teaching, she enjoys quiet walks among flowers, collecting beautiful details from everyday life, and practicing the Japanese philosophy of *ichigo ichie*—cherishing the unrepeatable nature of each moment.