4.

Despite my academic success at Lederle, my parents had the bright idea of sampling one of the schools in Detroit. Despite the inner-city system’s awful reputation, Burton Elementary, the four-story brick building across the street from Chung’s, was seen as an exception. It was the school that serviced the kids in Chinatown, including my second cousins. All the adults said nice things about the teachers and classes, so my mom and dad listed our cousins’ address as our primary residence and dropped us off in the mornings.

At first, the trial run was great. Not only could my parents look out the window and see our fenced—up classrooms, but I didn’t have to choose sides between the Black and white kids on the playground. However, there were downsides. My text books were held together by scotch tape and the lack of meaningful homework disappointed my mom. A few months in, my parents gave the experiment a failing grade and re-enrolled us in the suburbs. While I missed eating the free cereal breakfasts with my cousins, at least the water fountains were safe to drink from.

The brief stint at Burton prepared me for my next foray into the building. On weekends, Craig, Chris, and I attended a Chinese language program sponsored by On Leong, aka the tong. My parents never worried about making us bilingual, but with the dwindling population of families in Chinatown, the weekend program faced a declining enrollment and the possibility of losing its grant from the city. My siblings and I padded their numbers.

Chinese school differed from regular school. For one thing, everyone else was Chinese. Not only were they Chinese, but they had immigrated from Hong Kong or Southern China. They spoke fluent Cantonese. My language skills were so bad that I was placed in a class kids two or three years younger than me. It was humiliating. Whenever the native speakers laughed at me, I had to teach them a few new choice words in English.

After class was done, my siblings and I would head back to Chung’s. Even on Sundays, our back kitchen buzzed with activity. Each week, we sold over four thousand egg rolls, so my grandma worked through the weekend to be ready. To help with the assembling and frying, she enlisted the help of two of the Ahoos, as well my mom.

One afternoon, my siblings and I sat down to practice writing our Chinese characters. We were excited to use the new ink and brush sets sent from my maternal grandparents in Menlo Park, all the way in California. But unlike my parents, who bought everything in triplicates, my relatives made the mistake of sending us three different designs: a panda, a tiger, and a bamboo screen. In a fight for the fiercer sets, we screamed at each other. We yelled so loud, my grandma shouted over us, “Ah Gin.”

That was my dad’s Chinese name, but his friends called him “Big Al.” The Drew Carey look-alike — with a crew cut and thick black glasses — carried a few extra pounds. The girth made him jolly, especially when he chuckled at his own mispronunciation of popular multisyllabic words like bouillon, gyro, and San Franfrisco.

My grandma often dismissed my dad, but that made no sense to me. He obeyed almost all her orders. When my dad was in community college, she asked him to drop out to work at the restaurant. In exchange, she offered him a share of the family restaurant. My dad agreed, but after he married my mom, Ngin-Ngin reneged on the deal. Big Al was left to raise his family on a waiter’s wages and a side gig serving as a bouncer at the gambling den downstairs.

Big Al came bouncing into the room. Dressed in his red waiter’s jacket, my dad smiled. “Who wants to hang out in the dining room?”

A smile came across my face. The move was a definite upgrade from the hot and sweaty kitchen. It was where the men hung out, including my dad and my grandpa when he wasn’t in the gambling den or at the racetracks. Unfortunately, my grandma thought it looked unprofessional to see little kids in the dining room, so she banned us from entering during business hours.

With our best sad puppy faces, my brothers and I pouted, “Please, we promise to be quiet. We won’t even look at anyone.”

Ngin-Ngin adjusted the flame on her wok, “Hmm dok.”

Once again, my grandma tried to kill any joy in the house. The story usually ended there, but this time, my dad felt inspired. “It’s Sunday. It won’t get very busy.” He gathered our books, “Plus, they can keep an eye on the door.”

Like the rest of the city, Chung’s had a crime problem. Outside our employees’ sticky fingers, we had twice been robbed at gunpoint. The first time, my dad’s youngest brother, John, was the manager on duty. John had recently quit as a pharmacist at a drug store in the city because he was afraid the customers might pressure him into giving them free samples. Within a few months of rejoining the restaurant, a man came in brandishing a gun. After handing over the day’s receipts, my uncle lasted a few more weeks, before returning to the legal drug trade.

A few months later, another gunman appeared after lunch when our dining room sat idle. This time, the manager was my mom’s cousin, Rubber Lun. True to his name, which combined the English term for the slick polymer and the Cantonese word for “wheels,” after the robbery, Rubber Lun quit on the spot. Like a set of Hot Wheels, he was out the door in sixty seconds.

Detroit’s high crime rate seemed to always be on the rise. Meanwhile, white flight continued to take its toll on the city’s tax base, forcing officials to institute massive budget cuts, closing neighborhood police substations and laying off hundreds. With fewer men in blue to bribe with a free meal to hang out in our dining room, my dad thought our presence might be a cheap substitute. “Who’s going to rob a place with small kids?”

While I questioned my dad’s using us as a decoy, his argument worked. Ngin—Ngin went back to frying dumplings. Technically, my grandma never said we could hang out in the dining room. It was not her style to say “yes” to us. Instead, she just stopped saying “no,” which was our cue to run before she changed her mind.

Our restaurant’s ninety-four seat dining room was my happiest place on Earth. We had it all: furious dragons flying across the walls, antique glass lanterns spinning from above, a wood relief of the eight immortals sailing across the Bohai Sea, the Four Tops singing on the radio. For sweets, there were tubs of fresh-baked almond cookies, a display case filled with Wrigley’s gum, and a mini-fridge stocked with bottles of Coke. It was like Disneyland Detroit. We even had a mouse or two.

From my few visits during the daytime — when my grandma was off at the store — I knew that the most coveted seats in our dining room were up front where three huge windows gave diners a full view of Detroit’s bustling Cass Avenue. As regulars entered our lobby, they craned their necks past the teakwood screen to see if the red vinyl chairs were open, and if they were, they’d claim the seats, as they called out their order. At first, I thought these diners picked those seats for the beautiful, natural sunlight before realizing they were simply watching their cars from being stolen.

Continuing our fight over the ink and brushes, my brothers raced for the best seats in the house. We each grabbed a different booth and spread out. Big Al pointed to the white Formica top at the back of the room, the one by the metal coat rack, wooden high chairs, and plastic boosters. “You guys have to sit back here.”

My brothers and I looked at each other before running to grab a seat at the table. There were several warm bags of take away orders waiting to be picked up. I pushed them to the side.

My dad pushed in my chair and made me sit up straight. “You guys just sit here and relax. Don’t go running around. Grandma will get mad”

“For how long?”

“Until we close. That shouldn’t be too hard.”

Having finished all my homework, I looked around for options. There wasn’t much, just a pile of discarded newspapers and magazines, as well a stack of phone books. The excitement of hanging with the men evaporated after realizing there were still eight hours until we closed. What the heck would I do?

The obvious choice was stuffing my face. My snack began with a pair of egg rolls which we called “cheung goon.” The five-inch nosh, made entirely from scratch, even the skin and plum sauce, featured shredded cabbage, ground pork, baby shrimp, and our secret ingredient — Jif’s peanut butter. Dipped in the tart plum sauce, they were finger—licking good.

After finishing my appetizer, I skipped straight to the fortune cookies, a few dozen of them. Bored with getting so many duplicate answers to life, I gave myself a writing assignment. On tiny slips of paper, I composed my own fortunes, which I then slipped into the bow—shaped cookie with a toothpick. When I cracked open the shell, I acted surprised. “New friends are on the horizon.” “The Tigers will win 10-0.” “Craig and Chris will stop being such bossy pants.”

I looked at the clock on the wall. Twenty minutes down. Another seven and a half hours to go. Next, I turned to the discarded papers — The *Free Press* and The *News*, as well as the *Metro Times*. At that age, the only section that interested me was the comics, which I read over and over. *Blondie* and *Ziggy* weren’t funny the first time. They weren’t any better the tenth time, either. At least the puzzles were challenging: Jumbo, Scrabble, Find-a-Word. It was my first memory of enjoying playing with words.

By the fifth or sixth hour, my mind had turned to mush. I was so bored I even offered to help the waiters with their long list of side work — peeling pea pods, filling soy sauce bottles, folding napkins. But our hired waiters said they didn’t think we were up to snuff and they didn’t want to have to re-do our work. I think they were just threatened that we might be so good that we’d take their jobs.

The only thing left to do was sit and watch the adults. Throughout the afternoon, a steady stream of customers came through our door, a mix of age, gender, race, and dress. On the surface, they all seemed to be such different people, but it was interesting to me that they mostly ordered the same dishes — almond boneless chicken, shrimp fried rice, chicken chop suey, sweet and sour pork, breaded fried shrimp, along with our egg rolls. I guess food was universal.

However, my favorite part was watching my dad. Here was a man who had spent his entire life in Chinatown, yet he was able to find something in common with anyone who walked into our lobby. Other parents warned their kids not to talk to strangers, but my dad encouraged it. Whether it was an autoworker, rabbi, doctor, Big Al pushed us to say hi. Through observation and osmosis, I learned not to be afraid of people who were different from me.

Big Al wasn’t an expert on any subject, but he had the gift of gab. At some point, I noticed that it wasn’t about how much my dad said. As our diners pontificated on the latest plant closure or awful trade by the Red Wings, Big Al sat there, took it all in, and nodded his head. For my dad, bringing us in wasn’t just about protecting the store or showing us off to his friends; it was about letting us discover the outside world that was sitting inside our dining room. All we had to do was listen.

By the time dinner rolled around, I was proud of myself. Despite sipping lots of tea and Coke, I had managed to sit through the entire afternoon with only a handful of bathroom breaks. My dad rewarded our good behavior with a giant plate of shrimp with lobster sauce. The stir fried crustacean was served in a white sauce made with chicken broth, garlic, green onions, minced pork, and scrambled eggs. The dish was one of my favorites, but I was always confused as to why there wasn’t any actual lobster in the sauce.

We closed the earliest on Sundays at— 9pm. While the waiters cleaned in advance so they could leave on time, my brothers and I looked for our dad to see if he’d be ready to go, too. Around this hour, Big Al was always looking for more things to do around the restaurant — eating leftovers, testing new recipes, flipping through catalogs for the latest kitchenware. This time, he was sitting in one of our booths with the last table of the night. I wasn’t sure if I was more jealous of my dad, who got to make so many friends, or these strangers who got to spend so much time with my always-running-around, too-busy-to-sit-down dad.

My dad waved us over. I was so excited to meet the older white couple. I brushed back my hair and straightened my corduroy pants, before bolting across our red and black carpet. As I reached the table, I wanted to see what they had ordered: subgum wonton. The first time I saw the dish listed on our menu, I was surprised. The entree included a strange—sounding ingredient called “kreplach.” That didn’t sound very Chinese to me. My dad explained it was Yiddish for “dumplings.” I knew we had a lot of Jewish customers. I didn’t know our food was Jewish, too.

Jockeying for the best lighting under our antique lanterns, my siblings and I ended up organizing by height. My dad, whose face beamed with pride, nodded as the man and woman clapped their hands. “Your children are so well-behaved.”

My dad nodded. “This is Craig, Chris, and Curtis. Calvin and the baby, Cindy, are in back.” (There were only five kids at the time.)

The couple squealed. “Their names all begin with ‘C.’ Is that a Chinese thing?”

My dad, a community college drop-out, loved playing cultural ambassador. “It’s an ancient Chinese tradition. It’s so we know who belongs to who.”

The woman smiled, as she leaned in to give us a pop quiz. “Do you boys speak Chinese?”

Before I could respond, my dad jumped in. “Of course, they speak Chinese.’ This was a lie, but one my dad was happy to tell. Maybe it’s because his own Chinese sucked or maybe he figured the customers couldn’t tell the difference, but he turned to us. “Go on. Say something.”

My mind flashed back to the chalkboard in Chinese school, but the only words that came to mind were the ones the kids giggled about around the Corridor — “dieu mah (drunk),” “mah fun (marijuana),” “cha gai ngieu (hookers).” I could say those, but I doubted they would earn me any “Mazel Tovs.”

Thankfully, the woman cooed. “Tell me your names.”

This time, I welcomed her interruption. My name was one of the few Chinese words I could pronounce and even write in my chicken-scratch calligraphy. My back straightened up. My height rose two inches, as my mouth trumpeted the words. *“*It’s Chin Kwok Toy.”

My dad breathed a sigh of relief. He held up his three middle fingers. “His name has three parts. Our last name comes first, then his generation, and then his given name.” Those were the three parts of my identity. Even then, I knew the order was a big deal. It happened to be the opposite order of my American name. As my brothers and I continued to stand our position, my dad repeated his favorite line, “The family part comes first.”

5.

One afternoon, a mix of ginger, garlic, scallions, and star anise filled the kitchen air. Our head chef, Kin Sook, dressed in his white shirt and bloodied apron, was preparing another of my favorites, see yao gai. The easy-to-make entree was made by simmering a whole bird, head and feet included, in a giant pot of said ingredients along with lots of light soy sauce. In order to nab one of the two drumsticks, I had to be super nice to the guy. My grandma may have thought she was the boss, but in a Chinese restaurant, the cook was king.

As I paced the narrow hallway separating the two kitchens, rehearsing one of the few compliments I knew in Cantonese — “gum ho sick” — I panicked at the sight of the adults gathering around the prep table in the main kitchen. The greased-covered clock read 4:00pm, way too early to put out the dinner trays for our staff dinners. I had to act fast. When it came to food, no one in our restaurant believed in saying “women and children first.”

After elbowing my way into the middle of the group, including my parents who tried to hold me back, the hullabaloo turned out to be a false alarm. They were all gathered to hear Heng Sook talk about his latest cigarette break. Bending at the knees, he demonstrated his squatted position behind one of the planters outside. After taking one last drag, he said that heard a loud bang. He stood up to see a man running out of Bow Wah, the restaurant across the street. As Heng Sook continued his story, the entire table fell silent. I had never heard the place so quiet before.

I wanted to know what really happened, so I ran to look outside. The gray metal door was usually propped open to let in fresh air, but it was closed and locked. That was my first clue something was wrong. I peered through the glass slats. A black-and-white police car was parked on the sidewalk. This was too exciting to stay inside.

As my hand turned the knob, my mom yanked me back. “Stop. It’s not safe out there.”

I really wanted a closer look. “Don’t worry, mom. I’m short. Any stray bullets will go over my head.”

That didn’t help. My mom banished me, along with my siblings, to the back kitchen. More details emerged from the Ahoos who stopped in. It turned out Heng Sook had caught the tail end of a botched robbery. The man darting into the alley was the prime suspect. What our cook didn’t know was that Bow Wah’s owner, Tommy Lee, had tried to chase off the would-be thief with his dirty cleaver. The bullet went straight into his stomach and now he was dead.

In Detroit, whirring sirens had long become the new Motown sound, with squad cars blaring their red and blue lights in the air, but those cops always sped through Chinatown, on their way to some other no-good, bad part of town. This time, they stopped. The false belief I always held, that our tiny corner was a safe bubble, had been shattered. Chinatown was just as dangerous as the rest of the Motor City.

I wanted to question Heng Sook about his statement to the police, but the chance never came up. He never came back to work. According my dad, Heng Sook was afraid of having to testify in court, so he made himself scarce. I was confused. He wasn’t shy and his English was pretty good. What was there to be afraid of? Didn’t he want to play the hero?

After Tommy Lee’s murder, the Asian American families on the block launched their yellow and brown flight. Every few weeks, another moving van would cart off another friend. This included Rudy, the Filipino Fonzie. My cousin and I were in the back kitchen playing turtle — a match game with mahjong tiles, when they— A year older than me, Rudy looked so cool with his slicked back hair and white t—shirts. His appearance gave me the biggest smile. No matter what our little gang was doing — sitting on the building stoop or heading to Sam’s party store for Kool Aid and a bag of Better Made chips — Rudy’s presence made it exciting.

A few months before during the Moon Festival, Peterboro turned into a street fair. There was a stage and food stalls full of sweets and fried rice. Rudy was hanging around with his Filipino friends, getting ready to perform tinikling — a traditional island dance with clacking bamboo poles. He looked so handsome in his neatly—ironed barong. Since my older cousin, Wai—Mon, was his classmate, I begged her to invite him to join us sitting on the benches. My request must’ve been so annoying that my cousin snapped.

“What’s so big about Rudy? You in love with him or something?”

*Duh, of course. Isn’t everybody? He’s so cute.* That’s the thought that popped into my head, but from the way my cousin posed the question, I knew she expected a different answer. I didn’t understand what I was feeling, but there was just an energy and excitement that I felt around him. Was it physical? Yes. Was it sexual? I didn’t know what that word meant. Was it gay? More pre-gay. In a panic, I blurted out, “no.” Some primal instinct kicked in and told me I needed to lie. I was already being teased at school for being Chinese. I didn’t need another target on my back. I spent the rest of the festival playing carnival games and snacking on apricot haw flakes.

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With the number of eligible playmates down, I had to find new things to pass the time as my parents worked. Luckily, our kitchen was a treasure trove of opportunity and my parents let us have a run of the kitchen. Eight commercial-grade refrigerators lined the walls of our main kitchen, along with a long service station in the center that featured several ready-made broths. Whenever I was hungry, I could grab myself a bowl. Being creative and bored, I acted like a mad scientist, often combining the different soups into strange combos.

One day, in the summer before fifth grade, I was finishing up my latest concoction: wonton egg drop soup with mushrooms, when Big Al came in with a huge smile on his face. “Who wants to go for a ride?”

Usually that meant sitting in the van so he could double park while he made a quick delivery run. I usually went along, just to get out of the restaurant, but my soup tasted really good and I was ready for second bowl. “Thanks, but I’m okay.”

My dad grabbed my snack. “Come on. Everyone else is waiting.”

I looked around. I hadn’t noticed that the only adults left in the room were my Uncle Phil, who co-owned the restaurant, and the hired staff. Once again, I was the last to know.

The streets north of Detroit formed a perfect grid with the riverfront being ground zero and Eight Mile Road serving as the legal and psychological border. As the street numbers got bigger, the grass turned greener and the people got whiter. While most people stayed on one side or the other, my family crossed the line every day, going back and forth between home and work. This time, our van had passed our home on Nine Mile and we went further north than I had ever been.

With the entire family stuffed in the van, my dad drove to Sixteen Mile. A sign at the freeway exit read, “Troy, the city of tomorrow… today.” Our destination turned out to be a new subdivision full of half-built homes and mounds of dirt with wooden “sold” signs. We pulled into the driveway of a two-story house with a two-car garage and drab olive siding.

I leaned forward from the back. “Who are we seeing?”

My dad, whose smile hadn’t left his face since we drove from the restaurant, turned off the engine. “No one. This is our house.”

We all dropped our jaws, even my mom. My dad liked surprising us all the time, but this was a big one. Maybe it shouldn’t have been. Things in Southfield had gotten rougher. After several brawls on the bus, my mom added chauffeuring to her list of duties. At school, the fights between the Blacks and whites also increased. After a student punched a teacher, rumors spread about plans for armed guards and metal detectors. The worst was when several cop cars appeared in front of our house. They surrounded the residence-slash-drug den across the street.

In comparison, our new house and neighborhood looked perfect and clean. It felt like we were George and Weezy Jefferson and we had just moved on up. As we all piled out of the van, my siblings and I raced up the driveway, yelling, “I get the big room.” “Not if I see it first.”

I turned back to thank my dad. His smile was still there. After living his whole life under the roof of his parents, he finally had the master key. Big Al had come around the front of the van, waiting for my mom to get out. I couldn’t tell how my mom was feeling until she took my dad’s hand and smiled, too. Once again, her next big move in life had been decided for her.

After wiping off our shoes, my siblings and I ran around the house. We hit both floors, as well as the basement, opening every window and slamming shut every door. We behaved like the Spaniards claiming a New World. Hopefully, we weren’t carrying any deadly diseases.

I wanted to check the front of the house. I ran to the foyer and whipped open the double doors. I had never seen so much greenery before. It was like an enchanted forest. As I stepped to get a better view, my white tube socks felt a smooth groove on the ground. The newly dry cement included a welcome message, “Jap.”

I recognized the slur from late night TV and its war movies, but laughed it off. Not only had I heard plenty of racist taunts on the playground, but these idiots couldn’t even get it right. We weren’t Japs. We were chinks. The mistake was so obvious. I thought my siblings would laugh, too. I cupped my two hands into a bullhorn. “Hey, guys. Come see this!”

My dad, who was adding to his long list of repairs, happened to be in the foyer noting the loose light fixture. He poked his head out the door, “Why are you yelling?”

My finger pointed to the cement. “Look. Isn’t that funny?” My dad glanced down before yanking me back inside. He pulled so hard, I got whiplash. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Just stay inside. That’s it!”

On the twenty-minute van ride back to the restaurant, my siblings kept asking me what I had seen that made me so excited. I never told them. The image of my dad beaming as we first pulled up to the driveway flashed in my head. This was supposed to be his big day. I didn’t want him to feel bad or think that he made a mistake by moving us here, so I adopted a vow of silence.

Two months later, our family moved into the corner lot. The developers cemented over the porch, but a long list of repairs remained — finish the bathrooms and basement, build the deck, landscape the backyard, install the railings for the stairs. From the hushed conversations between my parents, I could tell this was a stretch. The house remained a work-in-progress, as they struggled to save enough to complete each job, but it was our home.

Sadly, the graffiti turned out to be a sneak preview. Every time we made a home improvement, another attack followed. If we planted trees, our mailbox would be smashed. If we installed a basketball net, skid marks would appear on our lawn. If we planted a garden, our windows would be shot with a bb gun. The worst came when the cops appeared on our driveway after we were accused of climbing on the school and throwing rocks at the passing cars. We never found out which neighbor called, but it was probably one of the twenty families that signed a group letter complaining about our delivery van parked on our driveway.

The restaurant once again became our refuge. It was our safe zone where we could just be ourselves. Unfortunately, as little kids, there wasn’t much for us to do. With my cousins moving out of Chinatown, the TV became our best friend. We watched a lot of reruns of *The Brady Bunch, Gilligan’s Island,* and *Good Times*. We learned a lot of catchphrases like “Dy-no-mite!”

At the end of November, I was excited to hear that my cousins would be visiting the restaurant. It was Thanksgiving, my favorite holiday and the one day of the year that we closed. However, we were even busier. Our dining room was packed with a private party for our extended family. Since my great grandpa had three wives, it resulted in a brood of ten kids, twenty grandkids, and forty great-grandkids, a mix of Chins, Chungs, Wongs, and Moys.

In addition to the large guest list, the day brought the best menu. The majority of family members had gone on to open their own restaurant, so there were literally too many cooks in the kitchen. They all vied to outdo each other with their contributions.

The winner was easily my dad’s Chinese roast chicken. A day earlier, he began preparing — slathering the birds in his homemade bbq sauce and hang drying them. A dozen wasn’t enough. It was the first dish gobbled up. My mom’s side dishes were popular, too, especially her sweet yams slathered in honey, butter, and melted marshmallows. A pair of honey baked hams, along with bowls of buttered corn, tofu, gai lan, green beans, and steamed rice rounded out the table. The only thing missing was turkey, as we considered it to be the other white meat, as in, only white people ate it.

After filling our bellies — and avoiding the one family member who kept trying to share the good news — the suburban half piled into their minivans and headed to the next party. The Chinatown side stayed and performed a rushed clean-up job. They were eager to move on to the highlight of their day — a marathon session of mahjong. Between my family and our workers, as well as the handful of Ahoos, they had enough to seat four tables every year.

Meanwhile, my siblings and I, along with our cousins, turned the dining room into our clubhouse. After watching the Lions beat the Denver Broncos — a rare Thanksgiving victory — we laughed along to *Mork and Mindy* and *Barney Miller* and played our favorite card games, Uno and spoons. One of our customers had even left behind a Rubik’s Cube which we took turns trying to solve.

Around dinnertime, our stomachs began to rumble. The adults were still in gambling mode, so it was up to us kids to prepare everyone’s dinner. By “prepare,” I meant putting together plates from the leftovers in the main kitchen. Because Ngin-Ngin banned the use of microwaves — she thought they looked unprofessional — the food was served at room temperature.

Chris, as always, took charge. He directed us to put out sixteen plates for the adults, and another eight for us kids. He then ordered us to remove the saran wrap. Working as an assembly line, the job went smooth and fast. We put a dollop of each item on a plate. We then delivered the combos to the adults. They all smiled their appreciation. A few of them even tipped us.

As we continued our service, a trio of well-dressed elderly men appeared at the door. As the head of the local tong, my grandpa often received late night out-of-town guests. It turned out the men were from New York. Chinese restaurants in the area had been recently targeted by rival gangs. They must’ve come to check on the situation. Yeh-Yeh turned to us and pointed to the main kitchen, “Hoo ga won ya.”I guess we had three more mouths to feed.

My siblings and I headed back to the table of leftovers. Everything had been demolished. The only scraps left were the slivers of ham clinging to the bone and some orphaned strands of green vegetables. Craig picked some gai lan. “Why’d they have to show up? There’s nothing left.”

Chris continued surveying the table. “There’s a little bit left.”

I raised my hand. “I can make something!”

My brother turned to me. “You don’t know how to cook.”

“Yes, I can,” I said. We grew up in the kitchen.”

“That doesn’t mean you can cook.”

“We just have to do what the adults do. How hard can it be?”

Chris pointed to the eight plates we had set aside for ourselves. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s just give them our plates.”

Suck-up. There was no way I was giving up the last pieces of my dad’s roast chicken to these strangers. I ran to one of the refrigerators.

My siblings and cousins turned to each other. They wanted to keep their plates, too. They picked up their leftovers and scurried into the dining room. That left me and Chris. Chris looked at his plate. His mouth reconsidered. “Whatever. It’s their fault for showing up late.”

With that, I jumped into action. Zipping through the rest of the refrigerators, I pulled out all my favorite ingredients: barbecue roast pork, beef, button mushrooms, straw mushrooms, mushrooms I couldn’t identify. I turned on the flame and threw the pile into the wok, along with a handful of spices. I mimicked the motions I had seen the adults do a thousand times.

The dish was coming along great… until it wasn’t. Somehow, the look and taste were off. The cook had become a clown.

I tried to balance things out, but nothing worked. At that point, I had to shoot for a Hail Mary. My dad always said it was important for every dish to have a secret ingredient. So, I went and grabbed one of my favorite condiments: ketchup. It wasn’t an obvious choice, but like my dad, I thought I would experiment. I pounded out a few globs into the wok. The caramel color looked pretty. I tasted it, then added a bit more. After a few adjustments, it didn’t taste half bad.

With Chris’s help, I put together three plates. We then ran back to the adults. Most of them had returned to their mahjong, but my grandpa was entertaining his guests. Chris and I handed the men their plates. Some of the other adults had gotten smaller portions earlier, so we gave them some of my dish, too. As I scooped my creation onto my dad’s, he looked confused. I smiled and continued serving.

After distributing my masterpiece, I stood back and watched the feeding. One by one, the adults stopped talking or playing mahjong. Their jaws stopped moving, as they looked down at their plate. I didn’t know what to say. Finally, Ngin-Ngin held up her napkin and spat, “Aiya, mo yung!”

With their chopsticks, everyone else pushed the additional contents to the far side of their plate. The New Yorkers looked at each other. My grandpa offered to get them something else to eat, but the gruff men huffed that they had just come by to check that things were okay.

As I watched our guests exit, Ngin-Ngin turned to me with a glare, happy to witness my downfall. Though everyone else smiled, I couldn’t stop from bowing my head in shame. Not only had I embarrassed my family, but also our restaurant, and probably every Chinese restaurant in the Detroit area. At least it felt that way. As punishment, I forced myself to play busboy. I waited for the adults to finish their plates so I could bring them to the dishwasher.

As I sat by my mom and dad, I noticed them slowly picking at their dinner. It was the same motion I did whenever there were green beans or eggplant on my plate. I looked down at the ground, “That’s okay. You don’t have to finish it.”

I had given my parents a convenient out, but they didn’t take it. Instead, they cleaned off their plates to the last grain of rice. My parents may not have been the most vocal when it came to expressing their love and support. We never discussed our feelings. But they did show it. I could see it on their faces, even if it was scrunched a bit.