

Beyond the Table

It was 4:00 pm on a Sunday. Nine-year-old me bolted straight home from “Little Bumblebee” dance class, my legs still sore from practice. As soon as I entered the house, I sniffed the air, welcoming me with rich umami scents. My grandpa, whom I lovingly called *Gong Gong*, had already prepared a bowl of dumpling filling - a mixture of ground pork, Chinese cabbage, soy sauce, sesame oil, ginger, scallions, and rice wine. And of course, his two secret ingredients - a sprinkling of five-spice powder and a scoop of miso paste.

Gong Gong had come to live with us from his hometown of Shanghai just the year before. A natural storyteller, he would offer us vivid accounts of his days as a pediatrician. When he worked at the hospital, he would often bring a warm bowl of homemade chicken noodle soup to the patients whose families were struggling financially. As he described the patients’ bright smiles and the joy the comforting soup brought them, Gong Gong’s eyes would sparkle, soft creases forming at their corners.

Gong Gong’s face lit up as I skipped into the kitchen. “Come! Today I’ll teach you how to make *jiaozi*, or dumplings!” he told me, his voice buzzing with excitement.

I sat down next to him at the dining table, where there were two large plates, one for each of us. Next to them, I saw a small dish of water, a large metal bowl with the filling inside, and a stack of dumpling wrappers were already set up. I watched attentively as Gong Gong demonstrated how to wrap the dumplings. Using chopsticks, he scooped up a sticky dollop of the meat filling and placed it perfectly in the center of the wrapper. Then, he dipped his index finger into the water and traced along the wrapper’s edges.

“This is the glue,” he explained. Folding the wrapper in half, he masterfully pleated and pressed the two edges together like ruffles on a skirt, working from left to right until the dumpling resembled a small crescent moon. “Now, your turn!” he exclaimed.

I tried to mimic his exact movements, but my dumpling had barely any filling. It looked like a small Hershey’s kiss engulfed in a robe of dumpling skin.

Chuckling at my lopsided creation, Gong Gong said, “Nice job for your first time, but don’t be afraid to add some more filling. You are a growing child, and you need to eat more!”

I laughed, determined to perfect my next dumpling. This time, when I tried to pleat the wrapper, the dough stuck to itself, and I sighed in exasperation. Compared to Gong Gong’s beautiful gold nuggets, mine was a crumpled piece of paper.

“It’s okay,” Gong Gong reassured me. Not every dumpling has to be perfect or look the same.”

Many failed attempts later, I started to gain the rhythm of dumpling making. I unleashed my inner origami-loving self and experimented with different dumpling shapes. I pinched the sides of one into a central peak to form a little *xiaolongbao*—soup dumpling—and crossed the two ends of another to form a fish.

“Gong Gong, since you taught me how to wrap dumplings, I am going to teach you a magic trick!” I exclaimed, trying to hold in my laughter.

“WWh-wh-wha?” he stammered. Before he could even finish his sentence, I grabbed a small fistful of flour, and with one big puff, I blew the powdery cloud of snow right at his face. With his eyebrows and eyelashes all white, Gong Gong and I burst into uncontrollable laughter until our cheeks started to hurt from all the smiling.

This first dumpling-making experience became the start of a tradition: every Sunday, the two of us gathered at the same table to cook together. This is what I now remember most about my weekends with Gong Gong - the smell of the fragrant five-spice powder, the sounds of us giggling, but mostly, how easily I took our ordinary dumpling-making for granted.

One Sunday, I asked Gong Gong to help me reach for a pack of gummies on the top shelf in our kitchen. He stood up on his toes, his arm reaching upward, but I noticed his knees start to tremble. Before I could do anything, his balance gave out, and each part of his body succumbed to gravity, as he faltered downward onto the cool, tiled floor.

“Gong Gong!” I cried, panicking as I rushed to his side.

Mom quickly ran over, her voice filled with concern. “Gong Gong, are you all right?” she asked as she knelt beside him.

He looked up, a mixture of embarrassment and pain in his eyes, and muttered, “I’m fine. I’m just a little clumsy today.”

“Okay,” my mom replied carefully, forcing a half-smile to hide her concern.

Later that week, it happened again. This time, he was reaching for a baking pan in the high cabinet. A few days later, he told me that whenever he walked on the ground with his bare feet, he felt the sensation of walking on clouds. Sometimes, he said the floor felt rough, like sandpaper under his feet.

“It’s nothing,” he tried reassuring me, brushing it off with a faint smile. But the pause before he spoke made the air feel heavier. I wanted to believe him, but a part of me felt uneasy. Many medical appointments later, we finally received the news that he had been diagnosed with Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a rare motor neuron disease.

Gong Gong, who once bustled actively around the kitchen, now was spending most of his time lying despondently in his bed, staring at the ceiling as the afternoon light crawled across the walls. His usual energy and cheerfulness faded, washed away by tidal waves of sadness.

When I asked him whether he wanted to make dumplings, he paused for a long moment, his lips pressing together, then answered, "I'm a little tired. Maybe next weekend."

At night, I lay wide awake in my bed, worrying about Gong Gong as a flood of childhood memories swarmed through my mind. I remembered the afternoons we had spent feeding ducks at the Almaden Lake Park, giggling as we tore pieces of bread and tossed them at the little animals. I remembered our weekend trips to Happy Hollow, laughing joyously as we rode our favorite ride, "Danny the Dragon," time and time again until the park closed. I remembered our visits to the Rose Garden, where Gong Gong would chase me around the central fountain as we played tag.

I gripped my bed sheets tightly with closed fists and squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that maybe I could freeze time. But no amount of wishful thinking could reverse the inevitable course of aging and physical decline.

I could hear the hushed voices of Mom and Dad in the room beside mine, so I walked over to their bedroom and peeked inside. Mom's back was curled to the window, and her shoulders rose and fell as she let out sobs. The weight of the world was on her shoulders.

It was three days before Gong Gong's eightieth birthday when I overheard Mom asking him where he would like to celebrate.

"How about hot pot at Hai Di Lao?" she asked.

Gong Gong shook his head.

“I know - how about Shanghai Delight? It’s your favorite!” she prodded with assumed confidence.

Again, he shook his head, this time more insistently.

I lingered in the living room, listening quietly.

If he didn’t want to go out for a celebration, then I’d bring the celebration to him, I thought.

The day of his birthday, I took out our family recipe cookbook and flipped directly to the dumpling recipe. Meticulously, I followed each step, mixing ground pork, cabbage, soy sauce, sesame oil, and a careful shake of five-spice and miso - the same way Gong Gong taught me on those Sunday afternoons.

I carried the plate of dumplings to Gong Gong, who was sitting at the dining table, with a blanket draped over his legs.

“These are for you, Gong Gong,” I intoned in a voice that was warm with affection.

As he took the first bite into the springy dumpling skin, his eyes softened and lit up. We were engulfed in a wave of nostalgia and familial warmth, transported back to the times when we sat together at the table, sharing dumplings and love.