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BRUCE
BODDEN

LOVE FOOD

By Leslie Hsu Oh

Leslie Hsu Oh teaches creative writing at the University of Alaska. "Love Food" is excerpted from a personal memoir. Another excerpt, "Between The Lines," will be published this summer in the journal Under The Sun.

BaBa and I pulled apart a pair of deep-fried *you tiaos*, a Chinese breadstick that is served only on weekends, and sells out by eleven a.m. in select Shanghainese restaurants. He folded his *you tiao* into a *sao bien*, a flaky sesame seed sprinkled pita. I dipped my mine directly into soy sauce.

The table before us was laden with my favorites: *fan tuan* (rice burrito with *you tiao* and bits of salty vegetables and dried shredded pork wrapped inside), fried tofu, *chong yol bien* (fried green onion pizza), *kno ro shen bien* (a juicy beef patty wrapped in a deep fried crepe).

We listened to the crunch of *you tiaos* between our teeth. We welcomed Chinese chatter from neighboring tables because there was nothing easy to discuss this Saturday morning.

My grandma was not sitting at her usual place beside BaBa. She had died several days ago at ninety-six. BaBa said he would no longer be eating at this restaurant, which he and his mother visited every Saturday. But we were here today because I just flew in yesterday to help BaBa plan the funeral.

Sipping some tea and smoothing my long black hair in place, I swooshed the grease down my throat and began, "How are you doing?"

BaBa seemed to age within the wool red and black checkered shirt MaMa bought before I was born. He said without looking at me, "I'm okay. I think she's happier now. You know,

she wanted to die." I nodded. When I bathed her last Christmas, Nye Nye's skin had already shriveled like a raisin. Her body folded in a permanent "L" shape. She had fallen a few months earlier and shattered the bones in her spinal cord. Every small movement caused her tremendous pain.

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"I'll put together my usual Web-based movie. Do you have photos from her youth?" I asked. My two-year-old daughter ran her Lightning McQueen toy car up and down my arm.

BaBa smiled at her, then sighed, seeming to acknowledge the fifteen years since my eighteen-year-old brother, Jon-Jon, died of liver cancer, followed shortly by MaMa dying from the same disease. If there were degrees in such affairs, we both earned a Ph.D.

After a while, I said almost to myself, "It will be nice for our relatives to see MaMa and Jon-Jon again."

"This is not about MaMa and Jon-Jon. This is about Nye Nye. Besides, I think that when they dig Nye Nye's grave, dirt will probably cover MaMa and Jon-Jon's tombstones." BaBa had slimmed down over the years, maybe for his young wife, whom he started dating, not more than a few months after we buried MaMa. I could see the hard lines of his bones.

"What? Why would Rose Hills do that? I would think that would be disrespectful."

BaBa did not respond. He finished his *sao bien you tiao* sandwich while I rambled on about how we should call Rose Hills and provide them specific instructions.

Finally, he explained to me something that I never understood, and still don't. BaBa had asked me years ago not to tell his son, my half brother, about MaMa and Jon-Jon. Now, he admitted that this has always been his wife's request. He felt that obscuring MaMa and Jon-Jon's tombstones might not be such a bad idea, for her sake.

I balanced my *you tiao* on my plate, deliberately wiped my mouth, folded the napkin neatly on my lap, and told him calmly that last year his son asked me whether we shared the same mother and I couldn't lie. Although no longer common knowledge, folklore suggests that the *you tiao* was originally made in the shape of a corrupt Chinese official and his wife and represented a tool in expressing contempt.

BaBa swore at me. And I swore back. Our meal ended in a torrent of words we will try hard to forget. Later, on the way home, after BaBa had loaded the car with extra fan tuans for my late night cravings, I asked, "Why is she afraid to tell him?"

"She thinks he is not mature enough to understand."

"Come on, Dad. He's almost twelve. What's the real reason? I mean, is she ashamed or something?"

"I don't know."

"Well, how does she explain how he and I are related then?"

"I don't know."

"What do you say?"

"When he asks me, I just tell him to ask your mother." After a long period of silence, he continued, "I don't have a problem telling him about MaMa and Jon-Jon. Maybe you can talk to her?"

"No way, Dad. This is a conversation you need to have with her. Alone."

BaBa never discussed this with

her and neither did I. On the day we buried Nye Nye, MaMa and Jon-Jon's tombstones peeked through footprints of dried mud and debris.

...

Lulled to sleep in the backseat of the car, I woke as BaBa swerved across five freeway lanes and exited on one of Arcadia's busiest streets. Chinese characters in neon lights blazed on a number of establishments populating strip malls. BaBa pulled into one of these, where fans crowded in front of Din Tai Fung Dumpling House as if in anticipation of a rock concert.

Nye Nye grumbled in the front seat. It was the last time we ate at a restaurant together. She had refused to ride in a wheelchair, even though her bound feet forced her to teeter precariously. I offered her my arm and she patted it, saying in Chinese that BaBa must love me very much to endure this hassle. She nodded at BaBa's wife and my half brother, who both disappeared into the crowd, and whispered that BaBa rarely came here.

BaBa drove away with my husband and daughter snoozing in her car seat. The traffic was thick and it would take them more than half an hour to find a parking space a couple blocks away. And the wait for a table could be nearly two hours long. Nonetheless, this annual tradition of eating at Din Tai Fung was perhaps one of the few things we agreed upon.

I lived in Alaska, while he lived in Southern California. We rarely spoke on the phone and I visited him only once a year. Mainly, I disagreed with the way BaBa grieved. After MaMa died, he immediately sold our house. He donated the cherry wood bedroom set that MaMa promised I would inherit. When I wasn't around, he flipped around their photos which I still displayed in a room of his house that he says will always be mine.

The more I wanted to preserve everything, hoarding boxes and boxes of MaMa and Jon-Jon's belongings, the more he seemed to erase them from his life, gifting MaMa's paintings to close friends and asking me to hold onto their wedding album. Sometimes I hated him for moving on, when I could not.

With a frown creased permanently in place, BaBa's wife pushed her way through a mass of bodies and returned with a ticket and a menu snapped to a clipboard. His wife and I silently browsed through 79 different kinds of dumplings and noodle soups printed in Chinese and English. The star of the lineup was juicy pork/crab dumplings, which failed to adequately capture the elegance of its Chinese name: *shea fun xiao long bao*—crab powder little dragon bun.

About the size of a dollar coin at its base, a translucent wonton-like skin kneaded into a twist at the top contained a bite-sized morsel of pork swimming in a pool of soup. A dash of crab powder to tease your senses. Served on a spread of lettuce in a bamboo basket, it arrived steaming at the table beside a dish containing strings of ginger soaked in black vinegar. Although other restaurants on occasion served this dish, Din Tai Fung (the only branch to open in the United States) in our opinion, made the best *shea fun xiao long bao*. Perhaps it was because you could see the dumplings being made with metronomic precision. In tall white chef hats, one man spun a rolling pin, tossing rounded flour medallions to another, who twisted the dough, and laid them gently like jewels within bamboo baskets.

The cooks were so quick that I never saw them stuff each dumpling. I suppose that made the dumplings taste even better, especially after BaBa taught me the art of savoring them. He said the first challenge in enjoying *shea fun xiao long bao* is to pick it up gently with a pair of chopsticks without poking

holes in its paper-thin skin. Place a few strands of vinegar-soaked ginger on top, perhaps to cool it down or enhance the flavor of the soup sliding like silk down your throat. Then, patience is required. You must know exactly when to pop the dumpling in your mouth. The soup has to be at the right temperature; otherwise, like a dragon's fiery breath it could sear tongue and throat, stripping away a complexity of salt, sweet, and sour flavors rippling across taste buds.

I didn't always like Chinese restaurants. In fact, I normally avoided them. On our annual summer national park trips, MaMa and BaBa had insisted on tasting Chinese food all over the United States and Canada, suffering stomach aches from indigestion or laughter, just to confirm that indeed they had chosen the right place to live, somewhere between Los Angeles, Alhambra, Arcadia, Monterey Park, and San Gabriel, where each of these cities offered a distinguished array of Taiwanese, Shanghainese, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hunan delicacies.

I still remember the dilapidated restaurant perched on the corner of a dusty street near the Navajo reservation. Jon-Jon, seven, and I, nine, had looked at each other nervously as BaBa parked the rental car beneath a peeling wood sign carved with gaudy red Chinese letters.

BaBa whispered to MaMa as he pushed open a chiming door and patted his pot belly, "What do you think? Maybe it'll be good this time?"

A warm breeze generated by a noisy fan sliced through the trapped humid air. We arranged ourselves on hard plastic booths designed to make customers stay just long enough to finish eating. Red paper place mats with a description of the Chinese zodiac fluttered in the occasional breeze.

*Her older brother
slammed a teapot onto
our table with a pleased
grin, splashing tea onto
our place mats. My
zodiac sign, the bull,
began to drown.*

Dipping our napkins into cracked yellow plastic cups filled with tap water, we cleaned the crusty silverware, a table smeared with greasy fingerprints, and teacups stained with lipstick. A Chinese-American girl who seemed younger than me approached our table with paper menus, her hair swinging in two pigtails. She smiled, revealing two missing front teeth, and chewed on her pencil while she waited for us to order. Her older brother slammed a teapot onto our table with a pleased grin, splashing tea onto our place mats. My zodiac sign, the bull, began to drown.

My hungry parents ordered five dishes that came on enormous silver platters. Our little waitress bit her lip anxiously as my parents burst into laughter at the arrival of each dish. "Oh my god, look how huge that egg roll is," MaMa said, the dimples on her cheeks gleamed.

"That doesn't look like sweet and sour pork. How can they mess that up?" BaBa declared.

When the waitress brought the last dish, she quickly handed it to MaMa, then ran inside the kitchen like a kitten with her tail between her legs. After some creative shuffling of the dishes, MaMa managed to carefully balance all the plates, cups and utensils on the table, some of them teetering over the edge. She began to spoon samplings of each dish onto our plates, not realizing that poor BaBa was unable to eat; his

hands were juggling a teapot and a cup. BaBa threw his head back and released his infamous eyebrow-raising laughter that rumbled from the depths of his stomach. "Stop it!" MaMa scolded BaBa softly. "We're being rude."

I laughed at BaBa while sipping my tea, not knowing that inside my cup, a fat fly floated lazily on its back, doing a couple backstrokes here and there.

...

BaBa never interfered with MaMa's cooking, but when she met with her clients, he would wake us with a slather of stubble kisses on our cheeks, cooing, "What do you want BaBa to cook?"

"*Pi goo!*" I shouted.

"*Zan yo gee!*" Jon-Jon countered.

We encouraged BaBa's cooking because he was just as generous in the kitchen as he was at Chinese restaurants and markets. *Pi goo* are fried pork chops marinated in soy sauce, wine, sugar, salt, and garlic that leaped out of the pan and splattered sticky difficult-to-remove oily patterns on our white stove. That was my favorite, which MaMa refused to cook because it infused the furniture and our clothes with a distinct oily odor. Jon-Jon's *zan yo gee*, soy sauce chicken, wasn't as smelly, but it involved gutting a chicken, boiling it in soy sauce, then chopping it into bite-sized pieces with a heavy cleaver. To BaBa, just seeing the joy with which we consumed his creations was worth the mess.

...

My dress ballooned as I leaned against the refrigerator door searching for ingredients. Every day I cooked, not because I liked it, but to see my daughter smash fistfuls into her tiny mouth, while my husband rubbed his tummy sighing, "Love Food."

I opened a small battered black three-ring notebook that fitted perfectly

in the spread of two hands. Several years ago, I started taking notes in the kitchen when BaBa cooked.

A few crispy blue aerogramme sheets floated to the floor. I noticed how faded they had become. When I studied in England, he wrote down some of my favorite recipes framed between "My Dearest Daughter" and "I love you and miss you very much, Take care, Dad." The instructions were never precise, a pinch here, a sprinkle of this or that, "I don't know how much to put, taste and you will see." Daily, I flipped through this notebook and ignored these aerogramme letters because I had cooked their recipes so often they had evolved into my own.

Pressing one to my heart, I ran down the hall to my study, curious to see whether I could find more buried in my files. Hours later, I added to my collection:

When you are sick, the best way is to make yourself a chicken soup. Buy a whole chicken, like Rock hen, small. Cut off all the fat including butt. Put it in pan with water just cover the chicken. Boil the water. Then pour out the entire water because it contains grease. Then fill the cold water to cover the entire chicken. Put in a whole piece of green onion. Put a small piece ginger if you can find one. Pour in a teaspoon of salt. Bring water to boil and then simmer it with small fire for one to two hours. You have to taste the tenderness of meat to decide whether it is done or not. The longer cooking the more juice. Try it. Good for your flu....

Mostly, I dwelled upon some unexpected words. The BaBa I know forgot about MaMa and Jon-Jon. A practical man, he moved on. He focused on the living, not the dead. So why did he write:

Don't think I do not miss Mommy and Jon-Jon. It is like a hole covered by grass. It does not appear that there is a hole from the surface, but it is a deep one there that can never be erased.

BaBa wasn't a romantic guy. He bought MaMa carnations even though she loved wildflowers. He forgot anniversaries. He didn't get her gifts, especially when she lied, "Don't worry, you don't have to get me anything for my birthday." And after she died, he only reminded me of the ways they didn't get along. He even pointed at scars on his hand and said MaMa left her mark.

So why did he write:

...when your mom studied in Southern Illinois University, I visited her several times. We were separated because of studying in different schools. There were one or two guys who were interested in her, and gave her hard time. When I arrived, they either wanted to avoid me or wanted to show me. No guys would give her a ride to grocery because she had a steady boyfriend. When I visited her, we walked to grocery and carried the grocery bags to her dorm. That was the most sweet moment; which was so precious in your lifetime. This is the deep wound in my heart.

I wanted to call BaBa and ask if he remembers writing these things. But I still haven't. I think I prefer relishing in the hope that maybe we are not so different. In all these years, I chose to understand BaBa in small doses, during Christmas holidays, over phone calls, in email exchanges. I saw a man who grieved in a way that insulted me. In refusing to tell my half-brother about MaMa and Jon-Jon, I felt he preferred if I disappeared too. But maybe, our grief stemmed from the same source. One person found it too painful to see them as part of his life. The other found it equally agonizing not to see them as part of her life. Both loved them. Both have a deep hole that can never be filled, even though grass covers its surface. Maybe in these letters, I found a brief moment when BaBa allowed his grief to transform the man he had always been. Or maybe I just don't

know my BaBa very well.

I walked back to the kitchen. I decided to make *mapo tofu* (minced meat and tofu sautéed in a spicy bean sauce), BaBa's secret family recipe. I didn't need to consult the black notebook. It was one of those aerogramme recipes that I spent extra care perfecting over the years, adding my own ingredients and spices.

Placing a block of frozen turkey meat in the sink, I turned on the faucet and placed my fingers under the running water, searching for the right temperature. With the water turning warm, I allowed myself to consider the possibility that BaBa did miss MaMa and Jon-Jon as much as I did. That the reason why he didn't want anyone to know about them made sense. Yes, it was better this way, not to have to explain what is painful. To be numb, as the "ma" in *mapo tofu* suggests.

The meat steamed in the sink, through its cellophane wrapping. He must respect his living wife and honor her wishes. But did that equal souring what was beautiful about MaMa or Jon-Jon? Or denying that they existed? Or lying to their son about who I was? I didn't have the patience to understand BaBa fully. I leaped back as the water burned my skin.

