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Han Huynh
University of New Orleans

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A Mother's Love

Han Huynh

As I got closer to the kitchen, the familiar smell of raw seafood hit my nose. It was a smell that I could almost instantly recognize the moment I caught a whiff of it. I'd describe it as smelling salty and fishlike, similar to the ocean. It was a smell that I had found unpleasant at first, but eventually grown accustomed to over time. So much so that I had even begun to find it comforting in a way, because I knew that certain smell could only mean one thing: my mom was home from work.

I found my mom hunched over the kitchen table, unpacking her lunch bag. She was wearing a dark purple puffer jacket layered over a thinner gray hoodie, along with a pair of baggy black sweatpants. Her short black hair was haphazardly tied up into a ponytail, which was beginning to come undone. It was all held together by a black baseball cap, which was starting to show signs of wear by the discoloration on random spots and fraying on the brim. Working at a seafood factory meant that she had to wear clothing that would keep her warm all day, as it was always cold in the factory in order to keep the seafood fresh. When she heard my footsteps approaching, she looked up for a brief moment, revealing her squinting, bloodshot eyes. She quickly returned her focus to removing the empty containers from her lunch bag and placing them in the sink.

Beside her lunch bag was a white plastic bag, labeled "Pho Bang." Some days after work, she'd stop by a nearby restaurant on the way home and grab takeout. Today was one of those days. She ordered Banh Mi, a Vietnamese sandwich made up of pickled carrots, cilantro, chilies, pate, a slice of cucumber, and a meat of your choice. In this case, it was roast pork slices. Banh Mi had always been a favorite of mine and my sister's, so my mom would try to buy it as often as she could. Despite my efforts of assuring her I could make my own meals at home, she'd still insist on buying them. Even

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if it meant that she had to sacrifice a part of the few hours she had before going back to work again.

On the days when she didn't bring home takeout, she'd cook dishes and prepare leftovers for me to eat the next day after making her own lunch for work. Despite her wanting to, I couldn't help but feel guilty whenever I saw how much time she spent cooking for me. With the little free time that she had whenever she wasn't at work, it seemed like she was always in the kitchen cooking something. Pho, noodle soup, spring rolls, miso soup, banana and coconut ice-cream, coffee jelly, Vietnamese yogurt, etc. When I'd ask her why this was the case, she'd respond with, "It makes me feel good when I cook for you, especially when I'm able to cook you your favorite meals." I've come to realize that cooking was something that brought her joy because the dishes that she made acted as a physical embodiment of her love. Each dish was created with love and care, so it made her happy to see me happy while enjoying something that she made herself.

After she finished unpacking her lunch bag, my mom continued with the rest of her usual routine after coming home. She began by cleaning around the house, taking a straw broom to the kitchen.

Keeping the house clean was something that she was very specific about, so she always felt the need to do it herself or go over it a second time after me and my dad cleaned. "There's a certain way that I like the house to be cleaned, and I feel like I do a more detailed job out of you and your father," she always told me. Making sure everyone in the house wore slippers, carefully cleaning the dishes, cleaning out the filters of the air humidifiers, dusting, and cleaning the bathroom are just some of the things she does. I thought this was unnecessary and took up the time when she could be resting for the next day. I wanted her to prioritize sleeping as much as possible, but she worried more about me getting sick or having my allergies flare up if the house wasn't clean enough. Despite feeling tired, she always felt the need to put my well-being before her own. I always had a hard time understanding why she did this, but thinking this made me realize how selfless of a person she was. She didn't see anything wrong with staying up late to clean, as long as she was sure that she did her best to make sure I wouldn't get sick.

As she swept the floor, I followed not too far behind her. I usually always kept her company while she was doing her tasks around the house, asking her questions like how her day went and what time she had work the next day. Today, she told me that she had work at 4:00 AM the next day. I glanced

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up at the digital clock mounted above the wooden cabinet in our living room, which read 10:26 PM. Having work at 4:00 AM meant that she would be waking up at 2:00 AM to get ready on time to leave at 3:00 AM. It was around an hour drive from our home to the seafood factory. 2:00 AM was only about three hours away, and considering the fact that my mom was in the middle of cleaning and still needed to pack her lunch, it would mean that she wouldn't get much sleep before she had to get up again.

Since she worked in a seafood factory, this was normal for her. She had to stick to a tight schedule that had her working for up to 10 or more hours per day. It left her little to no time to get a full night's sleep on most nights. Staying awake was a challenge, and she, along with many other workers at the factory, often found themselves nodding off to sleep. Working at the seafood factory also had other hardships. The constant contact with shrimp left her hands itchy and irritated after work. Standing all day also caused her to feel discomfort in her feet that she had to try and relieve by wearing gel insoles in her shoes. Crouching over the conveyor belt meant developing back pains and aches over time. This job was far from being an easy one.

Despite this, my mom always found ways to keep not only herself, but other workers at the factory positive. Sharing a laugh with other workers by telling each other funny stories was one of those ways. Once she recalled a funny story to me about my aunt, who also worked at the factory with her. My mom was working at her station, which had her sorting shrimp that came down a conveyor belt. She was responsible for putting the shrimp into the correct boxes to be transported. While doing this, my mom noticed that the flow of shrimp suddenly became slower. Finding this unusual, my mom and the other workers at her station decided to go investigate, and found my aunt fast asleep on the conveyer belt. Her head was resting on her arm that was blocking the shrimp and causing a buildup behind her. "We all had a good laugh about that," my mom chuckled while recalling the moment. The story with my aunt was something that she'd retell to the other workers from time to time, to lift up their spirits. She told me that she'd also sometimes take pictures of her coworkers when they were falling asleep, and laugh about it with them when she showed them later. "Working at the factory is hard for all of us, but moments like that keep us going and our spirits up," she'd tell me.

My mom was now in the bathroom, taking a shower. I had followed her in, continuing to have a conversation with her while leaning on the bath-

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room countertop. She asked me questions that she always did every night.

“Did you have anything to eat yet?” she asked over the pitter-pattering sound of water.

“Had some ramen earlier,” I replied nonchalantly.

“You know that’s no proper meal,” she criticized. “It’s not healthy to eat that all the time.”

I heard a shampoo bottle being cracked open, followed by the sound of its contents being squirted out. “I made some bitter melon soup; you should fix a bowl,” my mom suggested.

“I will, don’t worry,” I replied, trying not to let my tone of slight annoyance be heard in my voice.

Questions like these made up most of our conversations. How is school going, did I finish my homework yet, did I study, and how much money am I spending. In the past, I would find these questions to be annoying and repetitive, so I’d avoid having long conversations with her to avoid giving an answer. But now that I’m older, I’ve learned to appreciate them.

My mom’s life has been far from easy, ever since being born in Vietnam to now living in the United States. In Vietnam, my mom and her family lived in poverty, struggling to put food on the table every day. Her parents couldn’t afford to send her to school, so she never had the opportunity to have a proper education. When she came here to the United States with my dad, it didn’t get much better. She felt “out of place” because she didn’t have a degree or speak English like everyone else around her.

That was why she decided to work at the seafood factory, because she felt more comfortable being around other Vietnamese people. I can’t change my mom’s past or make it any better, but I can try my best to make her as happy as I can in the present. If that means having to sit through her long lectures and listening to her worrying about me, I’ll do it every chance I get. I’ve realized that her doing little things like cooking food, buying takeout, cleaning the house, and asking me these questions was her way of showing me she cared. Despite being sleep-deprived and feeling worn out almost every day, she always had the energy to worry about and put others before herself. That’s a mother’s love.

Works Cited

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