

## Crabbing

Ang's father had lived through the Cultural Revolution. Coming from an impoverished, tiny village, Ang's father barely understood his only son. While Ang grew up in America, Ang's father had a childhood of poverty and hunger.

It was a different world for them. There were no pension plans. The best way to ensure a passable retirement was to have as many children as possible and hope that one of them struck it rich. Ang's father had six siblings and his mother had eight.

Of the various pictures near their dining table, the most prominent image was of Ang's father and Uncle Gen after hiking Diamond Head State Monument. The picture was somewhat new but the frame was old. The frame had long lost its shine and the front plastic had yellowed with time. Ang once asked his father about the history of that picture. His father replied that it was a picture of the surviving children in his family. The Cultural Revolution, and the various crises that followed, ensured that the majority of Ang's uncles and aunts did not make it out of China alive.

Ang never asked about the picture again.

Ang's father had come home early one day to cook dinner. A professional chef, he prided himself on being able to cook meals for his family in record time.

The sounds of a chef at work echoed throughout the family's tiny apartment. The bubbling of boiling water for Ang's parents' tea, the rhythmic thuds of green onions being chopped, and the sizzle of Spam in a frying pan were unmistakable.

Tonight's meal was Spam fried rice—Ang's favorite dish. Ang could smell the delicious odors wafting in the air. The neighbors in the adjacent apartments always knew when Ang's father was cooking dinner.

The family sat down for their meal. While Ang had a tendency to gobble his meals, his parents would eat with a quiet grace. Ang would hunch over his bowl of food and devour every grain of rice, only periodically stopping to suck down some cold tap water. Ang's parents would consume small portions of their meal in between their inaudible sips of tea.

Ang's father was the first to speak. "I brought home crabs," he said in Chinese. "We can have them for dinner tomorrow." As a child, Ang's father would let him play with the crabs. After the crabs' rubber bands surrounding the pincers were clipped off, Ang would place the end of a pencil in front of their claws and marvel at how the creatures could leave indentations in the wood. The crabs were always sluggish by the time Ang saw them, but they still had power.

Ang's mother spoke next. "The two of you haven't gone crabbing in a while. You should go." Her Chinese was impeccable. It was flawless with the proper intonations and inflections.

Both father and son were surprised by her words. In Ang's childhood, he and his father would often go on crabbing trips. As Ang got older, the trips became less frequent. It had been years since the two of them had gone.

Neither of them knew what to say, but they both knew better than to argue with her. "We'll go Saturday," Ang's father said.

When Ang and his father made it to the Ala Wai Canal, there were already people there. It was a sunny afternoon and skateboarders, bicyclists, and a fisherman were enjoying the manmade body of water. Alongside his beer, the fisherman had his hat with many hooks, his vest with many pouches, and a tackle box with many compartments. Meanwhile, Ang and his father had only a

small bucket of supplies and a single fishing pole between them. The bucket was more rust than metal and its handle squeaked with every little movement, but it could still carry things.

Setting up was simple for the two of them. Ang grasped their net with both hands and thus he was ready. After tying a piece of fried Spam to the string at the end of the fishing pole, Ang's father was ready.

The method that the father and son used could more accurately be called 'dangling' than fishing or crabbing, but it worked for them. Ang's father would lower the bait over a crab one of them had spotted, then waited for the crab to start feeding. Once the crab would start feeding, his father would raise the bait slowly, causing the crab to follow along. The crabs were so hungry that they would often break the surface of the water unaware that Ang had placed a net under them. At that point, it would be a simple matter of dumping the crab into the bucket. It was the perfect father-son activity.

They tended to start crabbing at about noon and they would never finish until sunset. The Ala Wai Canal was always prettiest then. As the sun was inching towards the horizon, it bathed the area in a subtle, orange glow. On those autumn days, the kayakers daring enough to brave the Ala Wai's waters would paddle off into the sunset. The shade from the palm trees and the gentle breeze afforded comfort hour after hour.

Unfortunately, the Ala Wai Canal had a dark side, too. On any given day, one could spot half a dozen homeless people in the vicinity. The water, too, was unclean. The smell of the water was unavoidable. It was never quite enough to stain your clothes with its odors, but you could always smell the Ala Wai Canal before you could see it. In 1928, the canal was created to serve as a way to drain the rice paddies and swamps that would later become Waikiki. The city life that comprises Waikiki now ensures that the Ala Wai Canal has a constant influx of

pollution. Everything from lawn chairs to shopping carts could be seen in its waters. The water was filthy enough to ensure that any catches from the crabbing would only be for sport and never for dinner.

Even with its blemishes, Ang always held the Ala Wai Canal in a special place in his heart. As the day was winding down, Ang noticed a large crab in the waters. Compared to all the other crabs they had caught, this was the closest one in size to the store-bought ones that Ang's father would make for dinner.

Ang's eyes lit up. He had never caught a crab that size before. He begged his father for the fishing pole. The two traded duties. Ang's father took hold of the net and Ang tried his hand at catching the creature.

Ang lowered the bait to the crab. It noticed the bait and immediately started eating. Ang followed through just as he had seen his father do so many times before. Holding his breath, he started to lift the line. This crab was considerably bigger than the others and was actually able to pull back on the line. As Ang lifted, the line grew taut, only to have the creature let go suddenly. Ang sighed in frustration.

He squinted his eyes and tried again. It didn't matter how many tries it would take, he wanted to catch that crab. The piece of Spam found its way down towards the crab one more time. Other crabs, when met with the same bait, would always strike again. For whatever reason, this crab didn't seem interested anymore. Ang tried different methods. Swaying the bait like a pendulum couldn't garner the crab's attention. When Ang tried to make the bait dance and bob and weave, the crab had decided it had had enough. It darted away, never to be seen again in the Ala Wai's murky waters.

Seeing the look of defeat on his son's face, Ang's father told him, "It's okay, son, we've got a bucketful."

"I wanted *that* one."

Ang's father continued again in Chinese, "You know we're not going to eat them right? It's okay. We'll catch more next time."

"Yeah. Whatever," Ang replied in English.

A few years later, Ang found himself on the mainland to attend college, just as he and his parents had planned. A diligent student, he did well in his studies. Ang worked his way through college delivering takeout by bike. In his junior year, he was finally able to save enough money to surprise his parents with a return visit.

Upon returning home, Ang noticed that everything in his home was exactly as he left it, save for the layer of dust that had found its way on various items in the house. This was strange considering that his mother would never let dust settle.

He called out to his father. Ang's father was surprised to see him, as one would expect with a surprise visit, but he wasn't happy. The parent explained to his son that his mother had passed away.

"What...why? How?" Ang asked his father. He hadn't spoken Chinese in a few years and had difficulty conversing.

"Cancer, son." Ang's father scrunched his face as he relived his wife's death.

"Pancreatic cancer."

"When did all of this happen?"

Ang's father explained. "She contracted cancer during the end of your senior year in high school. She passed away about a year ago."

Ang gritted his teeth in rage. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you call?" He shouted at his father. Ang had phoned home before but when his father explained that his mother was unable to come to the phone, Ang always decided he could just call again later.

"She didn't want to distract you from your studies. She wanted you to go to college."

Ang's eyes were burning. "And what about you? Why didn't you tell me?" Ang screamed his questions at his father. His mouth felt like it had too much saliva. His tears soaked his face.

Ang's father looked away. "I thought you should finish your studies, too."

Father and son stood without saying a word. The only sound to break the silence was Ang's sobbing. "I never even got to tell her I loved her before she died."

"Your mother loved you, you know that."

Ang was crying into his hands. "I never got to say it to her face that one last time...did you?"

Ang's father closed his eyes, turned, and walked into his bedroom. The swaying door was inaudible as it closed. A few seconds later the telltale click of the doorknob told that the door wouldn't be opening any time soon.

Ang walked around the tiny apartment that he had called home for so long. Near his mother's personal chair, he saw her favorite pair of scissors and a pin cushion. The pair of scissors, which used to gleam with the sun's reflection was now covered in a layer of dust and left open in an "X" position. Her last project involved a floral, purple pattern.

After learning of his mother's death, Ang decided against any future surprise visits. Ang returned to college and continued to do well. From there, he was able to land an engineering job. The company liked him so much that they decided they would pay for him to get his master's degree.

Enough years had passed that Ang's father was starting to feel the effects of time. Ang was paid well enough at his company that he always had extra money left over for his father. The monthly checks helped Ang's father pay all of his bills, buy food, and have a bit of money on the side. Father and son were so comfortable with this arrangement that their monthly phone calls eventually changed over to every-other-month until finally they became annual phone calls.

Later, Ang had a vacation planned for a week in Japan. At the last minute, his boss told him that he would need to come into work, but Ang would still get two days off. After canceling his vacation, he decided to visit his father.

Their conversation, as it had increasingly become, was awkward and stilted. Pleasantries aside, the two men struggled to find things to talk about. Ang's father broke the silence first.

“So...are you seeing anyone?”

Ang nodded at his father. “I'm seeing someone. I don't think it's going to go anywhere though.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She and I argue a lot.”

Ang's father let a soft smile onto his face. “Your mother and I used to argue all the time.”

“Really?” Ang remembered seeing his father and mother argue once in a great while. Even then, the arguments he did see were usually quiet and restrained.

Ang thought for a second about something else the two could discuss. “Oh hey, I’ve been cooking.” Ang’s father gave him an incredulous look. “Here’s some fried rice I made. It’s a bit cold though.” Ang opened the container he brought.

It only took Ang’s father a single spoonful of his son’s cooking to analyze what the food was lacking. Ang’s father deduced, “Too much salt.” Then he smacked his lips and surmised, “You should add more rice next time.”

What was at first a simple commentary on cooking, Ang and his father soon found that holding a conversation was not as hard a task as either of them had remembered. Ang declared that he should visit every week so his father could teach him the proper way to cook.

It was only two weeks later when Ang received a phone call. It was Uncle Gen. He and Ang had not spoken to one another for over a decade. Once Ang picked up the phone and heard his uncle’s voice he already knew it was bad news about his father.

Ang made his way to the hospital, trying to drive with both haste as well as caution. He found his uncle and immediately thanked the man for being there for his father. Before he could finish his sentence, Ang could see the news on Uncle Gen’s face. His father had passed on.

“Here. Sit,” Uncle Gen said. The white chair’s steel legs scraped on the floor as Uncle Gen placed the chair for Ang to sit. The same sound could be heard once more as Uncle Gen pulled up a chair for himself.

Ang sat on the chair and leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees. The slouch in his back moved all the way up to his head as he stared down towards the floor. “I didn’t get to say goodbye. I didn’t get to say I loved him. It’s like my mother all over again.”



Uncle Gen moved closer to Ang. “Sometimes you don’t have to say it, sometimes you can show it in your actions. I’m sure he knew.” Uncle Gen patted Ang on the back. “He told me about the money.”

Ang shook his head. “Money’s not enough.”

“Guys like that...they can’t really talk about their feelings. I know your dad used to do little things to show your mom he loved her. Before they had you, he would go to her workplace and give her surprise visits.”

“Really?” asked Ang.

“Yup. How about you? Can you think of anything that you guys did together that showed him you loved him?”