

My father is not a man of many words. His role in our family is clear: he works to provide for us outside Hong Kong during the week, returning only on weekends. Even then, he spends most of his time sequestered in his study, buried in paperwork. But on Sundays, he steps out of that routine, visits the wet market to select the freshest ingredients, and asks me, "More onions this time, or less?"

On Monday mornings, when I open my lunchbox in the school cafeteria, other students see just another container of food. But I see the way the rice is more densely packed on the left side where my chopsticks naturally land; the way the skin on the drumstick is peeled, because I once left skins piled at the edge of my bowl; the way the egg was fried until its edges lace golden, just like the way he taught me to do it when I was six. All at once, the conversations we didn't have, the school plays he couldn't attend, the nights he called just as I was falling asleep, ache less.

There is something miraculous about this ritual, like the final piece of a puzzle sliding into place. My father's Sunday stew is just one fragment of this unspoken language of care. Across cultures and time, we have always known this lexicon. Think of the tombstones overflowing with rice and braised pork, how weddings and birthdays demand sweetness, and the peace negotiations where enemies 'break bread'. Food has always been a constant. It has always been a part of us.

Why does a simple plate hold such power? Perhaps it is because we are all starving for some kind of attention from someone that remembers how you take your tea, notices your aversion to mushrooms, or spends his only free day packing a lunchbox for you. No matter what the reason is, humanity has, maybe subconsciously, decided that food is the source of comfort we have always been searching for. And henceforth, food has become the oldest, most universal language we possess: a catalyst that helps us understand differences.

This is the equality that all of humanity clings to, even as the world keeps dividing us by borders, by ideologies, by algorithms and by the relentless march of time. The conservative grandfather and his pink-haired granddaughter might clash over dinner, but they still pass the same fish. Strangers become a temporary family as they share a hotpot, chopsticks crossing in the broth. Friends who lost touch rediscover each other over a cup of coffee.

My father's lunchboxes may never bridge the gap of his long absences, but that's alright, because when I taste the delicate balance of spiciness in his stew, I hear everything he wants to say.

I scrape the soggy rice at the bottom of my lunchbox clean, not letting a sentence go unfinished, before closing the container gently. The metal latch clicks shut. And suddenly, against all odds, I am complete again.