

A narrative essay – fresh fish

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I can hear the snickers as I walk down the crowded sidewalk of Chinatown. The gossip at the vegetable stand. The grin of the fish man. The chatter from the seafood restaurants. Laughter is everywhere, like a dragon's tail winding throughout the streets. I grew up speaking English, not Chinese, the language of my ancestors.

The first word out of my mouth was mommy, not mah mah. When I was 3, my parents flashed cards with Chinese characters at my face, but I pushed aside. My mom assured herself, " He will learn when he is ready. But the time never came. A decade later, I would regret that decision. February 7, 1997, Chinese New Year: My relatives and I gather in my grandmother's three-room Mott Street apartment around the round kitchen table, half-hidden under boxes of don tot, cha siu bao, and other Chinese delicacies from the local dim sum parlor. My Uncle Alex rapidly mutters something to me in Chinese, but all I can do is stare at him quizzically and scratch my head.

" Still can't speak Chinese? " he teases me, now in English. " How old are you? 13? And you still can't talk to your grandmother, can't even buy a fish in Chinatown. What are you waiting for? " " Hey this is America, not China," I reply. " You want fish for dinner? I will get some right now-with or without Chinese. " I turn to mom for permission, who reluctantly hands over a crisp \$20 bill. " Remember to ask for fresh fish, sun seen yu," she says. " You know how fussy your grandmother is with her fish.

" I repeat the words to my mother, who nods in approval, then dart down the two flights of dark narrow stairs into the bright, crowded streets of

Chinatown. Following the foreign sounds and the smell of the ocean around the corner of Mott Street, I find the fish stand, submerged in a sea of customers. There are salmon and croaker and flounder and sea bass, fish with big eyes, fish with shiny scales, and fish that I've never seen before. "I did like to buy some fresh fish," I blurt out to the fish man. But he ignores my English words and turns to serve the next customer. The cackling of the people behind me increases with their impatience. With every second, the breath of the dragons on my back intensifies- my blood boiling- compelling to me to make my decision.

What were my mother's words again? "Seen sang yu, please," I stutter, jabbing at the sea brass. "Very seen sang," I repeat, this time, beaming at my simple eloquence. I had spoken Chinese, used it to communicate with my own people. I had... .. told a joke? The fish man suppresses a grin, but the crowd erupts with laughter and chuckles and snickers. They are Chinese; I am Chinese. I should feel right home. Instead, I am the laughingstock, a disgrace to the language.

My face turns red, like the hung bao, the red envelopes exchanges on Chinese New Year. Then, I am racing back to my grandmother's quiet apartment, the fish, and the laughter in the distance. I return to the apartment empty-handed, except for the now-wrinkled twenty-dollar bill the I clutch tightly in my pocket. "I asked for seen sang yu, fresh fish," I stammer when the door opens, "just like you told me to - I mean - didn't you tell me to say that? But they just laughed." For a moment, my mother simply grins

to herself saying nothing, holding me in suspense. Then she explains, “ No, sun seen is fresh fish, not seen sang. You asked for ateacherfish.

Even though fish travel in schools, you would have a really hard time trying to find the teacher. ” My jaw drops. Should I laugh or cry? I still walk down Mott street to visit my grandmother – past the fish man, past the vegetable stands, past the restaurant- concealing the fact that I cannot speak Chinese. Sometimes I laugh at my fish incident, but in the end, the joke is on me. Every grin is a bond withering away; each chuckle, aculturelost; every giggle, my heritage fading away.