

Report

# A Beloved Tradition and a Father I Never Knew

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PROMPT: Creative Nonfiction

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GROUP: Write the World

## Part I: Coin Dumplings

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As a family tradition for the New Years, a coin would be hidden inside one of the dumplings, and the “lucky one” who discovered the coin would be granted a wish. Since the first New Year I could recall, my family would start the festival with the ritual of coin dumplings. We mixed pork and chives in a bowl, floured the dumpling wrappers, and enclosed the perfect amount of filling.

Once everyone was seated, Dad bent over the table to distribute dumplings to everyone and

Mom hated how performative it was. We devoured our plates, swallowing whole dumplings in one bite, fiercely competing to find the gold coin. As the soft shell of each dumpling melted in my mouth, I relished the salty flavor of the garlic, the hot sensation of the soup, and the warmth not only from the dumpling, but also from my family. On my tenth, or maybe thirtieth dumpling, I felt a solid substance in between the fillings. My tongue instantly recognized that telltale texture. It was me— I found the gold coin! In awe of my luck, my eyes popped as the rest of my family jokingly envied my triumph. I instinctively shut my eyes, wishing for Dad to stay home. It seemed as if fate bestowed me that coin, allowing me to keep dad by my side. That night, I hid the coin under my pillow as a reminder that Dad was close by.

Just weeks after the celebration, I scoffed at my short-lived fantasy. When Dad went away for work again, I went back to my familiar image of him: his perfectly made, untouched bed and stale cigarette butts he left in the ashtray.

He had mostly been absent in my childhood, always away on his business outings. Every time he would return, his comments revealed our time apart. "You've grown so much!" or "Your hair got longer!" He would play folk songs on the piano with his right index finger and hum along off-key. He was the parent who

interrupted my musical due to his tardiness, and the one who clapped at the wrong times. Above all, I remember the feeling of falling into his hugs and being lifted up and down.

Every time before he left, he would plant a big kiss on my cheek.

“I promise we will spend time in the summer together. We will go to the beach just as you want.” Here once again, his words conjured visions when things would be perfect again. I waited for him to go before wiping off the residue of saliva he left on my face.

## Part II: Melting Icecream

On a scorching August afternoon in 2014, a day I have longed for since the New Years, we were headed to the airport for our promised summer getaway. I was seven years old, bouncing up and down on the seat as I rambled about what to do on the beach. Suddenly, a faint sound of sirens approached from behind, and the unmistakable flash of red and blue lights filled the car windows. Before I realized it was for us, the police had already pulled our car on the roadside. The ice cream in my left hand melted in the heat and the chocolate dripped down from my palm to my wrist. My sister raised her eyes and we exchanged a troubled glance. The concern on her face was recognizable, an expression I knew well. Then, through the rearview mirror, I saw three officers knocking

on the window of the driver's seat, signaling Dad to step out. My initial thought was that Dad had been speeding again. However, the officers led him over to the police car, and he didn't even glance back at us as they motioned him inside. I looked back and forth between my mom and sister, hoping that they would have some explanation, but their eyes met mine with just as much confusion. The ice cream, forgotten, was now all over my forearm.

As days of no news passed after Dad's unannounced departure, my apprehension piled up. I tried to tell myself that this was normal: that he was gone for business outings as usual, that he'd broken our promise the way he had always done, and that he'd turn up one night for dinner, hair gelled back, smelling like he just got off a plane ride.

But that day never came. Riding home from school on a Thursday evening, I pulled out my phone to check the news I had subscribed to earlier that week. My eyes stopped upon an article, and chills shot up my spine. I gasped as I read the words in the heading, "ACCUSED," following my dad's name. With my fingers shaking uncontrollably, I scrolled through the report, hoping that this wasn't my father, that this wasn't real.

As soon as I got home, I ran to my mom for confirmation.

"Is there something I should know?" I asked with my voice shaking. Before my mom could process my question, I pulled out the article and read the headline loudly, emphasizing every word.

"I'm sorry...I didn't know how to tell you and your sister." My mom muttered but her words were laden with hesitation. My head buzzed and my skin was cold and sweaty. Before I knew, tears were uncontrollably streaming down my face.

I collapsed into my mom's arms. "God, how?"

### Part III: A Curse and a Blessing

Waiting is one of the most painful experiences, not because of time, but the expectations that come with it. Seven years after the incident, the concept of fatherhood became more obscure. Every so often, memories of my dad will return in the oddest ways, catching a glimpse of smoke from the kitchen, suits at a storefront, hair gel in the supermarket. But he no longer felt real.

During every New Year's night that proceeded, I developed an aversion to dumplings, fearing the taste would bring me back to my foolish childhood fantasy. I no longer dreamt of summer vacations, no longer had chocolate ice

cream, and no longer endowed my trust with any promises made.

As the summer before my freshman year of high school started, I was given a chance to make a phone call to my dad. Strangely, the feelings I experienced were like being called into the principal's office. My movement stiffened, and I was unable to form a chain of thought. But I had to pick up the phone and make that call. It was the only way for me to get some sort of closure to this chapter of my life. When he picked up the call, I watched as five seconds passed before either of us spoke a word. There was so much I wanted to say, but how could I have condensed seven years of emotion into one phone call? Words raced in and out of my mind but the only ones that broke the silence was: "Are you okay, dad?"

"Dad is all fine," he replied in a weak voice. We spoke briefly before my sister took over the phone and at the very least formulated something meaningful. Towards the end of the call, the two of us came together to say goodbye to him again.

I cried silently that night over his voice that I haven't heard in years. He sounded like a stranger. At that moment, I realized the weight of the seven years wasn't our time apart, it was a gap that left so many words unspoken. Too few "I love you's" and too many broken promises.

The phone call served as an end to my waiting, and a start to healing. I've accepted that pain is part and parcel of joy, and that this is love, and then there is everything else.

When the next New Year came, the tradition of coin dumplings continued. Hot steam carried the scent of dumplings through the house, reminding me of how much my family loved celebrations and new beginnings. This time, I wasn't the lucky one.

Despite that, I still made a wish.

## Message to Readers

I would love some feedback on the chronology of this piece. Are the flashbacks too jumpy? Is the way that I divided the story into three parts effective?

First Piece

United States

Creative Nonfiction

