

The ‘Daap Sung’¹ Man

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A click. A shuffle. Thundering footsteps. Eleven o’clock.

“Di di, quick! He’s here! Grab the keys!”

“I am, I am! But jie, we’re never going to catch him.”

“Try me—crap, he’s gone.”

“Told you,” my brother said as he unloaded the tiffin carrier from the shabby but sturdy hook that marks our door. Still, I saw the lingering disappointment he failed to hide on his features.

Our residential apartment features at least a few tens of these hooks, red and yellow and green and blue scraps of metal, twisted into a shape reminiscent of the body of a violin. On these sit the infamous carriers, or rather, as our mom liked to call it in her rowdy mixture of Cantonese, Hokkien, and Mandarin—*gaa laam*. Those days, food was served cold, contrary to the steaming, piping illustrations one would perceive on popular media and comic books. And, of course, those days, they would be delivered from door to door by the elusive man, the man we scrambled to catch in action, the man whose footsteps we could recognize a mile away yet could never seem to catch a glimpse of.

The *daap sung* man, as we inevitably christened him, was an invisible figure shrouded in mystery. By the time one of us scrambled to the drawers filled with skeleton keys to our front door and found the right one between fumbling fingers, the *daap sung* man would've been four floors beyond, safe and sound from our probing eyes and curiously pattering feet, leaving nothing but the container that belonged to us swinging in the wind. Sometimes, we would sit down and ponder his existence. Did he have children? Was his sole job the bringer of meals to homes where kids awaited in anticipation that slowly transformed into sluggish dread after day after day after day of inhaling the same, mediocre, leftovers, hastily packed by weathered hands? Did he like his job? Was there a *gaa laam* of his own, waiting for him at home when he returned, worn down from a day's work, delivered by yet another *daap sung* man? Perhaps they all knew one another: our *daap sung* man and his *daap sung* man and his *daap sung* man's *daap sung* man... Perhaps they were members of a coven, puppets controlled by all-knowing forces who picked our next meals and determined what kinds of food appeared on almost seventy dinner tables in our block.

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps...

For nearly a decade, my brother and I sharpened our ears with the hopes of catching the mysterious figure in action at long last; for a while, our mission felt important, like that of a private investigator lying in wait for a culprit. The *daap sung* man certainly felt like a criminal in all of his glory to us: he brought us lunch and dinner which we despised with all our hearts and yet wolfed down before another action-packed day at school, he left no prints behind and no sign of his intrusion, he always arrived at eleven on the dot—not even a second or a microsecond later... Blueprints of a criminal: he had them all, and we were determined to overturn his conspiracies.

But of course, those were plans that only existed in our fantasies between long stretches of work, eyes raw and watering, our hands trembling with residual strokes of Chinese characters filled to the brim, page after page, perhaps a teardrop here and there. The hours stretched endlessly; between classes, we filled out sheets of torn paper from an abandoned workbook, our Chinese names repeated again and again and again until we dreamed about them, and wrote them with our eyes closed, and—dare I say—grew ashamed of saying the very words that defined us ten years down the line.

Then, it was time for lunch.

A typical meal could very well be spooned right from those metal carriers, slices of soggy potato and its slimy gravy paired with rice (the only warm component of a meal, for it was almost always home-cooked). The vegetables followed: sometimes, it was yam, mushy and pimples and a sickly shade of violet. Other times, it was strands of seaweed-like kangkong, or choy sim, or bitter gourds peppered with some kind of foreign seasoning that looked suspiciously like rat poison.

For years, our meals had been standard templates laid out for us in the kitchen, beads of condensation fogging the bottoms of the metal containers we scraped with equally tarnished spoons. It was simply that: eat or die. Swallow the surprisingly frail contents brought to us daily and lick away the puree between our teeth. Do not complain. Do not spit it out. Chew.

We were robots—both my brother and I. We were raised to be that way: march, salute, grind. For as far as I could remember, our father had always been adamant about us cultivating the collectivist values of our culture at the early stages of our education, and our culture demanded order. It incorporated violence and invalidations that spanned obedience

into rigorously prepared vessels that were once vibrant and opiated and *children*. It was a toxic culture, as we soon grew to understand, but before that, it had been life, and hence the only thing we could trust to fall back on.

I never understood how the familial love the poets described of could exist in such a society. For a long time, I viewed them as myths, for the idea of something so enviable clashed with the worldviews that had been forcefully implanted within me by my parents. They seemed like an entirely different species in my eyes: those children who could speak of anything with no fear of overstepping, parents who joked with their kids and had family bonding nights and high-fived each other all the while sharing their interests... In contrast, I was a blank slate to my family. A sheet of canvas is open for interpretation. My parents complained that they barely knew me, without realizing that I barely knew me either, for all I'd been good at up till then, was pretending to be the obedient daughter they wanted. All I'd known how to do was to smile and suck it up and do what they wanted me to: wipe up the spilled dishes, clean the fractured China, swallow my tears and my snot, and study. Get my grades up. Rank first in my year. First in standardized tests. First in everything for it was unacceptable to be otherwise. Despite my efforts, the demands kept raining down on me, the critiques continued unabated, and I strived to maintain perfection in a vain attempt to silence those voices.

The point is, I had never really known who I was without those demands. I was a marionette, a willing servant of my parents' will. Whatever they wished for me to be, I tried my best to fulfil it. A lot of times, it felt like I was back at my childhood dining table again, spooning heaps of tasteless catered food into my mouth, all the while forcing myself to nod and say "It's fine. I like it just fine" when all I wanted to do was purge the trash I had just inhaled. Admittedly, some of these voices evolved from my own head: not all of it was my

parents. But some damages were harder to undo than others, and I bore the brunt of the years I spent, sacrificing my childhood to pacify the unrealistic standards they set out for me: trashing my school bags, beating me up for hiding my less-than-95 test scores and neglecting to rewrite the questions I got wrong five times at least because I was a kid who wanted to be a kid for fucking once.

Hence the voices: ones that later transformed into whispers that I was better off dead, that I should starve myself, that I was ugly and useless and a failure, and that smiling and breathing and laughing were all privileges I couldn't afford for I was ugly and useless and a failure. It was weak to admit it out loud, to admit that I was struggling, because, in my mind, I had everything. I achieved everything others could only dream of. I had a perfect GPA. I had talents and a way of retaining information many envy me for. I was a picture-perfect student who did not deserve the luxury of struggling. I physically couldn't. Tears evaded me when I needed them the most, anxiety and unprocessed emotions bottled up so tight that I felt like erupting on a daily basis. I pondered the absence of all these big feelings when I was a kid. I wondered if it was a delayed reaction, I was experiencing in response to the years of abuse I still dared not allow myself to admit out loud.

And then, I sort of get it: my early childhood years mirrored the dense schedules I now loathed. It revolved around studies, meals, sleep, and punishments, as clockwork as the *daap sung* man's schedule as he deposited our meals with not even a second's deviation. Years later, I would blame this misconception on my desperate wishes to believe that magic existed, that the *daap sung* man was concrete proof of some kind of mythical creature who would one day swoop down and inform me that I was a fairy from a faraway land.

Of course, the *daap sung* man had been late before—and of course, most of the time he was punctual. It was his job to be so: he was as much of a robot as me, my brother, and

everyone else who lived under this roof, strung along by its elders. But when you were an eight-year-old trapped in a torturous cycle of fearing whether your next breath would be your last because you forgot an assignment or because you only wrote it four times instead of five, you tend to develop delusional thoughts and believe in fairies and magic and crap.

I suppose, in a way, my earliest coping mechanism was precisely that: rigorous schedules, moulding every single day into identical copies of one another till they eventually blurred into the next. It made the days bearable—and it made it easier to dissociate from reality and pretend that I was nothing but a collection of atoms and molecules, taking in oxygen and excreting carbon dioxide. I heavily relied on the logic of science to convince myself that I wasn't a sentient being with emotions, that I felt nothing, and I cared nothing about how I was treated, because if I did, I would end up a crying heaping mess: a glaring target for my mother's relentless anger.

For a long time, it worked. I soon forgot how to cry, how to feel sorry for myself, and heck, I forgot how to feel the core emotions that made me human. I did it. I made myself into a robot, into this invisible creature as mechanical as the *daap sung* man. And for a while, it seemed like a protective shield, one that I could hide behind and pretend that my life wasn't messed up and I wasn't this broken, damaged, dysfunctional human being begging for the release of death deep down. It masked the pain—it really did—but in doing so, it also robbed me of my ability to feel and to empathize. I lost this vital connection I once had to the world, and I sank deeper and deeper into a world that had never existed in the first place, consumed by the fires of insanity, lost in the labyrinth that is my mind.

Then, the *daap sung* man stopped coming.

To the world, it was but a shift in eras—the end of one and the start of another. To

most, the evolution of food delivery services was an inevitable change, imminent and significant to the sustainability of our civilization. But to me, it was the start of an apocalypse as the walls I had trusted to keep me safe shattered around me like meteors raining down a desolate landscape eons ago. I saw every patch of routine I so desperately grasped fracturing and dissipating into nothingness, leaving me with choices, with flexibility, with so much goddamn time and space to be the “real me” when I hardly knew what that word meant.

It scared me, and so I turned to other self-destructive habits that inked my skin with sweat and blood.

What happened to the little *gaa laams* that I depended on to count the passing of a day? What happened to the fixed menus the equally disgusting food the constant tinkle of the *daap sung* man’s familiar footsteps disappearing in the distance? I grieved the loss of continuity in my life. Every time someone asked me what I wanted to eat, I feel the gaping chasm open beneath me once again as I remembered the times I would never have been asked such questions, that I never would’ve been put in a situation where I had the free will to choose what I wanted to eat for lunch. Had I been a prisoner all along, unaware of the liberty I actually had if I’d taken a step forward and looked beyond the patch of blue sky from my barred windows? Now that I was offered all this freedom, all these choices, did I really want them?

I hated it: this newfound freedom. It was too much, and I yearned to be a prisoner again. For when one had grown used to the same kind of mindless, numbing torture on a daily basis, the absence of it felt painstakingly agonizing. Even now, not a day has passed that I do not think about my childhood and wonder if I would’ve been better off left as a stagnant chess piece on the board, forever frozen in time. I wondered if this was better—all this pain unearthed that I hardly knew what to do with, how to respond to its nagging presence

in my chest.

And so, every day, at eleven, part of me still stands up straight on the lookout for the *daap sung* man. And every day at twelve, I am left disappointed, lunch-less, and more alone than ever. Years flew by —faster than one could ever prepare themselves for. Soon, the *daap sung* man and his empire, like everything else, were swept under the rug: relegated to distant memories. Soon, the bell ceases tolling, and the gears stop their motion, preserved in black-and-white photographs, showcased in museums. Just like that, a page turned and a new chapter began. Just like that, an era ended, and a new one emerged in its place. The tide continues eroding the shores, and time continues chipping away at generations of legacies: all of this is the will of the world, the unmoving facts of reality. And yet, sometimes, I can't help but look back and remember those days when the *daap sung* man's lingering shadows served to anchor me to reality, and I wonder, if everything had been nothing but a bronzed fever dream, set in the sweltering heat of my childhood home.

Notes

1. *Daap sung* (or 搭餸), refers to door-to-door catering services, most commonly brought in tiffin carriers (*gaa laam* or 格籃 in Cantonese) as illustrated in this article. Please note that it is not a commonly used term in the Malaysian Chinese community but rather a unique term coined by my (the author's) parents.