

Corn-Starch

By CL

“CL, which timeslot should this guest be arranged to?”

“The production house asked us if we need tents for our booths.”

“Is this height okay for the event door?”

This was the twentieth day I did not find myself sleeping in bed, but instead staying up overnight at the event venue, bombarded with endless questions from other student helpers. Only five days were left until the big day — every year during the last week of November, my college would have its annual celebration festival, with five different activities occupying each weekday. For preparation, a student team would be formed for the event, where each activity would have two leaders. I was one of the leaders of the first activity, and my partner Jason was now having his usual midnight chit-chat with his friends, eating his favourite Sam Dor fried chicken wings, while other student helpers were on the stage decorating the event timetable.

After finishing his midnight snack, Jason called me out. “Hey, come here for a moment.” He sounded serious, yet I knew what he was going to say was nothing near that. Therefore, I looked as reluctant as being called into my boss’ room for a reproach. “I’m making the thank you speech and certificates for tomorrow’s opening ceremony,” I tried to hint him before he started talking. Hinting him for his irresponsibility. Hinting him that he should help me out instead of relaxing and talking nonsense and eating delicious chicken wings that I did not have the time to eat.

Of course he failed to take the hint. “I also need to prepare for my dance tomorrow, and those can wait. But guess what? I just heard that our student helper, Angel, seemed to have a new relationship with Paul! That shy Paul! Can you imagine?” As expected, some meaningless gossips. I did not understand why he could be so at ease. There were only five days left to the event. While I was sacrificing my sleep and work, trying to refrain myself from any kind of entertainment for the event preparation, it really took my patience to bear with him when he just wandered around, having fun singing or dancing, grabbing my helpers’ attention and

receiving cheers even when he did nothing helpful apart from slowing down our progress. The moment he engaged the most, was when he walked around and looked at everyone's work, occasionally giving pretentious comments that were based on his immediate glance of the products, which of course, failed to be useful suggestions.

Is this how a 'leader' should look like? Does being a 'leader' means enjoying all the vanity through supervision but not putting actual effort? This was different from what I knew, also different from what I was currently doing. *Never mind though*, I comforted myself as I proceeded to making the souvenirs for the guests on tomorrow's opening ceremony. *As long as people see my effort, they would know who is the better leader.*

Yet my belief was immediately overthrown after an hour. After I finished the preparation for the opening ceremony and proceeded to cross-checking by the administrator, I was notified that Jason would be the one presenting them on behalf of our team. The reason was that he would dance on the opening ceremony, and it would be smoother for the flow if he directly did the presentation after his performance.

But that was my work. I wanted to tell the administrator when she made the decision. I wanted to tell the guests when they were receiving the souvenirs on stage. I wanted to tell the audience. I wanted to shout to the whole world, that the things Jason was holding, the words he was speaking, were all my work and my work only; that behind this honour, was a poor girl's numerous nights of effort. However, I had no choice and no reason to object this decision other than my selfish desire to present my efforts. I should have known.

After the ceremony, there were still four more nights of preparatory work; yet I didn't go directly to the event venue that night, but instead I went home. I knew that I must be pulling a sad face, so I stood outside my door, waiting for my sentimental self to turn a bit better before going in, so that my mother would not question my supposedly colourful school life.

"What are you doing here?"

After I had taken a few deep breaths and took out my key, an unexpected familiar voice startled me. I turned around, only to see my mother, who was holding two full plastic bags in both of her hands, one with fish-shaped shadows and droplets of red water accumulating at the

bottom of the plastic bag, ready to drip any moment; another drooping with weight, with the thin and flexible plastic film stretched to its maximum, almost tearing open. She was dressed in her usual clothes — a plain white t-shirt and a pair of long trousers, with a tote bag hanging on one side of her shoulders — a perfect fit to the market. “Why don’t you go in?” She looked around, wanting to discover what I was doing at the corridor, and eventually giving me a strange, confused look. “I’m cooking your favourite dish tonight, come help me out!”

As such, I was “forced” to help in the kitchen. Since I was small, having my mother’s sweet and sour fish (糖醋魚) had been the treat that I looked forward to the most. The sweetness, balanced by the sourness, would wash all my sadness and exasperation away, secretly seeping into my heart, blessing me with its appetizing flavour. However, I was not used to helping in the kitchen. I hadn’t even helped once in making the sweet and sour fish. While I was waiting for my mother to give her orders, she just told me to look at the recipe.

So I searched online:

1. *Marinate the fish with salt.*
2. *Chop the onions, green peppers, carrots and pineapples into pieces.*
3. *Sauteed the garlicks, onions, peppers and carrots, then mix it with ketchup, white vinegar and sugar —*

“Wait!!!”

As I just poured all the seasonings into the wok and was about to proceed to the next step, my mother’s yelling scared me enough to make me freeze. “You’ve forgotten the corn-starch!”

I looked at the recipe again, and “corn-starch” wasn’t listed on it. I told my mother, but she didn’t believe me and grabbed the recipe for a detailed look. “This isn’t a good recipe.” She concluded after scanning it for five minutes. “Wine should be added when you marinate the fish too.”

“Why wine?”

“It can remove the fishy smell effectively. As for the corn-starch, it makes the sauce sticky and helps it stay on the fish.” She scooped a spoonful of the sauce and poured it slowly back to the bowl. The liquid flowed smoothly in a vertical trail, reuniting eventually with the red pool in the wok. “You see? For now it’s very watery and can’t hold the taste.”

“So the corn-starch is like the most important thing in this dish.” I looked at the photo of the finished sweet and sour fish on the recipe. “Interesting that we can’t see it at all in the finished dish. Wouldn’t know it if I haven’t tried cooking it.”

“No, there isn’t such thing as ‘the most important ingredient’ in this dish, or in any other dish. You need to learn, that nothing is the most important thing in cooking. Everything has their role in the dish, and they are equally important. Minor as the wine or the garlic, or important as the corn-starch, as you said, missing any of them will result in a failed dish. Only by blending them together can they play their roles,” my mother said as she gave the dish a finishing touch. “I added back the corn-starch, but it’s too late to add the wine back.”

I nodded, trying to take in the theory like I took in the fish. There was a fishy smell in it.

I didn’t notice the time while I was cooking, and after dinner it was already 9pm. I checked my phone. *53 missed messages. 10 missed calls.* “The guests need their MMO!” “Where are our ear monitors?” “How will we order food for the event?” “What’s the number of the first aid team? Have we asked them to come yet?”

I returned to the event venue late that night. The helpers all asked where I had been, and they told me that the new dance Jason just performed was good, that they weren’t bored while doing their work.

“How was it? I wanted to see as well,” I smiled.

That night, I found myself at the event venue, doing my own work in my role.