

Report

The Supper Club

July 19, 2023

by Nausicaa Chu (United States)

PROMPT: Creative Nonfiction
Competition 2023

 15

GROUP: Write the World

Flames

The man with the flamethrower is in the house.

To be more specific, he is in the backyard shooting a three foot pillar of blue flame in the relative direction of our undergrowth.

Is this unexpected? Yes. If anyone had shown up on my doorstep at 8:00 at night with a weed flamethrower and a tank of petrol, it would be hard not to be surprised.

Is this unwanted? Not particularly.

Is this an anomaly? No. Certainly not for the man who brought it, or the man cackling next to him as fire and smoke fill the air.

Who in the world are these people? The man with the flamethrower in question is Uncle Jim, ironically the only burn surgeon in the state of Alabama, and the cackling guy beside him is my dad, a colorectal surgeon.

The flamethrower is carefully put away beside the Big Green Egg, a grill that looks like its name, and the gaucho grill, a moving metal slab attached to a rotisserie stick above a coal-filled grate.

Sparks

The invitations are sent out via text. Six o'clock, our house.

It's six thirty. I balance cans of sparkling water in my arms and dump them on the counter, set out knives and chopsticks and spoons, adjust bowls of fruit in the middle of the table.

Nobody's here yet, but that's normal.

“Whenever we say six, everyone knows we mean six thirty,” my mom explained to me one time. “You're supposed to be late to parties.”

The Yings are the first to arrive. Their two kids run upstairs to play minecraft on the Nintendo with my brother, while Auntie Quyen runs upstairs to help my mom around the kitchen, and Uncle Yedah goes around to the backyard where dad is grilling. Warm smoke and the smell of steak fills the house.

Auntie Quyen and Uncle Yedah, and all the other people at the dinner, are not actually my aunt and uncle, but it's customary in Asian culture to address close family friends as such.

The Hwangs come in next. They live right up the street, and our dogs, Teto and Ranger, get along well. The dogs run to the backyard to romp and play, and try and fail to get a bite of meat. Auntie In-suk brings Korean vegetables and noodles, and Uncle Jim joins the men in the backyard.

The Wangs come too. Auntie Janet helps Mom prepare vegetables while Uncle Tom asks, “chess?” and I pull out the board and smush the

flabby defense he calls the Sicilian. It really isn't anything of the sort.

Uncle George comes in and heads to the garage with my dad to pick out wine to go with dinner.

I carry trays of smoking meat and grilled vegetables inside, pausing as I hear the rush of the flamethrower shooting fire at the rotisserie duck in my dad's ever-going quest to achieve crispy duck skin. My dad carries the duck inside, darkened to a charred bronze, and everyone sits or stands around the counter and talks and eats.

The conversation flows easily, as it always does. There is a script to it, a rhythm, a comforting familiarity.

Usually part of the dialogue covers how this conglomeration of Asian people came together in the first place.

“When did we start having dinners like this? Because we came down, and then—” Uncle Yedah begins.

“Yeah, I mean, the Supper Club didn't really start happening until the Yings came down to

Birmingham, and then the Hwangs. Before that, the only Asian people at the hospital were Ben [another one of my dad's colleagues] and the Wangs," my dad says.

"It was the pandemic that did it," my mom says, "All the restaurants were closed, there was nothing else to do."

"But seriously, I think the food we cook here is the best Asian food in Birmingham. It's better than all the restaurants in the area," Uncle Jim says.

Auntie In-suk laughs. "We should start our own restaurant."

"One day, when we're all retired maybe," my mom agrees.

There is a thoughtful pause, and people get more food.

"We probably had to get together eventually. We're, like, the only Asians in Alabama. There wouldn't be anyone to celebrate Chinese New Years with otherwise," my mom jokes.

Uncle George sits quietly and sips his wine, sometimes inserting a witty remark into the conversation. But I think that perhaps he brought the Supper Club most together, more even than the Pandemic.

Embers

A year, maybe more, maybe less, after the flamethrower, people line the hallways of our house, at least twenty or thirty, looking strangely solemn for a dinner party. Not all of them are from the Supper Club, most of them work at the hospital, but all of them know the man walking with his wife between the two lines of people.

I know him as my Uncle George, but others know him as a doctor, a colleague, a mentor, a friend. He is my dad's friend and also my dad's patient.

After Uncle George was diagnosed with cancer, he was enveloped into the Supper Club. He won the Dumpling Competition we had a couple months earlier, almost won the Fried Rice Competition, and was a principal judge of the Galbi Competition. He was an excellent connoisseur of food and wine, and a huge part of the Supper Club. A lot of the dinners we had, we had for him.

The year or so we had with Uncle George was a wonderful time. But the cancer took a turn for the worse, and he decided to move with his wife to the west coast.

In the hallway, people cry and say goodbye. I am near the end of the hallway by the door, and we embrace for the last time. I don't know what to say to him. Unlike the dinner parties, there is no script for this, no well-worn dialogue. There is nothing to say, except "thank you, thank you for everything."

Uncle George dies a few weeks later, but the legacy and the memories and influence he leaves with the Supper Club lives on.

Uncle George showed the Supper Club the values of our Asian culture, our community, and he showed us to cherish what we have: the relationships that are really important in life. Things change all the time – the Wangs moved to California, the Huangs and the Kristens moved to Alabama and became part of the Supper Club – but what never changes is the importance of community and traditions in all the uncertainties of life.

As I transition through my teenage years, Uncle George's lessons and the Supper Club's lessons have stayed with me. I grew up in the Club – it was kind of like growing up in a big, big family. I learned that a few solid friends around you can make all the difference, that culture is something to celebrate, that a community of people can teach you more than you will ever

discover on your own. And I also learned that in all the transitions of life, all the change that happens, the relationships you have with those around you will ground you, will shape you, will become part of your identity.

The narrative of the Club is still continuing, and I am so, so glad that my own narrative is intertwined with it.

Blaze

A couple months after that final dinner with Uncle George, there is a package on the doorstep.

The package contains something that could only be described as a Flamethrower 2.0, grandly entitled a flambadou – essentially an iron cone attached to a handle into which you pour hot wax and light on fire to create a jet of flame.

Is this unexpected? Yes.

Is this unwanted? Not particularly.

Is this an anomaly? Not at all. At this point, it's completely normal.

Who in the world would buy this thing?

Take a guess.

Footnotes

It might just be my computer glitching, but I noticed that sometimes the words in the stories can get kind of scrunched up on the website, so here's the link to the google doc that I copied and pasted from for this entry just in case you need it:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PciTYPLKiXKoSlky_GE8UN0MTf5cY6wUH4ECFQj23ms/edit?usp=sharing

United States