

synopsis for 'Tom Yum'

Over the course of preparing a meal with her mother, Myla is reminded of the challenges they face as a family, given the frequent absence of her seafarer father.

Tom Yum

MYLA ONCE THOUGHT Tom Yum was a cook on the cruise ship Papa works on – a man named Tom, who made yummy food. It turned out *tom yum* is a soup her father likes to eat, whenever his ship docks at the port of Phuket in Thailand.

Once a week, Myla's mother makes *tom yum*, while Papa orders it at his favorite Thai canteen. Papa calls at dinnertime, and Mama puts her cell phone on speaker mode, and they all have dinner 'together'. This is *mahal*, but they do it anyway, because Papa misses his girls, and they miss him too.

Mama starts cooking by boiling water. Myla always looks at the water, sloshing gently in the pot, and wonders what it must be like to spend most of your time on a boat, with water forever moving underneath. "Isn't it hard just to stay standing?" she once asked, but Papa said his cruise ship is so big it feels like being on land.

Myla's first job is to tie lemongrass in knots – she learned how, just this year! – and pound it in the *almires*, so the flavor comes out. Lemongrass reminds her of her *lola*, Papa's mother – tart and a little gingery, always tied up in knots. Myla is too thin, Lola says all the time; the house is not clean enough; Papa should not have to work abroad.

But Mama says Lola is more like the shrimp that she peels and cleans for the soup – with a hard, prickly shell, but tender and sweet inside. Now Myla cannot look at her *lola* without imagining her all pink and stripy, which makes her laugh, which annoys Lola, which makes Mama laugh, and Papa too, when they told him about it.

While the lemongrass boils, Mama pours, into the bowls they'll eat from, salty *patis* – *Pinoy patis* is still the best, Papa says – and the juice of one lime, which is like *calamansi*, only not as sour. Myla has had to explain this to her classmates, who have never tasted lime and don't really understand why Myla's father is almost never home.

Crushed chili peppers go in the bowls next. "Maybe he's left you," Julio said to her once. "Maybe you don't have a papa anymore." Myla said something very mean in return – she is like a chili pepper sometimes, with a hot temper – but Papa told her that was wrong, because sour words should not crush her, when she knows they're not true.

Myla's next job is to take the stems off kaffir lime leaves. These are hard to find – Papa brings them home with him – but they smell wonderful, citrusy and flowery, like one of the perfumes worn by Rosanna from next door, who is pretty and nice, but always trying to convince Mama to go out with her, because she's sure Papa is always going out too.

Once the lemongrass has boiled for five minutes, the leaves and shrimp are put into the water also, along with mushrooms. These are earthy and simple, like Mama, who does not wear perfume. Today she smells only of herself, and *tom yum*. Yesterday she smelled like herself and *adobo*. Papa says Mama smells like home.

Wansoy goes in last of all, sprinkled on top of each bowl. Myla doesn't much like *wansoy* by itself – although it's minty and fresh, it's also sharp and a bit soapy-tasting – but she and Mama tried making *tom yum* without it once, and it just didn't work.

The kaffir leaves seemed too floral; the chilies, too spicy; the lime and lemongrass, too biting; the *patis*, too salty. It was like the ingredients just couldn't come together properly, the way everyone seems to think Myla's family cannot be a proper family without Papa around every day.

What they don't understand is that Papa is with Myla and Mama all the time – just not in person, mostly. But he's there in the letters he sends, the phone calls he makes, the weekly meal they 'share' – thousands of miles apart, but always close in each other's thoughts and hearts.

Just a pinch of *wansoy* makes all the *tom yum* ingredients come together. It's a small, simple touch that turns something which could have been strange and unpleasant into something – well, still a little odd, maybe, but wonderful.

Tom yum is very, very spicy; very, very sour; and only a tiny bit sweet – not every kid, Myla knows, would like it. But to her, it's just perfect.