

SUMMER FICTION

Starlight Drive-In

You know me. I'm the little doll that takes your order. I don't need a pen because I know your kind. Chicken chow mein, beef chop suey, honey garlic pork (and lemon chicken on Sundays). I know you. I can smell the scalloped potatoes in your future.

My past is a wonton, and yours is a potato. I say big diff. You are rude anyway.

Curtis was different. When he came in for the first time, he walked right up to me while I was taking an order from the winners of the Pierre Berton and Anne Murray look-alike contest.

"What do you want?"

"Hi," he said, looking at the floor. "I wanted to see if you were OK after what we seen yesterday." He spoke softly. I notice the pearl snap buttons on his checkered cowboy shirt again. I will always like snap buttons now.

"I'm fine," I said. For some reason I wanted to cry. My eyes filled. I felt shaky. He moved quickly and grabbed my arm.

"So, what grade are you in?"

"Seven."

"I'm starved," he said as he pulled me away from the booth and sat me down. He passed me a napkin for my tears and laughed nervously.

"You got any kung fu food here or what?"

"Do you want a menu?" I said, dabbing my eyes. The snowbirds left their booth and walked out.

"Get me something good, OK? Get me something different. I want what you'd have."

I want what you'd have. I like it when boys say stuff like that.

So I brought him a Coke and a BLT.

"What's a really rude thing people do in here without knowing it?" Curtis asked.

"They put soy sauce on their rice."

"Is that bad? Yikes, don't tell my mom."

"Really bad."

"How come?"

"Soy sauce is for cooking."

"You mean you eat rice like plain?"

"Yeah, mostly."

"What do you mean mostly?"

"A little Heinz on some fried rice is allowed."

"Who makes these rules?"

"Bruce Lee."

"Fair enough."

"What's something rude I could do at your dinner table?"

"Let me see . . ." Curtis put his arms on the table and leaned his chin in the crook of his elbow. "You know what?"

"What?"

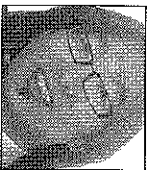
"You can do most anything at an Indian dinner table. You can smoke. You can fart. You can even be a year or two late. The food would be cold, though. The one thing you can't do is not put soy sauce on your rice while dressed up as the Lona Ranger."

"The Lona Ranger uses a lot of soy sauce, eh? What about Tomato?"

"Tortos love Chinese food. Ever been to the Totem Restaurant up in Hazelton?"

"No."

"An Indian runs it."



S T A N CHUNG

Global Citizen

"Is that you, Sophie?"

"Just a second, OK?" I say gesturing violently to my sister.

"What are you doing?" Curtis asks.

"Nothing," I say, urging Jean with my eyes to do something about Mister Stiff Jeans. The man keeps knocking. "Just a sec, Curtis."

"I am not moving," says Jean. I let the phone hang by the cord. It bounces like a Slinky on the floor. I run and open the fridge and pull out a red apple. I shine it on my sleeve. You know this is why Mom buys apples. Every day people come and beg us for food. Vitamin C is better than food. Sophie-ya, Jean finally gets up and unlocks the door.

I stick my arm out. He takes it. Jean practically slams the door on my arm. He stumbles away holding the apple up to the street light.

"Does he have any salmon for sale?" Jean smirks.

"Be quiet," I shriek.

"Hi," I say into the phone. I'm out of breath. I'm tense and excited and scared.

"What're you doing?"

"Nothing." I hear a dog barking on his side of the line. And then I hear horns honking.

"Hi," he says like he's known me my whole life.

"Hi," I whisper nervously. My palms are sweating.

"Ask your sister if she wants colb or sock-eye."

"Sorry you heard that."

"I don't mind. I just like to hear your voice," Curtis says. His voice is like suede.

"You like my voice?" I say hopefully.

"It reminds me of someone."

"Who?"

"Really," I say laughing. Jean leaves and turns off the light.

"Good thing you're you. Otherwise I'd be talking to some stranger that I really like.

And I don't want to talk to no stranger."

"Where are you? I hear noises."

"I'm in half a phone booth at the drive-in."

"What's playing?" I say, astonished.

"20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. It's pretty good. But there ain't no Indians in it."

"Any Chinese?"

"None," he says. "And I was looking. Jesus Murphy, it's starting to rain."

"You want to go back to the movie?" I imagine him getting cold and shivering.

"No, I like it better this way."

"How come?"

Indian boy walks into my restaurant because he's looking for me. Tonight, he calls me from the Starlight with his hair soaked.

I am 13 years old. I say to myself I am 13 years old. This is what it feels like to be alive. Never forget this feeling. Never.

It's been a lifetime since I talked to him. OR probably two weeks.

The last time he called, we had our first and last fight.

"You ever get hugged about being a Chinaman, Sophie?" He asked.

"Yeah," I replied. Already I felt uneasy. He liked to talk about this stuff.

"Why do they call us Indians?" he asked.

"They're from India. They're the goddamn real Indians. No wonder he got squashed. You didn't push him did under that bus did you?"

"Screw you!" I screamed. And then we listened to each other breathe for a while.

"I noticed you," he said softly. "Because you were the only one who looked sad."

"I don't want to be noticed," I said angrily, "ever again."

"Bye, then," he whispered.

"Bye," I said feeling stupid and scared that my life was blowing away. Two byes and there he was gone. Jesus Murphy. Two byes are barely the minimum.

It is the last lunch-hour sock hop of Grade 7. The gym floor shines in the low light. The boys line up on one side. We're on the other. All of us in our sock feet nup up the dust on the floor. Some of the Grade 6 boys pretend to curl in their wool socks. My father doesn't understand the sport of curling. Nobody Oriental does. Two boys from my grade play ruler hockey with a roller-up sock. My father loves hockey. He falls asleep as soon as he hears the theme from Hockey Night in Canada. I love Boyce Salminger.

Smoking in the boy's room. Smoking in the boy's room. I don't have to hear this song again.

Some of the boys have holes in their socks. Their big obscene toes shine like only big obscene toes can. The boys can't stop from asking me to dance. I cannot dance with a boy who has his testicles showing.

Really. It's just not me.

On girl's choice. I dance with my friend Antonia. She has breasts galore and gets attention from everybody. Who doesn't know she got her period in Grade 5? Grade 5! She sweats under her arms like the Quebecer guy who washes dishes in our restaurant, and I can smell that weird sour scent when we dance. I don't think I stink at all because I eat french fries and BLTs. Do you know what it's like to have your breasts hurt and feel like infected pimples? I am not memorizing that feeling.

Do you realize that if I ate rice and sweet and sour pork, the garlic would ooze out of me and hang around me like a fog? Just like Mom and Dad on Friday nights, when we put on the smorgasbord. Their skin is oily like mine. What a curse. To have your pores fertilized by an oily forehead. Thank God for the straight black bangs.

Stop squeezing them, Sophie. And stop smelling everything.

Stop squeezing them, Sophie. And stop smelling everything.

"Really. How's the food?"
"Bad, but we go anyway."

"How come?"
"Cause we're all addicted to soy sauce."
Later, I slipped him a copy of Teenbeat with my name and phone number written on Shaun Cassidy's face.

Sophie Yee, 392-9883. Between 8-9 p.m. He smiled when he saw my scribbling, and I felt all funny inside.

We met a few days ago in front of our restaurant. A school bus had run over a kid. This kid was an OK kid. When he came to town, the other kids finally had someone weirder than me to tease. What a relief! I felt stupid when they played keepaway with the small cloth thing on his head.

Anyways, it took the fire department two hours to flush the streets. He was riding his bike and must've fallen under the wheels. I guess a tire crushed his head. It was so messy. We noticed each other standing there, our faces kind of blank. Curtis came over to me and put a hand on my shoulder. I saw the tears running down his brown cheeks. And now he had come to find me.

To find me.
Nobody had ever looked for me before.

It's getting late. You think it strange that my sister and I spread our books out on the counter to study? Don't worry. It's all show. Jean lets me talk on the phone because I know her secrets. She got a B in physics and changed it to a B+ with dad's typewriter. Then she photocopied it and gave it to him. With a B+, she doesn't have to do summer school. Grade 12 will be hard, she says. One mistake and you're working at the Dairy Queen for life.

"How's Injun Joe?" she asks.

"How's your big fat B in physics?" I reply.

"The fuzz get you yet?"
"Turn out the lights! It's Mister Stiff Jeans. He's here again!" Jean cries.

Brrrrrrrrrrrr!

The telephone jangles my nerves. Mister Stiff Jeans starts using the front door for a drum. He's been coming around for a month. Pockmarked cheeks. Crooked dazed eyes.

Stooped over like an old man. He's wearing dirty jeans and a logger's wool jacket. He holds out his hand and brings it to his mouth. I pick up the phone before my parents can hear it ring again.
"Hello?"

"Cause they're underwater right now. It's way more realistic when it's raining. Well, so how about I phone you again tomorrow?"
"I don't think they'll be showing anything good will they?"
"No, they gotta good movie showing then, Sophie."

"Yeah! What's it called?"

"Sophie and Curtis," he says softly.

"Yeah?" I say, weakly.

"Sophie and Curtis?"

"Is it any good?"

"It's better than 20,000 Leagues. Even when your hair's all wet."

"How does it end?"

"You know what, Sophie?"

"What?"

"I have three white guys lined up who want to use the phone."

"You gotta go?" I ask worried. "Just hang up, Curtis. Don't get into any trouble."

"What are you talking about?" Curtis asks.

"You said there are three white guys outside the phone booth."

"Yeah?"

"I don't understand."

"That's how the story's going to end."

"The story of us?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's gonna end with three white guys lining up to use the phone."

"You kill me," I say, but really I want to say

I really like you or something equally unlike

me. I want to say it so bad. I can hear it in my

head. I don't even know this boy.

I hear shouting. Some woman is asking

Curtis for the telephone.

"The Starlight is a pretty good place to talk

to you, except they don't let you use the

phone for very long. Bye."

"Bye."

"Bye."

"Bye."

"Double bye."

"Triple bye."

"You hang up."

"No, you."

"I can't."

"Me neither."

"Bye, Honey!" a woman shouts in my ear.

Then I hear silence.

The fridge motor goes off and shudders. A

logging truck rumbles by. My left ear is still

hot. It rains diagonally. Two days ago, I saw a

kid's brains on the pavement. Yesterday, an

This sock hop won't be one to remember. I go because my friends say we are going. I go because it's raining outside and what else is there to do? Not all the girls have boys asking them. I don't want anybody to ask me. I don't want some earnest boy talking to my chest or punching my shoulder. I have pretty much forgotten about Curtis now.

This dance is dumb. We all say that. But we all go anyway. It is getting hot inside, so the teachers throw open the exit doors.

Exit

Exit

Exit

I love the soft red glow of the exit signs. Soon it will be the last dance, and I will return with my shoes to the security of my desk and the light of day. Then I see his silhouette at the side door. The teachers are outside smoking. He takes off his boots and moves toward me. He tosses his jean jacket on the floor.

"Can I have this dance?" Curtis says, taking my hand. I know the other girls are looking at him. And at me. Curtis is in Grade 9. We are in Grade 7. He is so tall. He might as well be — he might as well be a man.

And what about me? What am I?

Out on the gym floor, he grabs my belt loops as the song begins. It is my favourite, the one by Edward Bear. He pulls me toward him. I listen to the lyrics that I will remember all my life. "This is the last song I'll ever write for you. This is the last time that I'll ever say how much I really care."

He holds me in his arms, and I can feel the pearl snap buttons against me. I close my eyes, and I feel powerful like I am growing into someone. He smells like suede and cigarettes and cinnamon, like the inside of my mom's purse. I hold my arms around his neck.

Do you know how it is to slip away, to feel yourself disappearing and then reappearing as someone else? It is time, I think, to memorize this feeling.

Screw that. I am too busy dancing.

He's a boy off the reserve and I am a cook's girl. I imagine the stars spinning around the sky. The soundtrack swells. We are dancing on the roof of the Starlight Drive-in. There is a romantic movie playing in the distance.

Three white guys wait for the pay phone.

Stan Chung is a writer and associate

dean of arts and foundational programs
at Okanagan College.