

YIN CHIN

Lee Maracle

(For Sharon Lee, whose real name is Sky, and Jim Wong Chu)

she is tough,
she is verbose,
she has lived a thousand lives

she is sweet,
she is not,
she is blossoming
and dying every moment

a flower
unsweetened by rain
untarnished by simpering
uncuckolded by men
not coquettish enough
for say the gals
who make a career of shopping
at the Pacific Centre Mall

PACIFIC CENTRE, my gawd
do North Americans never tire
of claiming the centre
of the universe, the pacific and
everywhere else . . .

I am weary
of North Americans
so I listen to SKY.

STANDING IN THE CROWDED DINING HALL, coffee in hand, my face is drawn to a noisy group of Chinese youth; I mentally cancel them out. No place to sit — no place meaning there aren't any Indians in the room. It is a reflexive action on my part to assume that any company that isn't Indian company is generally unacceptable, but there it was, the absence of Indians not chairs determined the absence of a space for me. The soft of heart, guilt-ridden liberals might

argue defensively that that sweeping judgement is not different from any other generalization made about us. So be it; after all it is not their humanity I am calling to question. It is mine. Along with that thought dances another. I have lived in this city in the same neighbourhood as Chinese people for twenty-two years now and don't know a single Chinese person.

It scares me just a little. It wasn't always that way. The memory of a skinny little waif drops into the frame of moving pictures rolling across my mind. Unabashed she stands next the door of Mad Sam's market across from Powell Street grounds surveilling 'chinamen' with accusatory eyes. Once a month on Saturday the process repeated itself; the little girl of noble heart studied the old men. Not once in all her childhood years had she ever seen an old man steal a little kid. She gave up, not because she became convinced that the accusation was unfounded, but because she got too big to worry about it.

"Cun-a-muck-ah-you-da-puppy-shaw, that's Chinee for how are you," and the old pa'pa-y-ah would laugh. "Don't wander around town or the old Chinamen will get you, steal you" . . . Chinkee, chinkee chinamen went down town, turned around the corner and his pants fell down" and other such truck had been buried somewhere in the caverns of the useless information file tucked in the basement of her mind, but the shape of her social life was frighteningly influenced by those absurd sounds. The movie was just starting to lag and the literary theme of the pictures was coming into focus when a small breath of air, a gentle touch of a small woman's hand invited me to sit. How embarrassing. I'd been gaping and gawking at a table-load of Hans long enough for my coffee to cool.

It didn't take long. Invariably, when people of colour get together they discuss white people. They are the butt of our jokes, the fountain of our bitterness and pain and the infinite well-spring of every dilemma life ever presented to us. The humour eases the pain, but always whites figure front and centre of our joint communication. If I had a dollar for every word ever said about them instead of to them I'd be the richest welfare bum in the country. No wonder they suffer from inflated egoism.

I sat at the table-load of Chinese people and toward the end of the hour I wanted to tell them about Mad Sam's, Powell Street and old men. I didn't. Wisely, I think now. Our sense of humour was different then. In the face of a crass white world we had erased so much of ourselves and sketched so many cartoon characters of white people over-top the emptiness inside, that it would have been too much for us to face that we really did feel just like them. I sat at that table more than a dozen times but not once did it occur to any of us that we were friends. Eventually, the usual march of a relentless clock, my hasty departure from college the following semester and my failure to return for fifteen years took its toll — now even their names escape me.

Last Saturday (seems like a hundred years later) was different. The table-load of people was Asian/Native. We laughed at ourselves and spoke very seriously about

our writing. We really believe we are writers, someone had said, and the room shook with the hysteria of it all. We ran on and on about our growth and development and not once did the white man ever enter the room. It just seemed all too incredible that a dozen Hans and Natives could sit and discuss all things under heaven, including racism, and not talk about white people. It only took a half-dozen revolutions in the Third World, seventeen riots in America, one hundred demonstrations against racism in Canada and thirty-seven dead Native youth in my life to become. (For grammar fanatics I am aware that the preceding is not 'gutt Inkish.')

I could have told them about the waif but it didn't seem relevant. We had crossed a millennium of bridges the rivers of which were swollen with the floodwaters of dark humanity's tenacious struggle to extricate themselves from oppression and we knew it.

We were born during the first sword wound that the Third World swung at imperialism. We were children of that wound, invincible, conscious and movin' on up. We could laugh because we were no longer a joke. But somewhere along the line we forgot to tell the others, the thousands of our folks that still tell their kids about old chinamen.

It's Tuesday and I'm circling the block at Gore and Powell trying to find a parking space, windows open, driving like I belong here. A sharp "Don't come near me, why you bother me?" jars me loose. An old Chinese woman swings a ratty old umbrella at a Native man who is pushing her, cursing her and otherwise giving her a hard time. I lean toward the passenger side and shout at him from the safety of my car: "Leave her alone, asshole."

"Shut-up you f'ck'n' rag-head." I jump out of the car, without bothering to park it — no one honks, they just stare at me. He sees my face and my cowichan, bends deeply and says very sarcastically that he didn't know I was a squaw. Well, I am no pacifist; I admit, I belted him, gave him what for and the coward left. I helped the old woman across the street, then returned to park my car. She was still there where I left her, shaking, so I stopped to try and quell her fear.

She wasn't afraid. She was ashamed of her own people, men who had passed her by, walking around her or crossing the street to avoid trying to rescue her from the taunts of one of my people. The world raged around inside me while she copiously described every Chinese man who had seen her and kept walking. I listened to her in silence and thought of me and old Sam again.

Mad Sam was a pioneer of discount foods. Slightly over-ripe bananas (great for peanut butter bannock sandwiches), bruised apples and day-old bread were always available at half the cost of Safeway and we shopped there regularly for years. I am not sure if he sold meat, in any case we never bought meat; we were fish-eaters then. I doubt very much that Sam knew we called him "Mad" but I know now the mad was intended for the low prices and the crowds in his little store, not him. In the fifties, there were storeowners that concerned themselves with their

customers, established relationships with them, exchanged gossip and shared a few laughs. Sam was good to us.

If you press your nose up against the window to the left of the door you can still see me standing there, ghostlike skinny brown body with huge eyes riveted on the street and Powell Street grounds. Sometimes my eyes take a slow shift from left to right, right to left. I'm watchin' ol' chinamen, makin' sure they don't grab little kids. Once a month for several years I assume my post and keep my private vigil. No one on the street seems to know what I'm doing or why, but it doesn't matter. The object of my vigil is not appreciation but catchin' the old chinamen in the act.

My nose is pressed up against the window pane, the cold circles the end of my flattened nose; it feels good. Outside, the window pane was freckled with crystal water drops; inside, it was smooth and dry, but for a little wisp of fog from my breath. Round 'o's' of water splotched onto the clear glass. Not perfectly round, but just the right amount of roundness that allows you to call them 'o's.' Each 'o' was different as on the page at school when you first print 'o's' for the teacher. On the paper are lots of them. They are all kind of wobbly and different, but still 'o's.'

I could see the rain-distorted street scene at the park through the round 'o's' of water. There are no flowers or grass in this park. No elaborate floral themes or landscape designs, just a dozen or so benches around a wasteland of gravel, sand and comfrey root — weeds — and a softball backstop at one end. What a bloody long time ago that was, mama.

Blat. A raindrop hit the window, scrunching up the park bench I was looking at. The round 'o' of rain made the park bench wiggle toward my corner of the store. I giggled.

"Mad Sam's . . . Mad Sam's . . . Mad Sam's?" What began as a senseless repetition of a household phrase ended as a question. She knew that Mad Sam was a chinaman . . . Chinee, the old people called them . . . but, then, the old people can't speak 'goot Inklisk' — know what I mean? But what in the world made him mad? I breathed at the window. It fogged up. The only kind of mad I know is when everyone runs aroun' hollering and kicking up dust.

I rocked back and forth while my finger traced out a large circle which my hand had cleared. Two old men on the bench across the street broke my thoughts of Sam's madness. One of them rose. He was wearing one of those grey tweed wool hats that people think of as English and associate with sports cars. He had a cane, a light beige cane. He half bent at the waist before he left the bench, turned and, with his arms stretched out from his shoulders and flailing back and forth a few times, accentuated his words to the other old man seated there.

It would have looked funny if pa'pa-y-ah had done it, or ol' Mike, but I was acutely aware that this was a chinaman. Ol' chinamen are not funny. They are serious, and the words of the world echoed violently in my ears . . . "don't wander

off or the ol' chinamen will get you and eat you." I pouted about the fact that mama had never warned me about them. "She doesn't care."

A woman with a black car coat and a white pill-box hat disturbed the scene. Scream, the door of her old Buick opened. Squeak, slam, it banged shut. There is something humorously inelegant about a white lady with spiked heels, tight skirt and a pill-box hat cranking up a '39 Buick. Thanx, mama, for having me soon enough to have seen it.

Gawd, I am so glad I remember this: there she be, blonde as all get out, slightly hippy, heaving her bare leg, that is partially constrained by her skirt, onto the bumper of her car and cranking at the whatever had to be cranked to make the damn thing go. All of this wonderfulness came squiggling through a little puddle of clear rain. The Buick finally took off and from the tail end of its departure I could see the little old man still shuffling his way across the street. Funny, all the cars stopped for him. Odd, the little Chinese boy talked to him, unafraid.

Shuffle, shuffle, plunk of his cane, shuffle, shuffle, plunk; on he trudged. The breath from the corner near my window came out in shorter and louder gasps. It punctuated the window with an on-again, off-again choo-choo rhythm of clarity. Breath and fog, shuffle, shuffle, plunk, breath and fog. BOOM! And the old man's face was right on mine. My scream was indelicate. Mad Sam and mama came running.

"Whatsa matter?"

"Whah iss it," from Sam and mama respectively.

Half hesitating I pointed out the window. "The chinaman was looking at me." I could see that that was not the right answer. Mama's eyes yelled 'for pete's sake' and her cheeks shone red with shame, not embarrassment, shame. Sam's face was clear. Definably hurt. Not the kind of hurt that shows when adults burn themselves or something but the kind of hurt you can sometimes see in the eyes of people who have been cheated. The total picture spelled something I could not define.

Grandmothers you said if I was ever caught doing nothing you would take me away for all eternity. . . . The silence was thick, cloying and paralyzing. It stopped my brain and stilled my emotion. It deafened my ears to the rain. I could not look out to see if the old man was still there. No grannies came to spare me.

My eyes fell unseeing on a parsnip just exactly in front of my face. They rested there not to stray until everyone stopped looking at my treacherous little body and resumed talking about whatever they were talking about before I had brought the world to a momentary halt with my astounding stupidity. What surprises me now is that they did eventually carry on as though nothing was wrong.

The floor swayed beneath me, while I tried hard to make it swallow me and carry out my wish, but I didn't quite make it. A hand loaded with a pear in front of my face jarred my eyes loose from the parsnip.

“Here,” the small, pained smile on Sam’s face stilled the floor but the memory remained a moving moment in my life.

The old woman was holding my hands saying she felt better now. All that time, I did not speak or think about what she said. I just nodded my head back and forth and relived my memory of Mad Sam’s.

“How unkind of the world to school us in ignorance” was all I said, and I made my way back to the car.

BIG STEVE

Wayne Keon

rubs his hands
together
for

the forty fifth
time enough
for

one more deal
before the
store

closes man i’m in
for this round
of carpet

sweeping nd all the
city cleaners
going out

of business after
this has been
run thru

the bay street
slop pail
one

more time more time more time