

## *The Village of Chinatown*

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Larry Wong

### **GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER? (1952)**

Pop hummed as he made two swift chops with his cleaver to halve the chicken. In a mixing bowl, he poured soya sauce followed by a sprinkle of pepper and salt before marinating the chicken.

“What are you making, Pop?”

“Whut guy.”

Wow! Pot roast chicken. Chicken first browned, then cooked on medium heat with Chinese mushrooms, wine and garlic. Like the Chinese of his generation, whenever there were guests, Pop always made a chicken dish. He must've had dozens of recipes for chicken in his head. He could make boiled chicken, breaded chicken, braised chicken, fried chicken, anything and everything chicken. And all he had in our tiny kitchen were two hotplates with two elements each and a woodstove.



Pop, 75 years old, preparing a meal.

Our guest that day was Garry, my brother-in-law. My new brother-in-law, whom Pop and I never met.

Jennie left home in 1948 when she was seventeen. She wanted to see the world beyond Chinatown. Chinatown was an insular village back then. Everyone knew one another and was happy to stay, but some of the younger generation wanted to go beyond Pender Street.

My older brother, Wah, left home to go to the University of Washington and never returned except for an occasional visit, and now Jennie was returning home, if only just for a little while.

Jennie always missed Mom. Mom died when Jennie was nine, leaving her with Pop, two older brothers and me, the baby of the family. It was a lot for Jennie to grow into her teen years in such a male-dominated family. As much as Pop tried, it was a challenge to be both a mother and a father. Shortly after Mom's death, my eldest brother, Git, died at the age of twenty-one from tuberculosis, a disease common at the time in Chinatown.

The day after Jennie left home, Pop ranted and raved for hours. His voice bounced off the four walls with rage. He usually had a bad temper but that day, he outdid himself. He disowned his daughter and told all his friends about it. Every time he spoke about it, the veins on his neck and forehead visibly pulsed.

At first when Jennie left, I missed my siblings. But I quickly realized that Pop had changed his attitude toward me. He was more attentive. I complained one day while playing Cowboys and Indians that I didn't have a holster for my cap gun. The next day, he made a gun belt and a holster out of some leatherette material. He also measured me and made my shirts.

In the time spent with my father, I learned that he and my mother were in Chinese opera. Before the revolution of 1911, women were forbidden from the stage, so men played the female roles. When China became a republic, the men-only tradition was lifted, and Mom, who by then was in her twenties, eagerly tried out for Chinese opera and was accepted. With the local Chinese opera troupe, my parents were active on stage but in reverse gender roles. My mother played a general, and my father, a fair maiden.

There were times at night when I could hear Pop singing in bed. I ignored it, but later on, I found out his songs were love songs from the Chinese operas. I think he sang them to remember my mother and keep memories of her alive.

The first few years of Jennie being gone, she wrote to me regularly from a town in northern Ontario. With each letter she included a list of Chinese groceries for me to buy for her. She also included a cheque; it was more than enough, as I always had leftover change. The list included bottles of soya sauce, pounds of Chinese mushrooms and sausages, bags of dried Farkay noodles, tins of abalone and canned vegetables and even the smelly salted fish. I shipped off the care packages. I thought nothing of it other than, well, she missed Chinese food, and obviously in a small mining town, Chinese groceries barely existed. Her letters and lists were also a way of keeping in touch with us, even if Pop had disowned her.

When Jennie announced in 1950 that she got married and worse yet, for my father, to a white person, Pop immediately jumped up and down and disowned her again. He was furious. How dare his daughter married outside of our race? What was she thinking? Unacceptable! His voice rose and stayed at an anger level all week long. Now, two years later, she was returning home. Pop calmed down, though occasionally he'd gnash his teeth at the mention of her name.

Now, he hummed as he moved about in the kitchen. He was steaming pork pie, or gee yook bueng, with a duck egg yolk. The pickled Swiss chard with beef was already cooked in the frying pan, and the steamed salted fish was also ready. The air filled with the smell of garlic and vinegar.

Just then, the front door opened, and in walked Jennie with her husband.

“Pop! I missed you.” Tears ran down her face.

“Mo hamm,” he said. No need to cry. He stepped forward, his eyes happy to see his daughter, but when he shifted to the tall, blond man, his new son-in-law, Garry, he sighed. His body sagged, but he extended his hand. His eyes were wet.

Jennie raised her arms to give Pop a hug, but he stood with his arms at his sides. She hugged him awkwardly.

“Sik chan,” were the only words he could say. Let’s eat.

We all sat around the dinner table. Jennie laughed when she saw the newspaper tablecloth. Garry sat next to Pop, and I next to Jennie.

“I can still read the comics upside down,” she said. I laughed and smiled at Garry.

Pop had already set the food on the table. “Oh wow,” said Jennie. “My favourites.”

Mine too, I thought. But what about poor Garry? I couldn’t imagine that any of this village food would appeal to a white person.

“What do you do for a living?” Pop asked Garry.

“I’m a butcher.”

“A butcher?” said Pop, his eyes widening. “That’s good. People have to eat so you’ll never be out of a job.”

He offered Garry some Johnny Walker, and they toasted to the occasion.

“I have a job waiting for me here so we’ll be staying in Vancouver,” Garry told Pop.

Pop nodded and pointed to the food on the table, “Eat.”

To my amazement and more so for Pop, Garry started on the salted fish and ate it with gusto. My eyebrows went up. He was using the chopsticks as if he had been using them all his life. He was eating up all the village food, the peasant stuff. One was the dish of the dark green pickled Swiss chard with its sour taste, accompanied with the fine slices of fried beef. Next to that was the pork pie, with a bright orange salted duck yolk sitting in the middle. Another dish was the pot roast chicken, with sizzling garlic and Chinese mushrooms.

These were dishes you don’t normally order in a Chinese restaurant. Pop raised his eyebrows. He’d hoped to discourage this young man, but Garry passed the test. How could a lo-fan eat this village fare?

When dinner was over, there were some traces of sauce remaining on the plates. We all sat back, our bellies full and satisfied. Pop pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Garry.

Pop reached for the bottle, “Whiskey?”

Years later, Garry still has a healthy appetite for Chinese food. But I had to ask Jennie.

“How did you get a prairie boy from Saskatchewan whose parents were from Great Britain and brought up on meat and potatoes to finish that dinner Pop made?”

“Remember those care packages you sent me?”

“Yeah, I remember those.”

“When I was living at home, I used to watch Pop in the kitchen. I missed Pop’s cooking when I moved to Ontario. So I ordered whatever groceries I could and practiced cooking from memory.”

“Just from watching Pop?”

“Yeah. And of course, with Garry, he was tired of meat and potatoes, so I cooked Chinese for him.”

She paused. “I knew I had to eventually introduce him to Pop.” She shrugged with her palms facing up.

Pop and Garry got along famously. He never complained about Garry or mixed marriage in his family again. In another year or two, Garry’s parents came to visit us from Sinaluta, Saskatchewan. Charlie and Vera Diment went to Pop’s tailor shop. Pop made English tea for them by boiling water in a saucepan and letting the tea bag steep for a minute before stirring in spoonfuls of sugar and gobs of condensed milk. The Diments politely drank it all up.

In June 2000, Jennie and Garry celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

Pop died in 1966, and we buried him at Ocean View Cemetery. When Ching Ming time comes around, I place my bouquet and food offerings at his bronze gravestone and bow three times before him. I think back to the memories of Pop, running them through my mind like a movie and pausing at the happy moments. Of them all, that one of the dinner that changed the family forever.

The sun warms my face. I close my eyes and see coloured patterns dance before me. I take a deep breath. I can smell the freshly cut grass and feel the gentle breeze. I open my eyes and look into the blue skies. If I listen carefully, I can hear Pop singing in his bed—love songs he sang to my mother.