



Mince on Toast by Lui Sit

It was an Australian summer, but I was wearing corduroy flares and a long sleeve shirt with a Peter Pan collar. Standing next to Mrs Relavich in front of the class, I had the urge to take off my uncomfortable clothes and run out the door.

‘Class, I’d like you to welcome our new student. Her name is Lui. Everyone say, Good Morning Lui.’

I watched as the class opened their mouths like a chorus of trained guppies.

‘Good Morning Lui.’

Mrs Relavich continued. ‘Lui is Chinese. Put your hand up if you know where China is?’

A few pale palms waved in the air. I looked up at the teacher. She had such kind eyes.

‘Lui, can you tell us a little bit about China?’

I didn’t know what to say or how to say it. Mum had told her that my English was poor. Why was she making me talk?

‘Come on dear,’ she urged, gently ushering me forwards. ‘Tell us a bit about where you come from.’

Beneath the corduroy flares, my legs felt sweaty. A boy sitting in the back row stuck his tongue out at me.

‘Hello.’ My voice came out in a whisper.

‘Speak up dear,’ Mrs Relavich smiled.

The boy at the back was smirking.

‘Hello,’ I tried again. ‘I’m Lui.’

‘Yeah, we know that,’ the horrible boy said.

‘Chris,’ Mrs Relavich warned. ‘Go on dear.’ She nodded encouragingly.

‘I’m from China.’ My face felt very hot. Was it the flares or was it because I was lying?

‘Now tell us *about* China.’

About China? I didn't know anything about China.

Tight-lipped, I shook my head at her.

'No? You don't want...?' Her voice died off and she patted me on the shoulder.

'Never mind,' she smiled.

A wadded spit ball flew from the back of the room and landed limply by my foot. 'Who threw that?' Mrs Relavich's tone hardened

No-one said anything.

My insides squirmed. If this was school, I wanted no part of it.

'Go sit down Lui.' She nudged me towards the direction of the class. My flares flapped as I walked towards the empty desk in the back row. As I passed the boy, he whispered,

'Ching Chong.'

I didn't know what it meant but I could tell it wasn't a compliment. Sitting down behind the safety of the school desk, I surveyed the heads of all my classmates. These were my people now. And not one of them looked like me.

After that noteworthy introduction to primary school, I set about becoming Australian. I nagged my mother to buy me t-shirts and shorts rather than scratchy shirts with stiff collars and embroidered cuffs. I longed for the school uniform. An apple green pleated skirt and a red t-shirt with the school motto *I Care*, emblazoned on the front. I begged and begged but she had a heart of stone when it came to attire.

'School uniform not compulsory, she barked. 'Why should I spend money we don't have on something you don't need?'

There was no recourse. Money, or the lack of it, was a constant refrain in our house. My parents immigrated to Australia from Hong Kong after the Whitlam government dismantled the last vestiges of the White Australia Policy in 1973. In 1976, they arrived in Perth, Western Australia with the courage of their convictions, a three-year-old daughter and little else. Those early years were a struggle. My father's nursing pay check had to stretch to cover not only the needs of his wife and daughter but also that of family in Hong Kong. One pay check was split amongst ten people. It was not enough. So mum went to work as a cleaner and waitress and I became independent at age four, looking after myself for long periods at a time.

By the time I was six and starting primary school, things were a little better financially. We owned a house which my parents kitted out in orange and brown second-hand furniture and treasures from the local car boot market. We also owned a car, a silver Mitsubishi Galant. One afternoon my Dad came home with

a new TV. With great fanfare, he said I could now watch, 'Sesame Street,' and learn how to speak English. I followed his instructions faithfully. By the time I started school, I could understand American English perfectly. But I still could not speak it. Fortunately, children are fast learners and soon enough I had grasped enough of the local lingo to communicate with my peers. I had also at this point, discovered the school library which became my fortress of solitude and discovery. I read my way through the library and emerged with better literacy than many of the bullies that taunted me for being a Ching Chong Chinaman. Their gender identification perplexed me more than their taunts hurt but perhaps I am just saying that now in retrospect. Who am I kidding? Chinaman or China woman. It did hurt.

Fluency in the language allowed me to participate in choir which was great fun. I was no songbird, but I had enthusiasm second to none. One day, it was announced that we would be performing songs from the musical, 'Oliver' at the end of year school concert. Auditions would be held for the key roles of Oliver, Nancy and the Artful Dodger. My heart pounded. Did I dare? Could I conceivably be Nancy? A hurried counsel was conducted with my friends. Having gotten their support, I decided to audition. From somewhere in my mother's closet, I found a full gathered skirt that was too big for me. But it felt great as I swished my way down the hallway of our house practicing, 'Oom-Pa-Pa.' The day of the audition came. After the usual choir session, everyone left apart from those who wished to audition. Mrs Chorley, the choir teacher had us wait outside while she invited auditionees back into the room, one by one. I nervously eyed up the other wanna-be Nancy's. There were three of us and the other two had blonde hair.

When my turn came, I launched into *Oom-Pa-Pa* with what I thought was verve and gusto. Halfway through, I caught a glimpse of Mrs Chorley's face. She was not looking at me. She was looking through me. When I finished the song, her lips said, 'Thank you. Well done.' But what I heard was, 'I don't want a Chinese Nancy with a broad Aussie accent.'

In the end, she chose one of the blondes. My friends loyally said it was not fair. On the surface, I took it on the chin but inside, I felt a fury that extended to every inch of my seven-year old body.

My disproportionate response to rejection might have been due to unbridled angst over my diet. In Chinese culture, sandwiches are the food of the devil. My mother was disgusted to discover this is what Australian school children ate for lunch.

'That explains a lot,' she declared. 'Don't worry. I will bring you proper food every day.'

To my mortification, she showed up at school at lunchtime with a thermos filled with steaming hot noodles or rice and meat. She stood over me, hawk-eyed until every last morsel had been duly consumed. My peers watched us from afar whilst tucking into their cheese, Vegemite or polony sandwiches. Mum would then would then stride off back home with the empty Thermos and I would be left with a full belly and rising shame.

One day, I rebelled. I refused to eat the contents of the thermos and instead tipped it all out onto the ground. To my mum, deliberately wasting food was tantamount to a declaration of war and she entered the battle with no holds barred. She let me have it. But peer pressure is a powerful force and I stood strong. I won that war but it came with a cost. From that day on, Mum refused to make my school lunch. I went to school lunch-less or with my version of the devil sandwich; two pieces of bread that I had half-heartedly slapped together with some butter and jam. My friends observed my fall from culinary grace with kindness. Sharing with me their polony or vegemite sandwiches, I cheerfully took bite after disgusting bite, happy in the knowledge that I was one of them, at last.

By Year Two, I had gotten used to being the only Chinese kid at school. Most of my teachers treated me just like everyone else until I met Miss Swift. She was my Year Two teacher and looked just like Snow White from the Disney cartoon. Pale, unblemished skin. Dark brown hair and blue eyes. I adored her and for some reason, the feeling seemed to be mutual. I became Teachers Pet. My mum took a liking to her too. So much so that when Miss Swift asked if she would give my class a Chinese cooking demonstration, mum to my shock, said yes.

The day came and Mum lugged to school all the accoutrements which up to now had been safely hidden away in our kitchen. The wok, the rice cooker, Chinese cloisonné bowls, the cleaver and even our chopsticks! She set it all up at the front of the class while I cringed at the back.

‘Class!’ announced Miss Swift, ‘This is Mrs Sit, LUI’S MUM who is going to show us how to make Chinese food.’

Everyone turned to stare at me as if they had never seen me before.

“Whatyoulookingat” I muttered in my best impersonation of Arnold from A Different Strokes.

Fortunately, their attention was soon diverted to my mother as she started her one woman cooking show. She was even wearing an apron. She never wore one at home. I winced as my mum spoke confidently in poor English. I felt the veneer of Australianess I had worked hard to maintain slip away as she talked. My mum was letting the side down badly. She couldn’t have been more Chinese. She was even making fried rice. What was she doing? We never, ever ate fried rice.

‘A Loi!’

A cold shiver ran through me.

‘A Loi!’

There it was again. My mother calling my name. In Cantonese.

‘A Loi. Come here and help me,’ she shouted.

With my credibility in tatters, I shuffled up to where she stood and tried to kill her with my eyes. How could she do this to me?

'Put some soya sauce in the wok,' she instructed, oblivious to my torment.

As I did as I was told, I imagined leaving the school and travelling far, far away. Perhaps to work as a child labourer in a sweatshop as my Dad had done.

Mercifully fried rice does not take long to cook. When it was ready I was asked to help hand out the food to the class.

'You don't have to eat it,' I whispered to the kids, 'Just spit it back into the bowl.'

Afterwards as Miss Swift helped mum pack the items back into the car, I braced myself for the teasing that was sure to follow.

'Does your mum make fried rice all the time?'

'What's soya sauce?'

'That wok is really cool. It's like a weapon'

'Your mum is pretty.'

'Chinese food is yummy. I wish my mum could make it.'

I became a minor celebrity in class. Buoyed by my sudden popularity, I begged my mum to make a return appearance.

'No,' she refused. 'Making fried rice is a drag. And it's not proper Chinese food.'

'Well make real Chinese food then'

'They won't like it.'

I knew she was right. We ate fish heads and stinky tofu with spicy sauce. Half the time, I didn't even know what it was that we ate, only that it was good for me so I had to eat it.

As quickly as it had arrived, my celebrity status left, and life went back to normal.

Mum had been a folk dancer in Hong Kong. It was her passion but there were no jobs for Chinese folk dancers in Perth in the late seventies. Not content to stay a waitress, she enrolled in an evening adult education course in accountancy. The start time of the course meant that I would be home alone for several hours before Dad returned home from work. This was fine with me as I was used to being alone for long periods of time.

Before she left for her first class, she prepared dinner for Dad and I to have when he got home. She told me what was in the various pots and pans and instructed me to turn off the rice cooker when the rice was ready.

‘See this light here. It will turn green and that will mean that the rice is cooked. When that happens, just turn off the cooker at the power point. Ok?’

‘Ok,’ I nodded, wondering if I had missed the Goodies on TV.

With mum gone, I settled in front of the TV for the duration.

‘Goody Goody Yum Yum,’ I sang loudly, dancing around the lounge room. The episode finished, and I went to get a glass of water. In the kitchen, the rice cooker was going berserk! The lid was clattering loudly, threatening to topple off as bubbles of steam and froth surged from beneath it. The green light was on, but mum’s instructions had disappeared completely from my mind.

‘It’s gonna explode!’ I panicked, ‘The house is going to burn down!’

I ran to the linen closet and grabbed a bunch of clean towels. Running then to the bathroom, I saturated the towels with water until they were drenched. Lugging them into the kitchen, I threw the whole sodden mess on top of the rice cooker.

‘That will stop the fire,’ I reasoned. The weight of the towels had reduced the lid clattering but insurgent activity was still going on within the rice cooker. I needed to act quickly or the house was gonna burn down around me. I spotted the power point that the rice cooker was plugged into. I grabbed a chopstick and switched it off at the point. The lid gave one last clatter and then fell silent.

I ran outside the house and sat on the front lawn in the dark. Dad arrived home shortly after.

‘What are you doing out here?’ he asked.

‘Rice cooker. House. Explode. Fire.’

We went inside and surveyed the scene. Afterwards he had a word to Mum. Poor Mum. Her career as an accountant ended that night before it had even begun.

My best friend at school was Lisa Collins. We couldn’t have been more different. Lisa’s family was Scottish, so she had the fair skin, blue eyes and flaxen hair of her forebears. She envied my straight black hair and the fact that my skin didn’t burn from the harsh Australian sun. We bonded over horses which was odd as I had never been near one. Lisa’s house was so different to mine. It smelt of onions and dog hair; not rice. Her living room was a homage to chintz. She lived with her sister and her Mum and Dad which seemed so compact compared to the crowd at my house. Lisa had her own room which was pink, white and frilly like girls’ rooms on TV. The room I slept in had no space for frills for it also housed my baby brother, Grandmother and Great Grandmother; all of whom arrived the year I turned eight. The latter two immigrating from Hong Kong and the former courtesy of the stork.

One day Lisa invited me for a sleepover at her house. For her it was no big deal. She had them all the time. For me, it was like being asked to go the Land of

Sweets in the Nutcracker Kingdom. But there were two barriers blocking my entry. Mum and Dad. They could not understand why I needed to go and sleep at Lisa's house. It was not something Chinese people did they said. Something *bad* might happen.

'But you leave me for hours alone,' I argued. And I'm not Chinese. I'm Australian.'

But they stood united in their refusal to conform to this tradition of our adopted home land. Dejected, I had to tell Lisa I could not stay the night. She shrugged. No big deal.

Years passed, during which my mum got to know Lisa and her family a bit. Finally convinced that the Collins' were not a bunch of Scottish paedophiles, they let me STAY. THE. NIGHT. I took my army green sleeping bag. I took clothes and lollies. I took toiletries I never normally used. Lisa's mum, Mrs Collin's gracefully did not ask if I was moving in when I showed up at her door looking I was boarding the Titanic. The night passed unremarkably but as I sat with the rest of the girls in my pyjamas, gorging on lollies and watching movies, I felt as if another veil of the curtain had been lifted.

The next morning brought a new discovery. Being Scottish, the Collins' liked mince on toast for breakfast. When her mum asked me if I would like some, I didn't understand the question.

'What's mince on toast?' She explained but my brain could not process the answer so I just nodded. It was the early eighties in suburban Australia and the world 'multi-cultural' had yet to emerge as part of the lexicon.

Shortly after, Mrs Collins put a plate in front of me containing piece of toast with brown cooked mince on top of it. It literally was mince on toast. I looked over at Lisa who was dolloping tomato sauce on her portion before tucking in. I followed suit.

My eyes widened.

'It's like a meat pie on bread,' I exclaimed. Lisa shrugged, so casual in the face of this new delicacy. I ate in excited silence, my cheeks bulging.

Mum came to get me, a bit anxious and no doubt relieved to see that I hadn't been raped or murdered. Once we had walked down their driveway and were out of hearing, I shouted,

'They eat mince on toast for breakfast. It was amazing!'

My fun days in the sun seemed to come to an end when we moved to a new house and I changed schools at eleven. I had lived out my childhood up to that point in the one area. I had staked my claim on the local surrounds. Our cul-de-sac road where I learned to ride my bike and roller-skate. The deli where I bought lollies with money stolen from my parents' drawer. The creek where I caught tadpoles and made wonky pottery with creek mud. The remnant bushland which always promised escapism and slight danger when I entered it. We had been the

only Chinese family in the neighbourhood, but we had mostly been welcomed and accepted. Our next-door neighbours, Madge and Steve from Liverpool, spoiled me, allowing me to go for regular swims in their pool and jump up and down on their waterbed. Elizabeth around the corner, who had all the Enid Blyton books you could ever want to read and looked herself like a character out of Enid's books with her rosy red cheeks and curly brown hair. I was friends with the kids of the redneck family who lived at the end of our road. Their dad came home each night in his blacked-out panel van and would hand out lollies, always including me in the fray. Vanessa next door had a smelly dog and a mum who ran her own wedding cake business. Bliss was when she gave us great wads of leftover fondant icing to eat as we played in the front yard. Happiness was bare feet on a hot bitumen under a blazing sun. Freedom was riding bikes to the bush and playing in nature. Joy was a bag of mixed two cent lollies from the local shop. Comfort was knowing and being known by everyone in our street. My Australian childhood set me up for later life so that as I write this under the low grey clouds of an English winter, those memories burn through me and keep me warm.