

The Customer

I remember the Chinese laundry on Amsterdam Avenue and 92nd Street in Manhattan where I brought my white shirts in the 1960's. Whenever the owner, who called himself Chiang Kai-Shek, messed up my laundry he'd forget how to speak English. I brought home a package of shirts one evening, untied the string and opened the brown paper wrapping to find 4 perfectly ironed shirts and a fifth at the bottom in pieces ... two sleeves, a collar, two cuffs, etc. Every single stitch had unraveled. I tried to complain, but this time Chiang lost his ability to use the English language for a month.

His young wife, who called herself May-ling, stood ironing much of the day in the store's large front window, though I'm certain most of the shirts were washed and pressed downtown at the Chinese Laundry Cooperative. She probably pulled a dirty shirt from anyone's bundle and ironed it continuously all day. Such a fate may have befallen my disassembled shirt.

May-ling was my age and a pretty girl, a live mannequin and her husband's window advertising. I believe she resented the role. She would often get angry and scream at Chiang and start throwing things ... bags of shirts, her unfinished noodles, even her iron. When she was occasionally in a better mood, I would flirt with her and she appeared to warm to it, although her husband would stare daggers at me. He was older than us and no doubt jealous. One day I stumbled on the scene of a fight and was particularly appalled that Chiang could hurl such invective at his attractive wife. I didn't understand the words being shouted, but they were obviously hurtful. I had no connubial experience myself at age 21, but my parents never argued to the point of shouting at each other.

At the time I believed myself to be a mature young man with a masterful ability to solve anyone's problems, to calm the waters and sometimes walk on them. This opinion of myself may have been bolstered that afternoon by the past hour spent standing at the bar of the LaSalle, a filthy but cheap Irish house on 86th Street. It may have been two hours, come to think of it. In any event, I decided Chiang needed some advice on chivalry.

I didn't fathom a word of Chinese, but I knew Chiang and May-ling understood some English when I stepped into the fray by slamming my new plaid umbrella down on the counter like a billy club, looking Chiang right in the eye and saying, "You shouldn't treat May-ling so badly."

He stared back incredulous and I shifted my gaze to his wife.

I can't help it, I'm a romantic. I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket. Setting down my the umbrella on the counter, I reached across to dry the eye of a lady in distress. Chiang moved so quickly I didn't have time to react. In a half second he grabbed my umbrella and swung it down forcefully on my hand, knocking the handkerchief to the floor and almost breaking my fingers.

As my Uncle Harry used to say, "a little alcohol goes a long way." I lunged across the counter at Chiang, not necessarily to get him in my grip, but to retrieve my new plaid umbrella. I bought it on 45th Street only the day before and I was certainly not going to let him keep it.

Chiang moved away from me, threw the umbrella to the side, reached under the counter and brought up a sawed off shotgun. He held it pointed up in the air and not directly aimed at me, but to this day I remember the bright ragged ring of steel particles left by the hack saw blade on the end of the barrel. And I could see the ceiling directly above him was patched.

May-ling hissed something at Chiang and then turned to me with a forced smile on her face. She rolled her eyes over her shoulder toward her husband and said, "He loaded. Not gun." I hadn't thought of the possibility Chiang was a drinker. Maybe it was time for me to apologize and take him to the LaSalle as an expression of my good will. After he calmed down and put the gun away.

May-ling took my pink ticket and turned to the tall stacks of brown paper packages. Finding my shirts, she made change for the ten I gave her while Chiang stood staring at me with the gun still aimed at the ceiling. He never moved, a statue behind the counter carrying a deadly weapon. His wife pushed my shirts across the counter and I left quickly.

The next morning I bought a new umbrella. That evening I found a new laundry ... Puerto Rican, I think. It never occurred to me to worry about Chiang and May-ling again. In New York you soon learn to step away from another person's problem and not try to solve it. I began a route home that took me on the side of Amsterdam Avenue opposite the laundry. I never saw May-ling again, except from afar as she ironed her life away in the window.

I ran into Chiang one night at the LaSalle. He was rather convivial and his English was quite good, if a bit slurred. He recognized me and came over and bought me a drink. I good naturedly asked him if he had his sawed off shot gun under his coat.

"Oh, no," he said. "The police they come and take it away. No fix the ceiling anymore. No more complaints from lady upstairs."

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