

## fiction contest

16th annual Vancouver Courier Fiction Contest second place winner

## Crickety Joints

By Mary Chang

“Why are you out of breath, Mister? Did you run?”

He looked at the child sitting on the bench swinging her legs. A hazy pink scar squiggled down the outer corner of her left eye to the bottom of her chin. Her legs were bare underneath her sundress.

“Mind your own, Missy. I’m in no mood to miss the bus. Child, where are your shoes?”

“You got to be careful crossing the street, sir. Look both ways if you’re in a hurry. Where you heading, Mister? I like your cane. Can I see it?” Her eyes widen and she lifts the right corner of her mouth.

“Are you always this inquisitive? Didn’t your mother teach you not to speak to strangers? Shouldn’t you be at school?”

She tilted her head. “Yes. No. Yes.”

“Explain yourself.”

“I like to know the answers so I ask the questions. I don’t have a mama,—not on Earth. If you read the date on the newspaper you’re holding, you’d know school’s over until September.”

The man nodded. “That explains it.”

She raised her eyebrow. “You didn’t answer my questions.”

“Repeat them.” She obliged him word for word.

“Not that it’s your business, young lady but I’m heading to the library. As for my walking stick, if you move your backpack and slide over so you can give an old man a spot to sit, I’ll let you take a look.”

She dropped the backpack onto the sidewalk, scooted herself to the edge and reached for the cane.

“Wait, Missy. Be gentle. It’s hand carved.” He placed the newspaper on his lap and passed her the cane. She closed her fist around the handle, stood and stomped around the bench with the stick. Her bare feet slapped the pavement. “It’s sturdy. What type of wood?”

“Maple. Aren’t your feet cold?”

“Proud and solid—like the leaves. Who carved it, Mister?” She leaned the cane against the bench and stood facing him.

A moment passes before he answers. “My dear wife. Bless her soul. She was a mighty fine carver.”

“How did she die?”

He met the child’s stare and blinked. He wanted to roll up his newspaper and give the intrusive girl a whop on the head. Instead, he ignored the question and started reading.

“I know it’s none of my business, sir. But a woman who can carve like that must be extraordinary. Please?” When she smiled, he noticed she was missing her top right front tooth.

He laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“No shoes, no tooth, no service, Missy.”

“It’s not a baby tooth either. Tooth fairy got me twice for that one. I only show my teeth when it counts.”

“I guess this must be one of those times.” He winked.

“Yes sir.”

“In that case,” he said. “Oh, looks like my bus has arrived. Another time, Missy. Thanks for the chat.” He reached for his walking stick.

“Not so fast, Mister. That bus doesn’t go where you want to go.”

“Sure does. It’s the number 210—goes straight to the library.”

“Look again.”

He squinted. “216—my mistake.” He sighed.



“Okay, sit down. Button up your cardigan. It’s getting chilly. And stop smiling before you catch a fly.” She obeyed. She pulled her sleeves over her hands. The pink polish on her fingernails was chipped.

“She’s been gone three years. We were together sixty-one.”

“Wow—a whole lifetime. What’s it like living on Earth for so long?” She traced the scar on her cheek with her finger.

“Earth? It’s the second time you said that. What planet are you from?”

She looked at the sky, tilted her head and laughed for a full minute, hiding her mouth behind her palm.

“What’s the joke?”

She pointed to the clouds and said, “It looks like you.”

“The clouds? They look like ordinary clouds to me. Nothing spectacular.”

“Look again. That cloud—he looks like a face wearing glasses and a hat. The weird cloud beside it looks like a cane. He’s even got a big nose.”

He adjusted his eyeglasses. “I get it, it’s a profile view. He’s much better looking,” he said. “But I’m smarter.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I guess. He’s got no wrinkles and he can’t talk back. To answer your question, sir, I’m not from another planet. I’m from a state.”

“Which state would that be?”

“A state of mind. I can go anywhere in the universe if I set my mind to it. Please Mister—tell me more. Was she beautiful or ugly? Mean or nice? Happy or sad? Did she like children? Did she have a puppy? What kind of soap...”

“Slow down, Missy. One question at a time.

She was the most beautiful woman on Earth. Happy energy, gave her heart to the people she cared about. Children? Yes, we have four children together and seven grandchildren.”

“What are their names?”

“Joseph, George, Martha, Betty, Harold, Steven, Simon, Tina, Amy and Stanley.”

“You missed one.”

He repeated the list. “Nope. That’s every-one.”

“Four plus seven is eleven. You only said ten.” he showed him her fingers.

“You can count,” he said. “Looks like my bus is coming. Good day, Missy.” He tipped his hat.

“You’re crickety. I can hear your joints crick when you stand up. Where I come from you don’t get crickets.”

“Crickety? There is no such word as ‘crickety.’ You mean ‘rickety.’”

“That’s what I said. You’re rickety—there’s no rickets where I live.”

He shook his index finger at her. “No man wants to be told he’s decrepit.”

“Sorry, sir, just saying. You’d like my place. I’ll take you one day if you’re curious. What about the eleventh child?”

“She was our first. I don’t know.” He reached into his pant pocket for bus change.

“What do you mean? You’re old and squint your eyes, Mister, but you don’t have Alzheimer’s disease, do you?”

“Do you actually know what Alzheimer’s is, Missy?”

“It’s a common form of dementia—comes with memory lapses, confusion, emotional instability, slow loss of your mind. My first foster mother got it. That’s what the nurse at the orphanage told me. She was real sweet at first,

but later on she got confused and mean. Sometimes she’d forget who and where I was. That’s why I was sent back.”

“I’m sorry to hear.” His legs felt numb. He sat. “Do they treat you okay, Missy? Pardon me for staring, but that’s quite the mark on your face.”

“Pretty cool, huh? It healed up nice. I’m tough. I take care of myself.”

“Is that right? Are responsible adults looking after you at home? Do they know where you are?”

“Of course, Mister. I’m only nine. Your first daughter, what’s her name?”

“That’s another story.”

“I got time. So do you. That was just some big old truck that drove by. You better get your eyes checked, sir, especially when you’re chasing buses.”

He removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. “Guess I won’t be needing these to finish my story. They’re meant for distance. Keep an eye on the bus, Missy.” He slipped the glasses into his breast pocket.

“My wife, Rose, she never got over it. She devoted herself to our family. She took great pride in being a mother. Nurtured our children—made them confident and secure. Built strong bonds with all of them. She wanted to ensure they’d feel safe enough to confide in us no matter what happened. Happy most of the time, but every once in a while, I witnessed her sadness. You could drill a hole through that melancholy it was so deep. Nothing could draw her out of the black.”

“I know about melancholy. I had it once. Doctor put some pink sticky ointment on it and it disappeared.”