

## fiction contest

14th Annual Courier Fiction Contest third place winner

## Dusty high heels

By Mary Chang

I watch my father insert the needle into my mother's belly. She's sitting at the kitchen table hungry for her next serving. The ugly jagged pink scar peers out from underneath her sweater when she lifts it up. It's the same length as her hand and is the width of a fuzzy caterpillar—cruel evidence from a shoddy gall bladder operation she endured long ago.

Her petite body is frail and her black hair is riddled with white and grey. She closes her eyes and winces when the insulin syringe penetrates her skin and she sighs.

She turns to look at me with her good eye and shakes her head. "Amaya, you don't eat too much candy and sweets, okay? Or you go blind like me." She points to her right eye, which is red and swollen from recent surgery and clicks the tip of her tongue onto the front roof of her mouth. The sound of the steady clicking of her tongue is a familiar one. I hear it whenever old Chinese women are expressing shame or complaining about the ridiculous cost of groceries.

I turned thirty-five this year but whenever my mother talks to me, I feel like I'm eight years old.

"I-yuh," my father says. "She knows. Amaya eats so healthy and exercises—not like you." He looks at me from behind his thick black-rimmed glasses. "Your mother never listens to me. I ask her to walk but she gets tired just after two blocks. And Mother's over a dozen years younger than me—but look at me—I'm still so strong. I walk fifty blocks and don't get tired. And every morning, I meditate."

"Who wants to go for walk when I'm half blind? I can't see—too scary to walk. So dan-ger-ous. And so chilly now that fall is here. Always raining in Vancouver and too much cold. Not warm like Taiwan. I-yuh. Just let me be," she says.

My father smiles at the old woman whom he has patiently honoured for the last forty-six years and rubs her shoulder. "Okay, we'll walk when you can see better, okay?" he says in Mandarin.

"Amaya. Wasn't it your birthday? I have a surprise for you," he says.

"It was three months ago. Dad, I told you I don't need anything. Please don't spend your money."

"Aaah, yes but this gift did not cost me any money. So cheap. And so old. You shall like it—very, very nice." He springs up from his chair and scurries out of the kitchen. His faded blue slippers slap the yellow tile floor and when he reaches the carpeted hallway, he kicks them off.

It surprises me whenever I see my father walk. He is spry for a man at seventy-eight. When I was a child, I used to watch him meditate in the lotus position on our front porch every morning. Sometimes when I visit, he tells me, "I am old man, but body very flexible and heart still strong." To prove his strength, he sits cross-legged on the living room carpet, grabs his ankle with his hands and lifts it up, then bends down his head and touches his nose with the end of his big toe.

I hear the sound of his slippers. The 'gift' came in a small, brown box and arrived at noon. He places the package on the vinyl-covered table in between my mother and



me. "Open it," he tells me with a grin on his face.

I slide the package towards me, lift up its square lid and peek inside. I haven't seen it for twenty-five years, but I recognize it right away.

"You're right, Dad. It's beautiful. I love it. Where did you find it?"

"What is it, Amaya? What cheap gift did Baba give to you now? Always buying silly things for the house," she teases. I sense that she's curious to see what it is, because I know she loves shopping with her husband.

"Not yet, my dear. Time for lunch. I go check the congee and Amaya will make some tea for us."

It was a colour Polaroid from 1975.

My mother is wearing a navy blue and yellow flowered one-piece bathing suit wearing tan nylons three shades darker than the creamy skin on her arms, and a pair of taupe high heels. The lids of her eyes are blue, her cheeks are blushing and her lips are a glossy pink.

She is standing in the living room posing next to the artificial Christmas tree. Holiday cards decked out with snowmen and angels are strewn along a string on the blue wall behind her.

She has a curvy figure and is smiling like she's gracing the cover of *Chatelaine*. Her legs are long, strong and sexy. I remember that the first time I saw the photograph, I couldn't wait until I grew up so that my own legs would take on the same shape as hers. I was eight years old and it was my favourite picture.

Back then, when my mother had to speak in English to the Safeway grocery store clerk, she would hesitate, speak slow-

ly and then apologize in broken English that she couldn't speak the language. She would look away suddenly and avoid eye contact with the cashier until the groceries were packed into brown paper bags.

When the last item was rung up, a no-name brand glass jar of peanut butter, she would look up and confidently say, "Sank you!" nod and smile—two words she was never shy to say aloud.

When my mother spoke Chinese—she did not hesitate. When my parents argued, a whole trapeze of words shot out of her mouth like bullets being fired into an empty room. Some people say that the Mandarin language sounds like a song that hummingbirds sing along to. If that's true, then my mom sang her heart out with every curse and unbridled emotion that barked off her tongue that would frighten away a murder of crows.

My father stayed silent and didn't talk back. He nodded and agreed until she was finished. When she sang her story, the tone of her voice rose higher and the words spilled out of her mouth even faster. Eventually, the words faded and she was left breathless, quiet and victorious.

The house was calm the next morning after an argument. Everything looked the same. Dirty dishes from the night before were scattered on the sticky yellow laminate counter. My mother is wearing pink rubber gloves and squeezing out green liquid from the Palmolive into the sink as it fills up with warm water—being careful not to waste too much, but pouring in just enough to make it bubbly.

She lets me play with the bubbles when she sees me and asks me if I'm hungry. I respond in Chinese: "My stomach is very

hungry. What can I eat? Can I help you wash the dishes?" I intentionally spoke in Mandarin to be respectful. I didn't want her to scold me for speaking in English.

She takes off her left rubber glove, bends down to my eye level and squeezes my right cheek with her thumb and forefinger and kisses me on the lips. I knew I made a good impression because it was my cheek she was tugging, and not my earlobe.

"Amaya is very good. Such a good girl for only eight years old. Not like your brothers who are so lazy and still sleeping. Go pour some milk and I'll make you some lemon marmalade toast after I wash the dishes."

My mom bathed every night before bedtime, and when I was a little girl, she would let me watch her perform her nightly bathroom rituals after she changed into her nightgown. At the time I didn't know this, but she was teaching me how to become a woman.

She removes the plastic, rectangular navy blue and white lid from the jar of the Vaseline and scoops up the thick jelly with her first two fingers. Then she gently rubs the oily, sticky cream into her skin, starting with her cheeks and then her forehead until her whole face is shiny.

"This will stop wrinkles," she told me.

"Can I have some please?" I asked.

"You're too young. You don't need it. Only when you get to my age."

The curvy white bottle of Jergens body lotion with its trademark wave shaped fuchsia pink and black label sits on the counter. She lets me pump the lever for her until a white creamy puddle the size of a quarter rests in the inside of her palm, about three big squirts.