

A Chang Thang

By Gus Doiron

I'm getting on in age, and the aches of my arthritis are never far from my thoughts. But I will say this- I have yet to reminisce about the night we went to visit Chang's and not smile. There are various versions of what happened that night, but I consider my own as true as any.

It wasn't the first time we had discussed the supposedly haunted house where three people had gone missing. In small lumber mill towns such as our Sterling Oaks, remarkable events were few and far between. I hated anytime the topic of Chang came up.

We were all in Stephen's and my low standing tree fort in our backyard. It was our neighborhood bastion- first of childhood imagination, then later of seclusion for kids on the cusp of adolescence. Its weathered protection was the birthplace of many ideas- some good, some not so good.

The air that night seemed different. It could have been a combination of our age and the excitement of having the whole summer vacation ahead of us. Maybe it was just that it was a full moon with higher-than-normal barometric pressure.

Whatever it was, Eric Chambers suggested we go, first jokingly, then again in a more serious tone.

It was a moment before anybody spoke.

“Hell ya,” Stephen finally agreed. Being family, I knew his tone all too well. It told me that even if this was not one of the smarter ideas we had come up with, it had the potential to make for a great story down the road. Which was all Stephen needed.

As soon as Stephen had agreed, Sally Olsen, the town lawyer’s daughter, said that she would go also. I think Sally and I were the only two in the hangout that knew the main reason she was willing to go was because of Stephen. I had noticed recently her glances at him lasted a bit longer than they had to. She was rugged and had shown herself many times in the past to be just as resilient as any of us, so I was able to overlook this whole temporary “crush” thing.

Stephen, clueless as to Sally’s level of fondness, was simply happy to have another body on board. She smiled back at him as he nodded his approval.

Mickey Connors spoke next.

“I’ll go,” he said, as he looked at Sally the same way Sally looked at Stephen. A somewhat portly chap, he was the clumsiest fellow I had ever seen. He had broken something of value at pretty much everybody’s house. To those that knew him, Mickey was the bull in the proverbial “china shop”.

Another thing that set Mickey apart was his buck teeth. Mind you, he didn’t really have them. His brother Willy, however, certainly did. And, since Mickey idolized his older brother, he was forever tucking his lower lip under his upper teeth. Any stranger not familiar with Mickey’s situation would swear his buck teeth were the real deal. He had been doing this for so long, rare were the moments when Mickey would forget and allow his teeth back into his mouth.

Godfrey spoke next. I never caught his last name, as he was only in town for a short time. His family came to town when the mill expanded and would be one of the first to be relocated when the subsidy commitments would be fulfilled just two years later. Mickey's neighbor while living in town, Godfrey was a shoe in for our club even though adventure wasn't really his thing. Through his thick glasses, he over analyzed everything we did, and I realized only in later years that he was the only one thinking like an adult at any given time.

"That old house? It's too dangerous. It's falling apart. Mickey here will fall through the floor. No offense," he added, trying to impress upon Mickey that he meant him no ill will.

"Screw you," was Mickey's heated response. Then, imitating Godfrey, added, "No offense."

"Dangerous?" Eric interrupted, "Just admit it if you're chicken, and stay here so you can lay some eggs."

"I'm not chicken," Godfrey glared at Eric, almost subconsciously taking a nerve pill from a pocket in his jean jacket and popping it into his mouth. I had personally seen Godfrey take as many as eight pills in the run of a day to help with his stress.

"And you may want to reconsider giving me the stink eye," Eric added, pointing at him. Eric was always accusing people of giving him the stink eye. Even me, although he usually would crack a grin at me when I was the accused. I still hated him saying it. It was almost as bad as when he would pretend to be stalking me like some wild animal from a distance. Although I knew he was just tormenting me, he always took it to the point where I got scared. And I fell for it every time.

“You know what, fine. I’ll go. And, if something goes wrong, I’ll try not to be too smug,” Godfrey said as he opened his mineral water and took a swig.

That left me being the last to decide. But, once again, everybody just carried on as if I wasn’t even there.

“Fine. It’s agreed,” smiled Eric. “We’ll meet here tomorrow night, before dusk. Bring flashlights.”

At this time Stephen suggested to the group that maybe I should sit out this one. Like what the hell? I was heartbroken but remained silent. Even though we were family, or perhaps because of it, Stephen was always underestimating me. Which I never understood, as I was as solid and dependable as the next person.

“You know how much he wants to go,” countered Sally. Sweet lovable Sally, “I say he goes.”

“She’s right,” Mickey backed her up. She could just as easily have suggested that we eat caterpillars and wash our hair in mustard. Mickey would have agreed to it. But Mickey’s reasoning was not a huge concern of mine. I just needed votes.

“Perfect. It’s agreed then.” Eric said, purposely not seeking Godfrey’s opinion.

Looking at me, Stephen conceded. “Don’t make me regret this,” he warned. As if.

The conversation evolved into logistics and other topics that were beyond my concern, and my mind began to wander as it recounted tales that had made Chang a household name in Sterling Oaks.

Known only as Chang, he had started off in town as a mysterious man from the Orient (wherever THAT was- I had always thought it was somewhere near Seattle). Arriving many years ago, he had started off in town with a bakery in the daytime. He then quickly added to his repertoire as a wedding singer with his prerecorded one-man band on weekends.

People had been skeptical when he first came to town, but it turned out that Chang could really bake. Trained by master pastry chefs in Istanbul, he brought the quality and texture of goods (including baklava) that had been up to that point not encountered. Quality so good, in fact, that wives and even some of the more talented husbands almost stopped baking altogether, as their baked goods simply tasted like mud in comparison.

Up all hours of the night, Chang worked tirelessly. While croissants would be rising in the proofer and muffin batter churning in the mixer, he would be pinning his cinnamon buns. So entranced by his work, he wouldn't even flick the ashes off his cigarette, which dangled from his mouth, allowing them to fall into the baking.

"Secret ingredient," he would smile to the odd spectator that happened to view his work. They never ratted on him. They knew Chang was never above kicking a client out, condemning them to settle for basic domesticated goods at home or even worse, a grocery chain.

In the morning, Chang would lounge lazily back in a chair, half asleep while people bought whatever they could from him. He only took cash. Then, he would close shop at noon.

Saturday nights, Chang would trade in his apron for a baby-blue three-piece suit, complete with frills. With his pre-recorded music playing in the background, he would croon a combination of classic songs and modern love ballads to any newlywed couple that were

fortunate enough to book him far enough in advance. It was impossible to outlast Chang at a wedding. More than once, even after the last person left, Chang would still sing for hours to an empty hall.

A couple lucky enough to get both Chang's baked goods and karaoke skills in one evening would thus be known to have the "Chang Experience". This quickly shifted to, "The Chang Thing".

There was no question about it. Chang was a "great fit for the community", as even the mayor could often be heard commenting.

Unfortunately, someone who wasn't such a great fit for the community was Ming, Chang's wife. She arrived in town nearly a year after Chang.

Her arrival long anticipated, the town had high hopes for the lady who had been able to win the heart of the town's greatest treasure. Surely a man as incredible as Chang would have a wife that was also incredible.

Incredible was a word that could most definitely be used to describe Ming. But not in the way the townsfolk had expected.

An absolute diva, Ming had to be literally waited on hand and foot. Very short in stature, she was perhaps five feet tall. She was an intensely jealous woman and became extremely agitated when female customers would so much as smile towards Chang. She seemed to have no issues flirting with the male patrons, however. The fingernails on her left hand extended grotesquely into curved spirals with a total length of the longest nail being

close to three feet. The result of nearly twenty years of growth, it turned out. This rendered that hand virtually unusable.

Aside from the fingernails, Ming became renowned for being the first resident of Sterling Oaks with Lotus feet. Through Sally and Godfrey, I learned was another name for foot binding. Which, according to them, was an ancient Asian custom of taking a young girl's feet and tightly binding them to restrict the growth of the foot. This showed that a girl was destined for an upper-class lifestyle, unfit for lower-class work. Feet were soaked, toes bent under the foot until they were broken. The binding was tightened more and more until the undeveloped arch of the foot was also broken. The ideal length of a Lotus foot was three inches. Unlike Sally's size nine, which I came to have a whole new appreciation for.

Ming could walk, but not far. Nor could she carry much weight.

She understandably took up a great deal of Chang's time. His supply of baked goods dropped to a mere fraction of what they had been.

People now waited in line for several hours before the shop even opened, just for a chance of being able to buy something. Almost equally as tragic, it was nearly impossible to get Chang booked for a wedding reception. Instead of a majestic karaoke session, people now had to settle for a dull and boring deejay with cassette tapes.

Then one day, without warning, Chang's pastry shop never opened. It remained closed all week, much to the chagrin of the customers. That weekend, Chang never showed up to a wedding reception he was supposed to attend.

Finally, the sheriff went over to see if everything was all right at the house. He was never to be seen again.

Nor were there any sign of Chang or Ming, and there was very little indication of a problem, save for a rolling pin sticking through part of the drum set used for the prerecorded music at the house. Some versions insist that a cleaver and finger was found on the kitchen table, but it wasn't widely believed. The Bugatti Royale Type 41, Chang's twenty-one-foot-long set of wheels built in the thirties, sat undisturbed in the yard.

The local authorities called reinforcements to conduct a thorough search of the house and the shop, with no indication as to what happened to its occupants or the sheriff.

For whatever reason, the house had never been listed or torn down, sitting silently at the end of its treed winding driveway.

Which brings us to the tree fort that night with the gear we needed to explore the old house. Except for Eric. He rolled like a carefree Romani and all he carried was a flashlight.

We had stayed so often at the tree fort, our parents didn't think anything of it when we told them we were staying. The walk to the house was silent, as each of us had our thoughts on what lay ahead.

I was in awe when we finally reached the massive house. We were all at least partially second guessing our decision on this one. In the dark, any place can look haunted. Especially this dilapidated manor. The walls were missing shingles, and cracked windowpanes partially

revealed themselves behind covered plywood. The sagging porch looked downright treacherous, with its rotted-out boards difficult to point out.

Eric went up to the main door, only to find it locked. Godfrey suggested a whole walk around the building might be a more prudent game plan than just going right in. Even Eric had to agree.

Around the house we walked, shining our flashlights from the rock foundation right up to the third floor and attic. The beams of light made the windows appear even more eerie, as there was always more unseen off to the sides than what the flashlights revealed. We tried each of the three doors as we came to them, only to find them all bolted shut.

It was Stephen who spotted a break in the crumbling rock foundation cellar that we thought may provide an entry point without breaking any windows or doors.

Being the smallest, I tried to go first, but Stephen held me back so that he could go ahead of me. One after the other, we shimmied our way along on our stomachs, our backs brushing against the wooden beam. I had concerns about Mickey, but he managed it.

Finally, we were all in the cellar. We brushed ourselves off and began to look at our surroundings.

There wasn't much to see. There were several wooden bins that Mickey suggested were used for containing and slaughtering pigs, or some equally macabre use. Godfrey pointed out that they were likely used for storing potatoes and other vegetables during winter months. My eyes agreed with Mickey, my nose with Godfrey.

In another room, Sally found a stairway, and we cautiously made our way up.

The doorway at the top of the stairs led into a large living room. There were a few dusts covered couches, portraits on the walls (including a few which could only be of Chang and Ming), and some rocking chairs. A large piano sat in the corner, a half-full shot glass sitting on it.

Eric made his way over to the piano and lifted the lid. He ran a finger lightly over the keys and may have begun to play had Sally not interrupted. She shook her head and quietly closed the lid.

We made our way down a hallway and through a few more sparsely furnished rooms, seeing nothing of consequence. We went past the grand staircase leading up to the second floor before we found ourselves in the kitchen. A small oak table was still set with mugs and plates from a distant time.

Godfrey brushed some dust off a newspaper. "November 23, 1963."

Opening a cupboard door, Sally found a large delicate vase, so ornamentally in appearance it almost seemed a shame not to touch it.

Eric, Godfrey, and Mickey soon wandered into a large pantry off the kitchen. That left Stephen, Sally, and myself.

"Don't go far," Stephen cautioned them, "We need to stick together."

"Then you should keep up," Eric retorted, as he rounded the corner to the pantry out of view. I heard Sally tell Stephen to come look at the pottery, as I continued exploring. I came across one of my weaknesses, two pickled eggs in a brine of sorts in a bowl on a low stand. Confident the other two were wrapped up with the pottery, I gobbled up the first egg in the

blink of an eye. Still undetected, I had the second one, taking more time to savor it. Just how old the eggs could be never concerned me.

Stephen and Sally seemed exceptionally quiet, and when I looked in their direction, I saw their hands touching. Their eyes locked onto each other a mere foot apart. With absolute horror, I realized they may kiss!

Searching frantically around the room, I was about to make a noise to distract them. From what I know, one kiss is all it may take to lose Stephen to the land of girlfriends and unnecessary commitments. Playing ball and going to the swimming hole would be traded in for stargazing and walks on the beach while holding hands.

Well, not on my watch.

I was about to tip a chair over, when we all heard footsteps upstairs.

Snapping out of their trance, the other two looked at the ceiling, then at each other, then almost embarrassed, at me. By then I was already looking away, however, as I was much too polite to let them know I had seen everything.

Stephen hollered, "I told you guys not to go far!"

The footsteps stopped, just as Eric and the other two came back into the kitchen.

"What?" asked Eric.

"How did you guys get down here so fast?" Sally wanted to know, and frankly, so did

I.

“What are you talking about?” Godfrey asked. “We were in the pantry. You saw us go in.”

“You’re going to try to tell us that you guys didn’t just sneak upstairs from the pantry, and come back down?” Stephen asked as he headed to the pantry himself to look. I was already ahead of him. I was quick.

We went into the pantry, shining the lights in every corner. Sure enough, amongst the many shelves of half-empty jars, there were no stairs leading up or down.

“Whatever you heard, it wasn’t footst-“ Eric began, as there was suddenly a loud crash from the kitchen that cut the rest of his sentence off.

Running back to the kitchen, we found the vase that Stephen and Sally admired. It was now in dozens of pieces on the floor on the opposite side of the room from where it had been in the cupboard.

The temperature of the room had dropped a lot since we had just been there. It was now freezing.

Popping another pill, Godfrey looked as if he were about to speak, but the footsteps above us began moving again.

“Oh snap,” he said, looking up.

“We gotta go,” Stephen whispered. There were no objections.

Having no objections, we quietly and quickly worked our way back in the direction of the cellar stairs.

Getting back to the grand staircase that led upstairs to the source of the mysterious sounds, just before the living room, Eric reminded everyone to be quiet.

Mickey, being who he was, subconsciously bit his lower lip and looked at Eric.

“Man, what the heck is wrong with you,” Eric hissed.

“Leave him be,” Godfrey cut in as we made our way across the hallway and stairs. “I told you this was a bad idea.” He wiped his glasses as they kept fogging up.

“Yeah, because you are a yellow chicken,” Eric began to answer, but whatever else he had left to say was cut off.

From the top of the staircase, we heard a man’s voice say with an accent, “Who are you calling a yellow chicken.” At which point he struck a match and lit a cigarette. The glow of the flame was just enough to illuminate what looked like a small Asian man, wearing a white tank top.

“It’s Chang, in a wife beater! Run for your lives!” Eric yelled.

Run we did. The bouncing dim glows of the flashlights could barely light the way for us as we sped our way towards the elusive stairway to the cellar, and hopefully salvation. I hadn’t remembered passing through this many rooms and hallways, and at one point was afraid we had passed the door.

We had almost made it, when Godfrey’s glasses finally let him down. Still fogging up from the cold in the kitchen, he ran headfirst into the doorframe, knocking himself out cold.

I'll be honest, I almost left him. Being the only one behind him, I could have run right over his body, with no witnesses. I was almost certain he had killed himself.

But I liked Godfrey. He had always been nice to me. So, just in case he was still alive, I stayed by him. I heard the commotion of the others, impervious to what had just taken place with us, fade further and further away.

Godfrey's flashlight lay several feet away on the floor. It shone into a dark corner, so it was difficult to see. I didn't have time to redirect its light, however, as the ghostly beast shaped man was in hot pursuit.

I heard him before I saw him and stayed low in the attempt to avoid early detection. As he drew nearer, seeming to float along the floor, I braced myself, and sprang with all my might when it had gotten to within twelve feet or so. It was a good jump. Unfortunately, it was about five feet too early.

The aggressor saw me coming, and while I was still midair, expertly sidestepped, pushing me into a small side room. With a thud, I crashed into a closet.

A click of the doorknob told me I was locked inside. As I threw myself against the door, I could only hear muffled sounds on the other side. Whatever horrors poor Godfrey was encountering, it would have to be without me.

I figured that eventually, the beast would reopen the door, thus making a terrible mistake. I was going to fight with everything I had. There would be no premature jumps the second time.

I waited. And waited. I'll admit I had gotten to the point of almost dozing off, when I heard the unmistakable click of the doorknob. It was go time.

As soon as the door opened a crack, I sprang into action to catch my tormenter off guard. Throwing my whole body against the opening, I began to forcefully make my way out. I was almost completely through the opening, when I was grabbed. I fought for freedom until I realized it was Stephen who had let me out and was trying to calm me down.

I blinked my eyes trying to adjust from the blackness of the closet to the seemly brightly lit room I now found myself in. Slowly things came into focus and I saw my whole group before me. The phantom that had chased us, and maliciously locked me in the closet, was sitting on a couch attending Godfrey. Having had better days, poor Godfrey lay on the couch with a bandage on his head.

I came to learn that "Ricky", as the beast was called, was a distant relative of "Jasper" Chang. Only in town a few days, Ricky was trying to decide whether to list the house or tear it down.

He asked if we were aware of the consequences of breaking and entering, not to mention trespassing. However, he softened his stance when Sally pointed out that Godfrey could probably sue him for hurting himself in the house, breaking and entering aside.

Ricky went to check on the tea he had been preparing, and I began to let my guard down after seeing everyone else were somewhat relaxed.

Having no spaces on the couches and chairs available, I sprawled out on the floor. Which allowed me to have a perfect angle of what I saw next.

As Ricky came back with the tray of tea into the living room, he nearly tripped on his pants that dragged along the floor. ---Which is why I thought he had been floating earlier--- When he briefly lifted up his pants, I caught a glimpse of what I discerned to be goat hooves where his shoes should have been.

Ricky never saw me take notice, nor did anyone else realize yet what I knew. I alone had to decide whether to attack or run. Fight or flight.

But before a decision could be made, the pickled eggs I had snuck earlier decided to rear their ugly head.

I was on my feet, retching violently.

“Get him outside!” Ricky yelled as he ran to the nearest door, unlocking it from the inside.

Everybody except Ricky followed me outside, and after five awkward minutes of coughing up what was left of the eggs, I looked timidly around the group. Weak, I felt like a truck had hit me.

“Come back inside,” Ricky invited us. Godfrey was about to follow his directions, but Sally held him back.

“No. You didn’t have a reflection in the hallway mirror,” she accused Ricky.

Still standing in the doorway, Ricky laughed off her observation.

Stephen had noticed something also. When Ricky was walking, his shadow was of a much shorter woman, with long spiral ends to one of its hands. And tiny feet.

“HMMMM, nope. Don’t have any idea what you’re talking about,” was Ricky’s simple reply.

Fashioning himself to know a thing or two about ghosts through his brother Willy, Mickey, through his buck teeth, asked Ricky if he could step out of the house. Ricky gave some lame excuse about the stairs being weak and not wanting to twist an ankle. That was the reason he would not leave the house.

Already starting to back away, we told Ricky that we had to leave. Sadly, he waved us off and almost seemed to fade as we got further away. The door slowly closed, without him seeming to touch it.

A short distance from the house, we turned our backs on it and ran for all we were worth. And the versions of the night became more varied throughout the years as we recounted them. It was Mickey who coined the night appropriately, saying that we had had our own “Chang Thing”. Only through his buck teeth, it sounded more like “Thang”. The bastardized name stuck, to this day.

We never told anyone else about that night. Well, we promised not to, at least. How could I tell anyone?

I’m just a dog.

