

WOK AU VIN¹

John Biggs

Jim was out jogging when his new neighbours moved in. He returned via the back gate to notice a small, dark-haired figure next door. Her back to him, she was hanging out washing. She could hardly reach the clothesline. He called out:

‘Hi there! You must be my new neighbour. My name’s Jim, Jim McBride.’

She turned. Her smile, framed in a low-cut fringe and shoulder length jet-black hair, warmed him for the rest of the day. ‘Hello, Mr. McBride. I am Mei-yuk. Yes, we just move in. Today washing day already.’

‘Who *are* you talking to, Mei-yuk?’ An imperious voice boomed from inside. A screen door slammed. A tall, stooped figure with untidy white hair emerged.

‘Ah. A neighbour, I presume.’ Unsmiling, he tilted his head back and stared down at Jim through rimless glasses. ‘And you might be – ?’

‘Meet Jim McBride, darling. We just introduce ourself.’

Jim offered his hand. It was accepted with limp disdain.

‘Harold Murchison. Late of Hong Kong. Early to Tasmania. Ha!’

Then Murchison smiled broadly, the act over. ‘Jim, old boy. Delighted. We’re a trifle busy all day, lots to do, settling in. That sort of thing, don’t you know. But do pop over after dinner. Eightish? Eh? Help me demolish some duty free.’

Not so bad after all, Jim thought, and as for his wife? Watch it, old son!

The encounter suggested an idea for his own dinner: sweet-and-sour pork. *The Australian Cookbook* recipe had never worked, always a glug of pineapple juice and ketchup. Maybe his new neighbour would provide the right *fung shui*, or whatever but tonight’s effort was like all previous ones. Awful.

Then it was time to go next door.

Jim had spent a year in Hong Kong teaching English, so he could relate to Harold’s rambling anecdotes, based on thirty years as a civil servant.

He could also relate to Mei-yuk. Her heart-shaped face, small bones, golden skin and liquid chocolate eyes, tilting quizzically, sent his stomach surging – and this was not because she was a qualified cook, with a diploma from Hong Kong Polytechnic.

Jim mentioned his problem with sweet-and-sour pork.

Mei-yuk pointed a child’s delicate forefinger at him. ‘Poetic justifications! Sweet-and-sour pork is not true Chinese, you know that Jim? We make it up for *gwailo*, the foreign devils.

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Yet only we can cook it!’ She bounced up and down in her chair, squeaking with delight. She looked so delicious, Jim could have eaten her in one sitting, however gluggy the sauce.

‘It’s true, old boy,’ Harold agreed, ‘dead true. You have to do it the Chinese way.’

‘I’d love to,’ he murmured.

‘Well then, after this wretched moving in is over and done with, we’ll have you over to show you how it’s really done.’

Mei-yuk asked him into the kitchen while she prepare the steamed fish and black beans, the *bok choy* and oyster sauce, chicken rice, and the sweet-and-sour pork itself. Harold popped in now and again, to say *ad nauseam*, ‘It’s how you make the sauce, old boy. Just watch her.’

And watch her Jim did. She was dressed in shorts, which revealed perfect golden legs, a superbly rounded bum, and a tiny waist. Her hair was pinned up out of the way, leaving a delicate neck for him to admire. She turned her head in profile, to explain what she was doing. He was very distracted.

‘You cook ingredients separate. Number one, marinate pork in water, soy, sugar, cornflower, drops of sesame oil, squeezed ginger, right, and baking soda for making tender. More better. Then chop spring onion...’ She put each into a rice bowl as it was prepared.

She dumped in the pork into the shimmering hot wok, stirring with loud clangs. Shortly after she removed it, dumping in the vegetables and fresh pineapple chunks. They too were removed after a minute or so. In went the sauce: rice vinegar, sugar, pineapple juice, chopped tomato, and chicken stock, reduced until it was thick and sticky. Back went all the other ingredients, for maybe a minute or two.

Perfection. No glug, the meat evenly coated with a divine sauce.

Hmmm, Jim thought, how about *coq au vin*? This French classic was another of his culinary challenges. His books gave the same basic recipe: marinade overnight in herbs and volumes of red wine, then after the meat, bacon lumps, and eschallottes have been browned, in go the champignons. Cook until tender in a tight casserole in a slow oven. The result, without fail: glug.

Here was the answer: Western ingredients, Eastern methods.

Mei-yuk was the observer this time, he the observed. He’d marinated the chicken in wine and herbs – with a touch of baking soda, Mei-yuk, thanks for the tip. After patting it dry, he stir-fried it and the other ingredients separately. He deglazed with a bottle of a thick Clare shiraz.

‘I’ll cut the acidity with a teaspoon of sugar,’ he advised the chocolate almonds that were gazing at him.

‘No, la!’ they laughed back, ‘honey more better.’

So honey it was, with a dash of balsamic. He reduced it to a thick sauce, then everything went back to simmer for a few minutes more.

Perfection. He was satisfied with his *coq au vin* at last.

It was not *coq au vin* that worried him that night. It was Mei-yuk.

He was worried that he had fallen in love.

Jogging along the cliff-top leading to Soldier's Rocks, Jim saw Mei-yuk sitting on a rock. She was staring out to sea. He approached noisily, to let her know she was not alone.

She jerked round. Her face was streaked with tears. One eye was half-closed, her lips swollen.

Jesus, what a bastard! How do I handle this?

'It is not what you think, Jim,' she answered his thoughts.

'What can I think?'

'Please, it is okay. Leave me, la.'

He couldn't leave her. He sat beside her, took her hand. She didn't protest.

'You can tell me, Mei-yuk.'

Her liquid eyes were brimming tears, her sweet bruised mouth was trying to smile. 'I walk into a door.'

'Don't bullshit me, Mei-yuk.'

Suddenly she wailed, throwing her face into his sweaty T-shirt. He held her tight, desperate with sympathy, frantic with excitement.

She drew away just as suddenly, as if aware as he of the complications.

'Yes, he hit me. He is old, but one time a month, maybe, he get excited. Like he is angry but he is not. Then he beat me, then he make love while he is exciting.'

'Mei-yuk, that's terrible, unacceptable, *ugh* – ' Jim's outrage sputtered into incoherence.

'Shhh. He is my husband. He look after me. Beating hurt little bit, but then it is finish. I like cooking for him, he cook for me. Good, la! No problem.' She smiled one of those smiles that put his heartbeat on hold.

He cradled her tear-stained face in his hands. He kissed her ever so gently on her wounded eye, on her swollen lips. Two deep brown, velvet pools, full of hurt, watched him. His hands, out of control, unbuttoned her blouse. Two small, pink-eyed breasts looked out at him.

We have to stop this, he decided frantically. He hauled her to her feet, and carried her kicking and squealing into the chilly River Derwent.

Their heat was quenched.

They met several times after that, but Harold was always present. Their meeting at Soldiers Rocks was never mentioned, of course. Then he met her in the Kingston Supermarket. Coming from different directions, their trolleys touched as they turned the corner by the pet food shelves.

‘Hello, Mei-yuk.’

‘Jim!’ Her face exploded like sunrise over the South China Sea.

He reached out for her hand.

She squeezed his in return.

‘Careful, la. He is waiting by the checkout,’ she whispered.

He now knew to be true what he hadn’t dared to dream.

Three days later, he saw what he would never have dared to hope.

A taxi pulled up outside their place. Only Harold climbed in. The driver lifted a large suitcase into the boot. She waved goodbye. She went inside.

They were alone, probably for days! He longed to rush over and crush her in his arms. *No, hang on. Let’s sort this out. If I go, our lives change irreversibly. If I don’t, I’d be a coward, Contemptible. She’d never forgive me, I’d never forgive myself.* An hour of this sent him crazy. So he went but with a pretext: To borrow some hoisin sauce.

‘I see you watching. I know you will come.’

She led him into the living room. His hands were trembling, his mouth so dry he could hardly speak. She insisted that he have an expensive Armagnac, that he sit in Harold’s favourite chair, with the fabulous view of the Derwent and down the Channel.

She squatted at his feet, her hand resting on his leg. She looked up at him, stopping his heart. She tickled his thigh, the brush of a butterfly’s wing. Self-control was now gone. He pulled off her blouse to look upon exquisitely chiselled golden shoulders.

The next four days were the happiest, most fulfilling, in Jim’s life. They cooked together, slept together. They swam naked together, at night, to keep their passion simmering, not boiling over and wasting. They gave each other exquisite pleasure. There was absolutely no doubt now, in both their minds. They discussed it, and agreed.

Harold must go.

But Harold came back.

He looked very pleased with himself, Jim noted through his venetian blinds, as he watched Harold get out of the taxi and walk to the front door Mei-yuk was holding open for him. He had been in Melbourne on business.

Two desolate days later, Harold called Jim over the back fence. ‘Ah, Jim. Hoping I’d catch you. Dinner tomorrow night, my place. I have a recipe I know you’ll adore.’

He accepted, accepting also that seeing Mei-yuk now would be torture.

But Mei-yuk wasn't home. 'She's terribly sorry. Her turn to go to Melbourne. Relatives. You know what Chinese and their families are like, eh?'

Jim hid his surprise and disappointment. But Harold was true to his word. He advanced the theme they had started: first the sweet-and-sour pork, then the *wok au vin* as Jim called his method.

'Basically the same style, old boy, but I use a special Chinese veal, hard to get in Tassie but Little Bourke Street is full of it. The meat's cooked in La Tache '89, not the most robust of recent vintages but in Romanee-Conti the most subtle. Pure velvet. Just the ticket for my little culinary exercise. The '92 accompanies the dish, slightly more tannic, don't you know.'

My God, Jim thought, it had better be special – four figures on the wine alone.

And special it was. The sauce magnificent, but the meat! So tender, yet firm to the bite. The taste vealish, with a subtle tinge of pork. It was a gourmet's dream.

After they'd finished this dream dish in reverential silence, they chatted while sipping the best Burgundy in the world. They talked about recent break-ins in the district. That should have been no surprise, given the mixture of rich retirees and a beach culture.

'So of course one installs the very best security system. Closed circuit TV, with video-tape. You can identify intruders, you know...' Harold's voice trailed away languidly.

Christ! Did he see us? But Harold was off again, talking now about his dish.

'Yes, old boy. Delighted you found it so delicious.' His head was tilted back, looking down at Jim, in that unpleasant posture he had adopted when they had first met. 'But then so you should, old man. *So you bloody well should!*'

Jim's insides erupted. Blood-red vomit exploded like steaming lava onto the white damask tablecloth. Through streaming eyes, he saw Harold, sitting, staring at him intently. He was smiling.

Then Jim saw the cleaver in his hand.