

In late September, 1962, I stepped off the bus from North Bay at the Timmins train station around midnight. It'd been three days since I left Buffalo Narrows, a village in Northern Saskatchewan. I had hitched a ride south with a trucker to the town of Big River. From there, I took a bus to Prince Albert and then later, another bus to Saskatoon. From Saskatoon, I took the Canadian National Railway to North Bay and then the final bus to Timmins. I was tired.

The bus was late and my sister who was supposed to come to get me must have gone home. The bus pulled away and other passengers also went their way. I stood there alone looking down the main street of Timmins. It was late at night and it had rain earlier. The street was completely deserted. The moist pavement glistened and reflected the neon lights of the business district. The street looked as if they'd forgotten to take down the Christmas decorations. I stood for a few minutes undecided what to do, but I thought I was in paradise.



In Buffalo Narrows, my grandfather owned and operated the Buffalo Narrows Café. He and I were the only two Chinese living in a population of seven hundred people, mostly Metis. The town had no indoor plumbing, radio or television reception and the streets were snow covered in the winter and mud covered in the summer. Just damn cold in the winter and damn boring most of the year. There was no library or books in general. I had been in Canada illegally now for six years with an identity, Hung Lee, that my Grandfather had bought for me. I was known as a "Paper Son" or an illegal immigrant. Growing up there was different.

My Grandfather had left China in 1912 with my Grandmother pregnant with my father. They would be separated for forty-nine years. Grandmother finally came to Canada in 1961 to join us. But a year later, my Grandfather who was in his seventies sold the Café. He told me to go and live with my older sister in Timmins. Luck would have it, my brother-in-law, Jack, was part owner of the Peacock Gardens and got me a part-time job as a waiter. I would work there Friday, Saturday and Sunday for all my high school years. How I envied my friends that hang out in the pool halls, Third Avenue and the Peacock.

Aside from languages courses, I didn't have much trouble with school. I enjoyed literature, but was terrible with composition. In grade thirteen, Miss Anderson, a tall spinster, who took her vocation seriously, gave me the worst mark on an essay in her long and distinguished career. She was extremely upset at my effort and I was embarrassed. I did manage to pass English that year and graduated from high school in 1968. After a few bumps in the road and a few detours, I ended up at the University of Toronto and studied dentistry.

Over the years, I discovered I enjoyed telling stories to my patients. In part, it was my way of distracting nervous people when I had my fingers or other objects, often sharp, in their mouths. My memories of growing up in that unusual village of Buffalo Narrows and its four room school that only went up to grade eight was a wonderful source of entertainment for my patients. My own experience as an illegal immigrant was directly connected to the history of Chinese immigration to Canada that seemed to fascinate my white middle class clientele. When some of my patients said, "Dr. Der, you should write this stuff down; it's part of Canadian history", I thought of

Miss Anderson and my low mark on the King Lear essay. I still cringed. In hindsight, she probably was being charitable because she knew English wasn't my first language.

Could I write stories? Probably not, I reasoned. But the itch wouldn't go away. I kept thinking of my Grandfather's life, how he spent nearly his entire adult life alone in Canada without family. I also felt guilty about never asking him about his years alone in Canada. No one really knew anything of his life before 1945. There was a whole generation of men like him too, voiceless, lost in history, with no one to tell their stories. I thought I should try.

So why do I want to write and tell stories? I can feel Miss Anderson sitting on my right shoulder saying, "Hung, you can do better." My high school is having reunion this summer in Timmins and former students have been asked to share their memories of those years. Miss Anderson's name is the one most mentioned. I guess I want to tell Miss Anderson that I'm still trying and yes, I can do better. I want to tell my Grandfather's story to honour his sacrifices.

It's one thing to tell stories orally at the dental office; it's another to write it down. With oral stories, grammar is less of a problem. Sentences can be fragmented and paragraphing a non-issue. I can tell stories dramatically by my voice and body language. I can whisper and shout, cry or laugh. In telling, emotions can be easier to demonstrate. Writing has always been difficult for me. Now, I have to convey feeling with dialogue, drama with scenes and time with summary narrative and theme with musing.

Trying to write is, well, like pulling teeth. It is tough. I write poor sentences, have no diction. I have trouble with tenses and grammar. But recently, I've been trying hard to improve on my weaknesses these past few years. I would write some stories and workshop them at Ryerson University and University of Toronto in hopes of improving my writing skills. I keep trying. My story telling, I think, is good, but I need focus and discipline which I lack. Now that I'm semi-retired and have more time to write. I have the desire to improve and tell stories that would make my Grandfather and Miss Anderson proud.

When I first arrived in Timmins, I said "I thought I was in paradise", a slight exaggeration of course. But looking back, Timmins was the metaphor for "my Gum San". It's where I received a good education; the teachers really cared, and, I had a track coach, Hugh Meyer that helped me to long jump a record distance that hasn't been broken in over forty years. Talk about a confidence builder. Even though the Chinese came to Canada a hundred and fifty years ago dreaming of finding gold, most never got rich or had very good lives. My Grandfather, too, came with the same vision, but life was hard. I went to Timmins, ironically, a place where you can dig gold out of the ground, but you couldn't keep it! My "Gum San" or Gold Mountain are the teachers who encouraged me, the confidence I gained, the education that enlightened me, the freedom of choice available and the friends that I've made in Timmins. And, lastly, there is the story I want to write.