

Souvankham Thammavongsa

*Chick-A-Chee!*

Above us, there lived together four single young men in a two-bedroom apartment. One of them, the one who didn't have a job, sat by the window all day and smoked. He'd see me and my brother coming home from school and when we reached the landing just below his window, he'd yell out, "Hey, girl. Sexsssy" and he'd laugh like it was a fine joke of some kind. He laughed even louder when he saw how frightened I was. Later, he'd drop the "Hey girl" part and just simply say, "Sexsssy," stretching the word out like it was a rubbery arm, long enough to reach me. I would dread coming home after school and see the orange dot glowing by the window above us. I knew he was there. Once, he put his face right up to the window and I saw his lips. How they ended the word *sexy* in an upside down *u*, peeling back his lower lip and showing crooked, yellow-stained teeth. I told my mother about the man upstairs but my mother, never one to back down from a fight, said, "And what do you do when he says that to you? Do you just run away? Pretend to shoot him or something. Go like this," she folded her fingers into the shape of a gun, "Pow, pow' That'll teach him! Hmph." My brother suggested we use the front entrance. It was a roundabout way to get home but we got to avoid the man.

There were a few other kids in the building, a three-story brown brick. All the kids who lived there knew each other. It was an unsaid thing but we all knew not to play alone outside. So, when we wanted to play outside, one of us would knock on an apartment door where there was a kid inside. We lived next to a couple with two boys our age, Troy and Stephen. We didn't really know each other well but the walls were so thin we knew them more than they wanted us to. We never saw Troy or Stephen at our school; they went to a different one where they wore uniforms. Troy, the older one, was skinny and tall, and Stephen was chubby, round and short, looking more like his mother. Troy and Stephen would knock quietly on our door and ask if we could come out and play. We buried a cat together once. We found it in the parking lot. It had been run over. You could see the lump that was the front part and the lump that was the back part. In between was flat. It wasn't dead, just not moving and staring back at all of us. Stephen stepped on its head. What? It was going to anyway, he had said.

In October, of every year until my brother turned eight, our parents always took us out to *Chick-A-Chee*. They drove out to a neighbourhood we wished we could live in, wide tree-lined roads with big Victorian homes. The CN Tower looked big from where it was. It also had signs that said *Neighbourhood Watch*. No one would put poison or sharp blades in their

candy in a neighbourhood like that, my dad said. The first time we went, my brother was six and I was seven. He put on a plastic Spiderman mask and I didn't know what kind of face to have so my dad just made me a black apron with glow-in-the-dark material sewn on it in the shape of a skeleton. In the dark, and fully dressed in this, I looked like I was a skeleton walking across the lawn. It made my brother squeal with excitement and fear.

We were to walk around dressed like this, from house to house, and yell *Chick-A-Chee* at the person who answered the door, and to hold out our pillowcases, hold the open-end out and it would be filled with all kinds of candies. I did not believe this. I feared then that it was a plan to send us away. After all, it was always threatened that that would be so, something our parents said to get us to behave.

Me and my brother walked up together to a house there. My father would stand by the curb, both hands in his pockets, sometimes he'd pull them out to puff warm air into them. He was dressed in a light jacket and jeans, still more interested in looking good than a warm coat and mittens.

As we walked on, we would turn around to look at our father, make sure he was still there and he would encourage us to go on, lifting an arm and sweeping the air in front of him, and he reminded us, "Say *Chick-A-Chee!*"

When we got to the door, we stood there looking for the doorbell. Finally, my brother looked up and noticed it on the left side of the door. It turned out that neither of us could reach it. I lifted my brother up and he pressed the doorbell once, and then twice. And then I let brother down softly. A light behind the door came on and then a woman with brown shoulder-length hair with blunt bangs opened the door. She wore glasses and had a friendly smile. She said, "Well, now, you are Spiderman...and you are...oh my! Look at that costume! Now, isn't that a sight! Where did you get that? Did your mother make it?"

I was so nervous I didn't answer and only said, quickly, "*Chick-A-Chee.*"

"Oh, Harold, come out here! These children are just so adorable! Harooooold! Get out here!"

Harold came to the door, shuffling his fluffy slippers along the linoleum floor.

I said it again, "*Chick-A-Chee.*"

Harold gave a laugh and said, "Elaaaaine! That is so adooooorable! Give the kids a little extra, won't you?" And he reached for a large glass bowl from somewhere behind the door and gave us four bags of potato chips, two in each pillowcase. As soon as the treat was in our pillowcases, we both yelled, "*Chick-A-Chee!*" and ran away giggling. We ran to our father, who was still standing by the curb and showed him the potato chip bags at the bottom of the pillowcases and he said, "See! I told you. Just say *Chick-A-Chee!*"

And all through the night, we went like this, door to door, yelling *Chick-A-Chee* until our pillowcases were so heavy they could not carry

more. Our father took the pillowcases home and he and our mother sorted out the candy. Nothing homemade and no loosely wrapped or already-opened things. The next morning, at school, my brother and I took out the candies at lunch and displayed them like a street vendor selling an array of watches on the streets of New York, telling our friends we went *Chick-A-Chee*. The lunch woman on duty leaned into the crowd around us and said, “Don’t you mean, you went ‘Trick-Or-Treating’?”

We shook our heads with full and utter confidence. No.

I looked up at her peering big face and said, “No, Missus Furman. We went *Chick-A-Chee!*”