

**THERE'S  
NO  
SUCH THING  
AS A  
SKINNY BIBIK**



**SANDRA CHUA**

“Nyonya Charlie aka Charlene Neo is a charmingly contradictory heroine in the true Peranakan and adventure tradition...with a touch of romance thrown in.”

—**OVIDIA YU**, author of *The Cannonball Tree Mystery*

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**SANDRA CHUA**

**E**  
EPIGRAM

*For David, the main reason  
I get on my feet, dust myself off and set out to  
accomplish everything expected of me.*



PART I

## 1

### **What's Wrong with Nyonya Charlie?**

It was like traversing some kind of time portal. A wormhole. Modern Singapore, with its brightly lit skyscrapers and noisy roads, ceased to exist the moment Charlie pushed open the ancient wooden gate and stepped through it. In front of her was one of the ugliest heritage houses of all time. She thought so, anyway.

The house on concrete stilts was a mad mix of European and tropical architecture. Almost 150 years old, the family seat of the moneyed Neos boasted fluted Doric columns on tall plinths. Wide verandas under deep overhanging eaves were bordered by fancy filigree balustrades that would not look out of place in Queen Victoria's England. The heavy teak front door was ornately carved, depicting images of bats and pomegranates. The symbols of good luck are much-loved by the superstitious Peranakans, whom Charlie identified with. The Peranakan bit, that is. Not the superstitious part.

Dinner had already been served by the time Charlie got

home, but she couldn't sit down to eat just yet. She sprinted up the stairs to the third-storey reception room. Her great-grandmother, Mak Cho, held court there.

The scent in the room was suffocating. A low-lying altar against one wall held the Gods of Fortune and Buddha statues, and heady incense spewed from smoking joss sticks. There were dishes of bunga rampai, sweet-smelling potpourri made with jasmine, magnolia and shredded lime leaves, placed on the side tables.

*How does anyone breathe in this antiquated junk store?* Charlie thought. Prudently, she opted not to voice her opinion but smiled instead at her great-grandmother and her two Burmese nurse companions.

Mak Cho was seated in an oversized mother-of-pearl inlaid rosewood chair. A tiny woman, she was dressed in a loose-fitting and long baju panjang, her informal attire. Her mind was sharp as a tack, despite being almost a hundred years old.

Bright eyes, set in a deeply wrinkled face, peered at Charlie as she approached. Mak Cho's lips pursed in disapproval. This was the old lady's usual demeanour, and Charlie was used to it. Mak Cho seemed to disapprove of most people and modern life in general. Everyone was, according to her, tak guna—useless.

“Selamat petang, Mak Cho, gua dah balek. Ada baik?”

It was customary for all family members to pay their respects to the matriarch the moment they arrived home. Speaking in patois, Charlie said good evening to her great-grandmother,

adding that she was back from work and asked if she was well.

“Baik. Sudah makan?” The old lady gave the usual greeting: *Good. Have you eaten?*

*She looks just like Yoda,* thought Charlie. *And the Force is still strong in this old one!*

“Sudah,” Charlie responded, in the required polite manner. She had eaten, she told the old lady, but she was actually starving.

Then the interrogation began. For a good fifteen minutes, Charlie was quizzed by Mak Cho, who still couldn't understand what her great-granddaughter did for a living. Why wasn't she a lawyer like her sister, or a doctor like her brother? Why didn't she do something more useful? Like become a secretary to a powerful man? And why didn't she take better care of her skin? Tak chantek—ugly. Muka bengis—sour-faced. Mak Cho didn't hold back her criticism.

Charlie withstood the put-downs as she always did. When she was younger, the harsh words shook her confidence. What made it worse was that Mak Cho never seemed to scold her older brother and sister in the same way.

On the other hand, both her grandmother and mother were subject to similar abuse. They tolerated Mak Cho's insults with grace, never allowing the cruel words to get under their skin. Taking her cue from them, Charlie didn't react but just let the comments slide off her like a fried egg from a Teflon pan.

When finally given permission to leave, Charlie took two or

three steps down at a time to the dining room, where the rest of the family had begun eating.

Her father, Alistair, sat at the head of the table. On his left was her mother, Jasmine, and on his right, Charlie's grandmother, Ma Ma Susie. Charlie took her seat next to Ma Ma. Across the table, her older brother, Alexander, and his twin, Beatrice, were so busy eating that they didn't even look up from their dinner plates to acknowledge her.

"Ma Ma, Papa, Mummy, makan," said Charlie, inviting the elders to please eat. She had always thought these long-winded, respectful greetings were mostly irrelevant but the elder Neos insisted on observing them.

"Makan," said Ma Ma.

As the housekeeper, Ma Jie, served the youngest Neo a plate of steaming white rice, Charlie wrinkled her nose at the food on the table. Everyone else was tucking heartily into plates piled high with fat and carbohydrates, but she was put off by the presence of pork, pork and more pork. If there was one word to describe Nyonya cuisine, it would be *rich*.

Neither Malay nor Chinese, the food was an exuberant blend of both: From the Malay—a heavy use of coconut milk, chillies, onions, limes, candlenuts and tamarind. From the Chinese—salted soya beans, ginger, garlic, tofu, soya sauce and, yes, loads of pork and pork lard. Mixed together, the ingredients evolved into dishes like babi pongteh, bakwan kepiting, babi chin, chap chai titek and even pig stomach curry.

Charlie disliked the taste of pork and other red meat. She much preferred clean-tasting fare like stir-fried vegetables or steamed fish. Even a simple plate of cucumber salad could not make an appearance at a Peranakan table without being dressed with chicken gizzards and dried shrimps. Sighing, she gingerly helped herself to the vegetables in the chap chai and assiduously avoided the pork belly in it. She didn't notice her mother critically eyeing her.

"Tsk!" Jasmine exclaimed impatiently. "Such a picky eater! Peranakan cuisine is prized by gourmands because of its complexity. You have no idea of all the work and effort that went into preparing each dish!"

Making a face, Charlie muttered into her food, "I most certainly know the effort that went into each dish. Every time I was punished, I was sent to do kitchen duty."

It was true. As a child, every single infraction resulted in a tough stint in the kitchen peeling onions or pounding chillies. She accepted it when the crimes were severe, like the time she and her sister fought so violently that they scratched each other's faces and pulled hanks of hair out. But sometimes, the crime didn't fit the punishment. Like the time she ran too close to the rose bushes and accidentally tore a hole in her new dress on the first day of Chinese New Year. Or when she forgot to study for her Chinese spelling test and scored a zero.

There was the time Charlie, Alex and Bee stole an English trifle from the fridge. The dessert was meant for an adults-only



dinner party that their parents were hosting that night. The three of them managed to consume about half of it, and feeling green from the sugar and sherry overdose, they abandoned the bowl in the laundry room. Of course they were caught and convicted, especially after Alex barfed up fruit cocktail, sponge cake, jam and whipped cream.

The girls were condemned to kitchen duty. Alex was told to “help” the gardener outside. With teary eyes stinging from the fumes of a mountain of chopped onions, the girls watched resentfully from the kitchen window as Alex, whooping noisily, ran wildly about the garden, pretending to be a caveman hunting game.

It was obvious. Their brother had it good. Not because he deserved it, but because he was born a boy. From a young age, Charlie witnessed, but could not understand, the disparity. Peranakans treasured male progeny over female. Even today. Even with modern society’s emphasis on meritocracy.

Once, Ma Jie had found a mound of wriggling earthworms in her bed. Clearly, Alex was the culprit because he was angry with her for cleaning his room and throwing out his ant farm.

*Oh ho, Charlie thought gleefully at the time. Alex is in for it now! Wonder what the witch will do to him? Give him the beating he deserves? Lock him up forever?*

To her amazement, Alex got away scot-free. Ma Jie had pretended that she didn’t know who did it and swept the matter under the carpet. Irrefutable proof that in a Peranakan family, it

was much better to be born a boy.

All this while, Charlie was absently shovelling rice into her mouth, lost in her thoughts. Her mother’s disapproving voice cut through her brain fog.

“Charlie! Will you slow down? You’re eating like a famine victim!” Jasmine seemed to be terminally exasperated by her youngest child.

“Shorwee.” Charlie committed another cardinal sin by speaking with her mouth full. She gulped the rice down without chewing. And gagged a little. “I need to leave for martial arts class soon.”

“Tsk! Martial arts, martial arts!” This time the reprimand came from her grandmother. “I cannot understand your obsession with fighting and beating people up. There are hundreds of other hobbies you could take up. I saw some people doing Zumba in the park. It looked fun.”

“I blame Papa,” said Jasmine.

Alistair, who had been quietly enjoying his food and ignoring the dinner table squabbles, dropped his spoon in surprise. It bounced off the tabletop and fell to the floor with a loud clang. “Me? What did I do?”

“You encourage Charlie’s violent tendencies! After she sliced that poor China boy with a cutter, you allowed her to learn taekwondo! And then what happened?” Jasmine looked accusingly at her husband, who dropped his gaze guiltily.

“To be fair,” Charlie jumped in, “it was the competition

organiser's fault! They paired me with this short girl. I had the height advantage, so when I kicked her in the head, she went flying and was knocked out."

"When the girl's family sued Charlie, I decided that I would take up law!" Bee interjected triumphantly. "So something good emerged from that catastrophe!"

Charlie sighed. Her sister was not helping. She was glad when Ma Ma changed the subject.

"The tailor is arriving from Malacca soon. Make sure you are home. You need to be measured for your sarong kebaya," said Ma Ma, eyeing the women at the table.

Charlie grimaced. She found the traditional Peranakan costume restrictive. The tight wrap-around batik sarong made sure you walked—nay—glided sedately at all times. It was almost impossible to hitch it up and take large strides if you needed to get somewhere quickly. Then there was the delicate, lushly embroidered kebaya top, which had no buttons. Made of transparent voile in an array of lovely colours, it would be secured by a kerosang, linked brooches. The kebaya is a garment designed for not doing much other than looking elegant and decorative. And Charlie had no time for that.

Ma Ma, eighty years young, wore the kebaya every day. She was plump and jolly and looked exactly like a typical Peranakan grandmother. Out of the kebaya, Charlie thought, she would make a perfect Mrs Santa Claus.

Jasmine was a more modern bibik. A career woman, she

dressed in a kebaya only on special occasions. And when she did, she looked imposingly elegant—almost like Michelle Yeoh—with glittering diamonds encrusting her ears and neck.

Strangers meeting Bee and Charlie for the first time usually didn't believe that the two were sisters. Bee was a whole head shorter than Charlie and curvy where Charlie was not. Bee looked adorable in her kebaya. The transparent, V-necked top showed off her pert breasts and the close-fitting sarong accentuated her ample hips. She was petite, wasp-waisted and extremely feminine. The perfect Generation Z Peranakan lady.

Growing up, Charlie was well aware that she looked like a malnourished stray cat. When she was in primary school, her mother would force her to drink a whole glass of full-fat milk every night after dinner in an effort to make her put on weight.

"People say that we don't feed you," Jasmine complained. "You make us look like bad parents. Stop whining and drink up! Every single drop!"

Bee sailed into adolescence. Everyone marvelled as her body blossomed. Poor Charlie. Adolescence seemed to bypass her. She just grew taller and taller, with little discernible difference in her chest and hip size.

Every school year, on Racial Harmony Day, Charlie was shoehorned into a new kebaya. And each year before she left for the Racial Harmony celebrations, Charlie would pose awkwardly as her mother and grandmother eyed her critically. "You remind me of a galah," Ma Ma commented more than once, referring

to a bamboo pole. “Straight up and straight down.” Then both ladies would sigh. Something was not quite right with this Peranakan girl.

The new sarong kebayas that Ma Ma referred to at dinner that night were being ordered for Mak Cho’s coming centenary celebration. There was to be a tok panjang lunch at the house for close relatives and friends. A tok panjang, meaning “long table”, referred to a typically overabundant festive meal. Jasmine, a celebrity food writer and consultant, was in charge of organising the whole event.

Charlie felt her mind wandering as her family droned on, discussing the nitty-gritty details of the party. An air-conditioned tent was to be set up in the garden. Flower décor worth thousands of dollars was to be ordered. Caterers, valets, serving staff, live band, sound system. They were pulling out all the stops for this hundredth birthday bash.

Dreading the pomp, the rituals, the kebaya-wearing, Charlie wished that she had been born: 1) a boy; and 2) to a simpler family. Ideally, one without the cultural baggage and illogical expectations.

Her train of thought took it one step further. *If only I was an orphan! Yes, an orphan has no senior relatives making unreasonable demands. Wouldn't that be great?*

## 2

### The Secret Life of the Bookkeeper

Charlie loved her job, and she hated her job. Right now, she hated her job. She was desultorily keying numbers into a computer in a small, stuffy office located in a warehouse complex. Mind-numbing, boring work. Fortunately, her real job was far from boring.

She worked for a shadowy government enforcement agency, which had recruited her in her final year at the University of Singapore. It happened about a month before the final exam. The day her life changed, Charlie was exhausted. Not from studying, but from organising and then overseeing an awareness event on consumer waste. The event was held over the weekend, and she had been clocking twenty-hour days for more than two months, juggling lectures, tutorials, homework, and the nuts and bolts of getting the event and its myriad activities up and running.

When the Waste-Not Fest was finally over, Charlie slept for eighteen straight hours in her UTown hostel room. But an

urgent pounding on the door woke her.

Woozy from being rudely awakened, she opened the door to a bespectacled woman in her late thirties. She was dressed in what Charlie thought of as a “civil servant uniform”—beige long-sleeved blouse, navy A-line skirt and sensible shoes. She introduced herself as Dr Salfiah Omar of APES (Agency for the Protection of Endangered Species) and she was offering Charlie a job even before she graduated from university.

“I was impressed by your management skills with the waste awareness fest and after investigating your extracurricular achievements, I think you’re just what we’re looking for,” Dr Salfiah said, cutting out the social niceties and getting right to the point.

Very few people know about APES’ existence. While Singapore is a signatory to CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), due to political and economic reasons, the island-nation is sometimes unable to publicly participate in other efforts to stop trade in endangered animals and animal products.

“Which doesn’t mean our government is not doing anything to thwart smuggling and trade in targeted species. We are doing it, just under the radar,” Dr Salfiah explained to Charlie.

Two months later, rookie officer Charlene Neo made her way to the leafy, upmarket area of District 10 to what looked like an old school compound. Large rain trees surrounded a 1960s-style low-rise block. A discreet sign under the car porch read: *APES—Agency for the Protection of Endangered Species.*

It was Charlie’s first day at work and when she walked into the office, she was surprised to meet her co-workers. Apart from Dr Salfiah, they were all men, the youngest in their early thirties, the rest older and middle-aged. And they were a specific kind of man. All obviously ex-armed forces personnel. You know the type: neatly cropped hair, buff, outdoor sorts. Nice enough guys but with a limited sense of humour. Charlie immediately felt like a vegan at a meat buffet. Her instinct was to turn on her heel and walk back out the door.

“What am I doing here?” she asked Dr Salfiah. “I don’t think I belong in this place.”

“We require someone like you precisely because you’re not like one of them,” Dr Salfiah replied. “We need more women, for sure. We approached a number but you’re the only one who said yes. And we need more people who can think on their feet, not just follow orders. Don’t worry, you’ll be fine.”

Charlie quickly discovered that she couldn’t tell people that she worked at APES. “Where? What’s that?” they’d ask, followed by looks of incomprehension or puzzlement. It was easier to describe herself as a civil servant attached to the National Environment and Development Ministry and that she functioned as some kind of park ranger.

Certainly, sometimes she felt like a park ranger, especially when her job entailed tracking and apprehending poachers deep in the primary rainforest. At other times, she was stationed at the Malaysia–Singapore Causeway checkpoint, on the lookout

for animal and plant smugglers entering and exiting the island state.

And then came the Big One: her current assignment required her to go undercover—deep undercover—for weeks or months. APES had received intel that a large shipment of illegal animal parts was headed to Singapore from Africa. It was deduced that the shipment would likely be destined for a privately owned warehouse complex.

Tong Meng Ser was a walled warehouse complex in West Coast. The sprawling compound held more than forty storehouses of varying sizes. Three of the largest were the size of aircraft hangers and located in the middle of the grounds. Low-rise office and warehouse units surrounded these three big ones, which were occupied by the owners of Tong Meng Ser, a family that had been in the ship chandlery business for more than a century. Other companies that rented warehouses from Tong Meng Ser were mostly fruit and vegetable wholesalers or food product distributors. One company, Indochine Food Supplier, agreed to let APES officers work there during the day and stay overnight at the staff accommodations on the second storey of the warehouse.

Two APES teams were assigned to this mission. Alpha team comprised Charlie, who was to pose as the company bookkeeper, and her partner, Officer Gabriel Tay, who acted as a storeman. Omega team—officers Maurice de Rosario and Sul Salman—held the positions of clerk and deliveryman. The four of them

took turns to come to work and keep the warehouse complex under surveillance 24/7.

Indochine Food Supplier, importer of Vietnamese foodstuffs like instant noodles, was in actuality a one-man operation run by a Mr Song, who was more than happy to have zero-cost workers run his little company for him while he went on holiday. Which was how Miss Charlene Neo, newly minted bookkeeper, found herself doing the company accounts, sighing at the tedium of it all.

The first item on Charlie's to-do list: make friends. At lunch, Charlie approached two ladies sitting at a table in the canteen and asked if she could join them. She soon got to know Mei Wern and Ai Lee, both Malaysians who commuted to work across the Causeway from Johor. They were administrative clerks in different food-supply companies.

Next, Charlie spent the weekend baking biscuits. On Monday morning, as she passed the security checkpoint, Charlie handed a large jar of biscuits to the guards on duty. They were pleasantly surprised. No one had thought to offer them treats before.

"Baking is my hobby lah," she told them. "I always make too much, so I thought I would give you some."

"Thank you lah," said Officer Maniam. "We are very happy to help you eat up your oversupply!"

Once the ice was broken, the security officers invited Charlie inside for a cup of coffee. Stepping in, Charlie could see from the bank of monitors where the closed-circuit cameras were

installed and where they were aimed. Unseen by the security guards, she surreptitiously placed two tiny spy cams in the office. One of them faced the CCTV screens and another gave a wide view of the room. The spy cams would feed live video to APES headquarters as well as to a computer inside Indochine Food Supplier. These were not the only two surveillance cams hidden by APES in the warehouse complex. Charlie's colleagues had positioned others to monitor the comings and goings of goods and people.

At odd times of the day, Charlie would often wander over to the security office to have a cup of coffee with the guards.

"It's so boring and lonely in my office," she told them by way of explanation. "I just needed to get out and talk to someone. You don't mind me dropping in, do you?"

"No, no. Not at all. Have a biscuit," said Officer Maniam. The other guards in the room nodded and smiled at her. In their casual chats, Charlie could glean more gossip about the other companies.

By the second week, Charlie had settled into a routine and met her new BFFs for lunch every day at 1pm. She began to really like Mei Wern and Ai Lee. They were warm and generous girls, always willing to share information about the community in the warehouse complex. Charlie even found out about a number of less-than-legal goings-on but had to tell herself to close one eye and let these things be. She couldn't jeopardise the Big One by going after the smaller misdeeds.

For instance, Charlie once noticed a tarpaulin-covered lorry parked outside Mei Wern's company. She thought she heard the sound of birds twittering when she walked near, but she couldn't be sure. When she casually mentioned it at lunch in the canteen, Mei Wern put her finger to her lips to shush her.

"Boss loves collecting songbirds," she whispered. "He doesn't go through the proper channels to get them sometimes."

Charlie nodded understandingly, like a co-conspirator.

Ai Lee was sure that many of the packers from the fruit and vegetable wholesalers were working illegally.

"They speak in strange foreign languages and many of them are always hungry. When the supervisor is not looking, they eat raw vegetables and fruit," she revealed.

Charlie made a mental note to investigate the potential criminal oversights only after her main mission was accomplished. *Focus!* she told herself. *Focus!*

"You know, I feel so restless, cooped up in that office all day," Charlie said to Mei Wern and Ai Lee one day. "How about we do some exercise after work? We can jog around the compound when the sun is not too hot."

"Good idea!" said Mei Wern, a food lover who was prone to plumpness. Ai Lee, who was thin and not inclined to do any athletic activity, grudgingly agreed to go along with them.

"We'll bring exercise gear to work and start tomorrow evening," Charlie said determinedly.

At 5pm the next day, the three girls, dressed in T-shirts,

shorts and trainers, started jogging around the perimeter of the warehouse complex. Next to the canteen was a basketball court where many of the workers from the fruit and vegetable company were playing a game. The girls slowed down to covertly admire the strapping, muscular young men run, jump and challenge each other for possession of the ball.

Then Charlie noticed something that made her freeze. She stood and stared at a tall young man in a loose tank top. He was not distinguishable from the other sweaty players except for one thing—a scar on his shoulder blade shaped like a quirky star.

*Could it be? Surely not. What are the odds of two people having the same mark? In the same place?* Charlie couldn't tear her eyes from the young man as he dribbled, passed and caught the ball. He was slim in build and graceful in his athleticism. The scar was mesmerising.

“Eh! Stop staring! They will think we are man-crazy!” Mei Wern hissed at Charlie, jolting her out of her reverie. So true. The girls resumed jogging.

“Those guys— Are they all packers from the fruit and vegetable warehouse?” asked Charlie.

“Yes,” said Ai Lee. “They are mostly China citizens. You can tell from their accent. They don't speak Mandarin like the locals here. I think there are also men from Vietnam, Burma and other places.”

Over the next few days, as the girls jogged past the basketball court, Charlie kept an eye out for Quirky Star, as she secretly

nicknamed the young man. He was always there, concentrating on the game, unaware of Charlie's scrutiny.

Then came the day Quirky Star was arrested along with his foreign colleagues.

Charlie had been in the office for only about an hour that morning when a uniformed policeman came to Indochine Food Supplier and politely asked her to step outside. He wanted to know if there was anyone else in the office, and when Charlie answered in the negative, he entered the office, storeroom and staff accommodations to check. Satisfied that there was no one else, he instructed Charlie to go to the basketball court, where a processing centre had been set up.

The parking lot was filled with police cars and vans, beacon lights flashing. Men in blue were walking purposefully here and there. At the basketball court, Charlie met Mei Wern and Ai Lee, who were lining up to hand their employment passes to a police officer behind a desk. Charlie presented her Singapore identity card to the officer and was told she could go back to her office.

*Must be an Immigration Department operation to weed out the illegal workers,* thought Charlie as she headed back. In the car park, people were being herded into black police vans. Charlie noticed Quirky Star. He was standing quietly, waiting to enter a van with the same men he played basketball with. *He's an illegal worker!* Charlie kept her eyes on him as she walked briskly on.

That's when she slammed straight into what felt like a concrete pillar. The impact winded her and she took a staggering step

back. Two hands shot out of the pillar and gripped her shoulders to steady her. Instinctively, Charlie grabbed the first thing her right hand came into contact with. In this case, it was a white shirt front, along with a lanyard attached to an identity tag. A part of Charlie's brain registered that it was a plainclothes policeman.

"Oof! Miss, are you all right?" Charlie heard a deep male voice say.

At 1.75m, Charlie was a tall girl. But her gaze still had to travel up and up to meet a pair of dark eyes fringed with impossibly long eyelashes.

"S-s-sorry," she said, a bit breathlessly. They awkwardly let go of each other.

"What's your name, miss? Have you been processed?"

"Uhm...yes. I was heading back to my workplace...officer...uhm..." Charlie peered at the man's identity tag. Singapore Police Force. Badge. Mugshot of the policeman in peaked cap and blue uniform. It was her old friend, Isaac Govindasamy.

### 3 The Reunion

No way. *Inspector* Isaac Govindasamy. Charlie's brain was pinging with questions, but she was rendered speechless.

"Miss? What's your name? Which company do you work for?" Concerned eyes bored into her.

Charlie was startled into speaking. "Uh. Indochine Food Supplier. Charlene Neo. I'm a bookkeeper..." Her voice trailed off as she took a good look at the man. Very tall. At least 1.9m. Broad shoulders, strong jaw, wide mouth, big nose, those long-lashed eyes, thick eyebrows, neatly cropped curly hair. He was unrecognisable. And yet...

"Zac, it's me—Charlie." A pause.

"Say again? Charlie...?" The dark eyes widened. Isaac let out a whoop. "Charlie! Oh my gosh! Can I hug you? No. I can't. My men are watching. We must talk. Tonight. After work. Dinner?"

"Yes! I can't believe it's you! How long has it been? Count! I'm twenty-four. Oh, oh, it's been twelve years!" Charlie was so happy and excited that she could hardly think coherently, let



alone speak in a calm manner. Quirky Star was relegated to the back of her mind and then forgotten.

Back at the office, Charlie was recounting the day's events to her partner and erstwhile storeman, Officer Gabriel Tay, when a nondescript Toyota sedan pulled up outside Indochine Food Supplier.

"Bye, Gabe, that's my ride home," said Charlie as she packed her things to leave. Officer Gabriel had the night shift and would stay in the staff quarters. It would enable him to survey the warehouse complex and watch for any suspicious activities.

Charlie slipped into the front passenger seat of the Toyota and smiled at the driver. Isaac grinned back, displaying a set of straight white teeth.

"Ooh, what big teeth you have," she said playfully.

"All the better to eat you with," he growled.

They burst into laughter, twelve years of separation disappearing immediately as they fell back into their usual banter.

"APES? What's that?" The usual question.

Charlie sighed as she tried to explain the nature of her job. They were stuck in peak traffic on the expressway, but neither was complaining. It gave them the chance to catch up on each other's lives.

Charlie asked after Isaac's family. She remembered his parents fondly and often thought of the happy times she spent at Govindasamy Store. It was such a large part of her carefree

childhood. Isaac's parents were alive. It turned out that twelve years ago, Mr Govindasamy discovered he had heart disease and decided to sell the shop. The family moved to a flat in East Coast. Isaac accepted a police scholarship during his National Service and was now serving the country as a full-time police officer.

Isaac wanted to go to a restaurant for dinner but Charlie had other ideas.

"Let's visit the old neighbourhood. We can eat at a hawker centre there. Wouldn't it be fun to see the places where we used to get up to all kinds of mischief? Your father had to come and rescue us a few times," she said, nostalgia welling up from deep inside and threatening to overwhelm her. She had to catch herself. What would Isaac think if she suddenly started crying? "I really miss those days," she finally said, blinking and sniffing discreetly.

"That's such a good idea! You're on!" Isaac steered the car off the highway and headed to Upper Serangoon and the HDB estate where he used to live.

The old housing-board flats were still there, looking drab and shabby, but the surroundings had changed quite a bit. The low-rise block that housed Govindasamy Store now had a new mini-mart, a Thai mookata eatery, a Japanese ramen place and ironically, next to the food establishments, a slimming salon.

Gone were the mom-and-pop shops, the old-time laundromat, the kitchenware vendor that also sold toys. The capsule vending machines, where Charlie and Isaac spent an obscene amount

of their pocket money trying to get a particular action figure, were replaced by claw machines that demanded more reckless spending. An internet café had replaced the Kumon tuition centre, and the ramshackle rollerblade and skateboard shop had turned into a trendy bicycle retailer selling \$4,000 racing bikes. They walked companionably towards the old park, where they found that the basketball court had evolved into a futsal field. An open grassy patch, where they used to catch grasshoppers, crickets and toads, was now a fenced-in community garden.

The old playground, though, looked exactly the same. The slides and swings had been repaired but nothing much had changed. The towering saga tree that provided Charlie with red beads to stuff her sacks for five stones was now taller than ever and gave shade to more than half the playground. This place jolted Charlie's memory. She turned to Isaac, who was affectionately patting the monkey bars. He had spent many hours swinging on them as a boy, but now he stood taller. Much taller.

"Zac, do you remember the boy from China—Sheng?"

"Of course. My father called us the Three Musketeers because we were always together."

"I saw someone who looked like him. In fact, you guys arrested him this morning."

"That's not likely," he responded. "Sheng went back to China. The men you saw this morning are likely to be illegally imported workers. They're mostly from Vietnam and Cambodia.

"Anyway, think about it. You only realised who I was after you

saw my ID. I didn't recognise you at all. Sheng would have also changed a lot from the time you last saw him. I'm pretty sure you're mistaken."

Isaac was the voice of reason and Charlie almost agreed with him. But something stopped her.

"No. This man has a distinctive scar on his shoulder blade. I admit that he doesn't look anything like I imagine Sheng would look like today. But that scar..." she mused. "It's been bothering me."

"It's bothering you? Why? Is it because you caused the scar? Do you still have nightmares about the day it happened?" Isaac asked, half-teasingly.

"How can I ever forget that day?" Charlie shuddered. "Do you know that it was the day my happy, carefree childhood ended? And I wasn't even a teenager yet. I was just twelve, in my tweens. A tweenager."

## 4 The Accident

The year was 2008. The upright Steinway in the big music room was being tortured. The melody, or what was supposed to be a melody, was a jumble of jangly discordant notes. It sounded that way to Charlie, who was trying to sneak past the room without being noticed.

“Ow!”

Mrs Nancy Ang, the world's most fearsome music teacher, had pinched Bee on the back of her hand. “Your Grade Five exam is only two months away! You haven't been practising!” she snarled at Bee, who was on the verge of tears.

“I *have* been practising! Two hours every day,” Bee protested in a wavering voice.

Charlie had heard enough. She wasn't going to stick around for her turn with old Nasty Nancy. Best to disappear while she was occupied with abusing her poor older sister. Charlie bolted. Down the curved main staircase and past the second music room, where her brother was torturing another instrument, this

time a violin. His violin teacher, Mr Toh, was listening to him saw and screech away with the patient look of a martyred saint.

*It's child abuse. Why do we have to endure this horror?* Charlie thought to herself as she scampered through the cavernous kitchen.

Ma Jie was sitting at the counter plucking roots off bean sprouts. “Oi! Where are you going? I will tell your mother!” she hollered as Charlie flew through the back door.

*Ugh! Bad luck! Why did the old witch have to be in the kitchen? I'm going to be in big trouble.* Charlie kicked off her rubber flip-flops, threaded the thongs through her left arm and launched herself barefoot at the mangosteen tree in the backyard. One of the tree's branches stretched over the chicken run, providing a convenient bridge to the back wall. Using her toes to grip the tree trunk like a monkey, Charlie pulled herself up the tree, crawled across the branch-bridge to the top of the back wall and leapt off into the alley behind their house.

*Freedom!* Pausing only to slip on her flip-flops, the tomboy sped through a maze of back alleys to the nearby public housing estate. She was headed for a grocery store in a rundown block of double-storey shophouses.

Govindasamy Store was an old-fashioned grocer's. It stocked fresh produce in wooden crates that partially blocked the walkway in front of the shop. Inside was a higgledy-piggledy mix of cooking-oil tins, rice bags, confectionery, packaged drinks, instant-noodle packets and baking ingredients.

Charlie paused to catch her breath before stepping into the

shop's gloomy, incense-filled interior. The portly store owner was behind the cash machine, reading the Tamil newspaper.

"Ho! Charlie! Isaac is doing his homework in the back storeroom. Go in!" he said good-naturedly. Mr Govindasamy, a devout Hindu, had married a devout Christian lady and their only issue was Isaac, one of Charlie's best friends.

Fourteen-year-old Isaac, or Zac, as Charlie affectionately called him, was indeed in the back storeroom, but instead of doing his homework, he was playing with his Nintendo Game Boy. Without looking up from catching Pokémon, he drawled, "Run away from home again?"

"Stash that, Zac. C'mon, let's go to our usual place. D'ya think your dad will give us ice cream?" Charlie was restless and wanted to be outdoors. "Call Sheng."

Sheng was Charlie's other best friend. He was Isaac's classmate and lived in a public flat nearby with his single mother. His full name in Hanyu Pinyin was Chen Gang Sheng, which coincidentally was the given name of martial arts movie star Jackie Chan. Charlie and Isaac often teased him by calling him Jackie Chan.

Sucking on lime popsicles, Isaac and Charlie sauntered over to the nearby park. They trod barefoot on the stone pebbles of the foot reflexology path, alternately shrieking with laughter and pain. They hung upside down on the monkey bars and climbed up the chains of the swings while waiting for Sheng.

It was Isaac who first noticed the mechanical grass cutter,

a two-metre-long pole with a whirling blade at one end and a handle at the other. Gardeners were often seen with these petrol-powered motors walking up and down lawns and grassy slopes swinging them in an arc. This particular one was lying abandoned in a flower bed, its owner nowhere in sight.

"I've always wanted to try one of these," said Isaac. He picked up the backpack motor and turned the ignition. The grass cutter roared to life. "Ooh! Cool!" He swung the machine in a wide arc and cut off all the pink heads of the periwinkles in the flower bed.

"I want to try! I want to try!" Charlie was excited and eager to play with the new toy too. After Isaac handed her the whirring pole, she started cutting the grass by swinging the pole left and right. Blades of grass flew up around her. She didn't notice the large stone in the long grass.

It happened in a matter of seconds. The whirling blade hit the stone and the impact jolted Charlie so hard that she let go of the pole. The grass cutter flew out of her hand and took an erratic trajectory into the air. Towards Sheng, who was approaching his friends without their noticing him. Sheng's eyes widened in shock before he ducked in time to dodge the cutter. Its sharp rotating blades, however, hit Sheng in the back, shredding his T-shirt and making a deep, irregular gash in his shoulder, before clattering to the ground, still convulsing dangerously. Sheng grunted loudly in pain and fell close to the moving grass cutter.

Charlie heard screaming that seemed to come from far away but then realised that her mouth was wide open and she was

the one making the noise. Isaac recovered quickly enough to grab the grass cutter before it did more damage. He removed the backpack and hit the off button.

By then, a dark red bloodstain had started spreading across Sheng's back. He was gritting his teeth and his eyes were screwed up in pain. Charlie fell to her knees and cradled Sheng's head, all the while sobbing hysterically.

"Got to get help." Isaac took off sprinting towards his father's shop.

Charlie had no idea how long she knelt holding Sheng's head in her lap. She watched in a detached manner as his blood started soaking into the ground. His eyes were screwed shut, but he was conscious and gripping her arm tightly. *A lot of people have come to watch*, she thought numbly as a crowd gathered.

Sirens. Medics in white. They released Charlie from Sheng's grasp and took him away. Still, she sat in the same place. Men in blue. Police officers. Isaac spoke with them. One of them came over to talk to her. She couldn't hear what he said. There was a rushing noise in her ears. She didn't seem to understand the language he was speaking, so she said nothing.

The owner of the grass cutter came running up, clutching his sparse hair and wailing. For some reason, Charlie understood some of what he said. Something about going to the toilet, something about being sacked and being sent home. Something about naughty children and blame.

Isaac was speaking. "Address?" he asked.

"Eighteen Flower Hill," she muttered.

The men in blue helped her stand up and marched her to the police car. Charlie barely registered the short ride in the cop car. Outside again, with two police officers flanking her, she stood docilely before her front gate.

The gate swung open. Ma Jie stood there, eyes wide, hands covering her mouth. Ma Ma came bustling down the driveway to the gate. There was muffled conversation in agitated, urgent tones. Ma Jie pushed Charlie up the driveway, into the house, up the curved staircase and into her room. Charlie vaguely remembered having a bath, being dressed in her pyjamas and being told to wait till her parents got home.

Parents home. Much yelling. This time, nothing was muffled. Mummy and Papa spoke loudly at the same time. Charlie wished they would take turns so that she could understand. Wait, no. She didn't want to understand. She had her own problems. Let them yell.

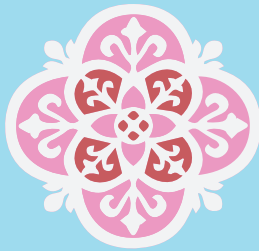
One of the joys of my existence is connecting with young people and discovering what sways them. Thank you, guys, for the informed conversations.

To my Peranakan relatives who think they recognise themselves in these pages, *it's not about you.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Sandra Chua** is a former magazine editor and meddling mother of three exasperated daughters. In addition, she's an avid bookworm, K-drama addict and domestic goddess-wannabe. *There's No Such Thing as a Skinny Bibik* is her first novel.



“Nyonya Charlie is a charmingly contradictory heroine in the true Peranakan and adventure tradition.”

–Ovidia Yu, author of *The Cannonball Tree Mystery*

Charlie has always been too tall, too skinny and too wild to ever be considered a proper nyonya. Her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother are always looking on in disapproval, yet Charlie knows she must follow her heart in career and in love. That becomes complicated when three men fight for her affection, a major smuggling ring must be investigated and the paparazzi cannot get enough of her!

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