



## Long Stay in a Distant Land

*Chieh Chieng*

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The Lums are cursed. Their early deaths come randomly, strangely, and often, be it by tainted cheeseburger or speeding ice cream truck. The most recent victim is Louis Lum's mother. Now Louis must move back home with his gangsta rap-obsessed father, Sonny, to prevent him from enacting the revenge he promises. But soon Louis's concern shifts to his uncle Bo Lum, who has disappeared in Hong Kong. As Louis's search progresses, the tragicomic story of three generations of Lums in America is revealed.

## Long Stay in a Distant Land Details

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Author : Chieh Chieng

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## **From Reader Review Long Stay in a Distant Land for online ebook**

### **Laurel Deloria says**

A rather convoluted confusing story of three generations in a distant land (US).

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### **Sarah says**

I'm getting a kick out of this fiction. It's the shorter, contemporary, California-Chinese version of 100 Years of Solitude set in my favorite Valley. Perhaps a better comparison would be the male perspective from The Good Luck Club? Point is, this is a story of fathers and sons (and brothers and uncles) with a strong matriarch. A few chapters focus on San Francisco and Hong Kong (and Grandmaster Flash and Doctor Dre!), just in case you're not so interested in the Garden Grove and Anaheim references.

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### **Nena says**

I read this a while ago and forgot about it. I remember the record collection of the father's character and how he wanted to assimilate his son to his affinity for hip hop while still having "FOB" tones and annunciations to speech. Also, I remember the search for the brother (or was it half brother; either way, brother) and some obstacles the protagonist faced. Pretty good read from what I recall.

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### **Amy says**

Picked this audio book out at random and was very pleasantly surprised. The interactions of different generations of Chinese immigrants are funny, believable, and never stereotypical. The actor reading the book sets just the right tone and the voices are perfect.

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### **Jerjonji says**

The New York Times views this story as a "coming-of-age" story, but for me, the novel was more about discovering who the other people in your family really are instead of discovering who you are.

Lewis Lum is convinced that the Lum family is cursed and that Death is collecting the remaining members one by one as revenge for his grandfather cheating it. If you think that Death is chasing you, it affects some

of the decisions you make- like you never eat hamburger at fast food restaurants, you always look both ways two or three times before crossing the street, and you invite Jesus into your heart three hundred and fifty times... but that's just the beginning. A quirky family tale that made me laugh and giggle, Chieng does a great job of making a different culture accessible and comprehensible to the non-Chinese reader while at the same time portraying a loving, but somewhat manipulative family.

One of my favorite passages is when Lewis is eating out in Hong Kong and orders turnip cakes. When the golden cakes arrive at the table, he smells them carefully, examining every inch before tasting them. His grandmother had made the terrible tasting things from an old family recipe for every family gathering (which is mostly premature funerals from bizarre events) and nobody likes them. For the first time in his life, Lewis is about to discover what they are really suppose to taste like. It's an awesome scene and one I wish I'd written. The characters seem real and they each have their own story which is slowly revealed. With such a distinctive voice, I don't have to worry about losing my own, and since it's not a complicated read, it helped with the sense of brain boredom. I found this book when I was chasing down another book that hasn't arrived yet! (I'll tell you about it when it's here and read!). I wish Chieng had more books written for me to read- that's the worst part about reading 1st books!

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## Em says

In writing *A Long Stay in a Distant Land*, Chieh Chieng isn't creating Benadryl—a phrase often uttered by the Lum family matriarch whenever anyone makes an unsatisfactory excuse. It, like the Lum lineage on the cover of this novel, can be traced back to the 1940s, when Louis Lum's great-uncle Phil was part of the team that introduced Benadryl to the world. In the eyes of Louis's grandmother Esther, it's a legacy none of the Lum descendants can measure up to. So when Chieng documents their achievements through the decades, he's not creating Benadryl. What he is creating is a humorous but heartfelt family saga that spans three generations of the Orange County Lums.

Louis Lum, a twenty-something editorial assistant, believes his family members are all cursed to an early death as punishment for all the Nazis his grandfather Melvin killed during World War II. After an overworked medical student accidentally kills Louis's mother in a car crash, only six of twelve Lums remain—and one of them, Louis's reclusive uncle Bo, just went missing in Hong Kong.

Chieng's work can best be described as a tragicomedy. While *Long Stay* certainly addresses serious issues like survivor's guilt and unhealthy relationships, it does so primarily through humor. Even the way the Lums die—eating tainted cheeseburgers and getting hit by speeding ice cream trucks—encourages readers to laugh despite the obvious tragedy. The chapter about Melvin's decision to enlist in World War II (his wife Esther blames Popeye for that fact) is especially full of over-the-top dialogue, complete with gun metaphors about virility and ludicrous schemes to kidnap Melvin from France.

But for all of the characters' exaggerated traits and circumstances, there's something very real at their core. Esther especially could have come off as a caricature of the overbearing mother who uses guilt as a weapon to get what she wants. (My favorite is when she convinces Bo's landlady that she raised Bo as a single mother after Melvin died in World War II, despite the fact Bo was born in 1961.) But certain things Esther does, like pushing her son's junk food away from her nutritious meal, capture a personality that definitely belongs to someone you know.

So while the parts are better than the whole, if you're looking for a short stay in a distant yet familiar land,

Chieng delivers with this novel that reads like a mix of connected vignettes. The chapter titles alone will have you hooked.

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### **Melissa says**

Really a fun read -- I loved the chapter headings (how often can you say that about a book?), and the characters -- wonderfully crazy. I particularly liked how the 50-something dad, Sonny Lum, was a knowledgeable rap music fan, how his son, Louis, is convinced the family is cursed and therefore orders his hamburgers from the fast food place without the meat patty... the grandfather's OUTRAGEOUS aphorisms... yet the same book offers a good deal of sweetness, tenderness and characters just trying to find their way in the world.

Wishing there was something else out there by this author, a terrific sense of humor!

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### **Diane says**

A wonderful novel. It is the story of a Chinese American family who are pretty much Americanized. I enjoyed the spare style, the slightly amusing tone, and the delight that the author takes in his characters. It even has a great ending.

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### **Bill says**

Cute Immigrants (2013)

Chieng, Chieh (2005). *A Long Stay In A Distant Land*. New York: Bloomsbury.

This quirky, multi-generational family story begins in southern California. The Lum family are Chinese-American and seem to be middle class. Louis works for a magazine but moves back home to tend his father after his mother is killed in a traffic accident. The father has vowed mortal revenge on the driver of the ice cream truck that killed her and Louis has to prevent that and attempt to talk his father out of it. But then his uncle Bo disappears, suddenly moving to Hong Kong to see what the Old Country is really like and in part, also to escape his suffocating grandmother. Louis goes to Hong Kong to find Bo, where additional adventures ensue.

The novel is advertised mostly as a comedy, because the reader is supposed to be charmed and amused by the zany antics of the Lum family. The humor is dry and often funny but degenerates to cute. The basis of the humor is that members of the family are not completely acculturated into America, or Hong Kong either, so they make mistakes in both cultures with charming misunderstandings and mispronunciations. In that sense the humor is condescending.

Most of the humorous situations arise when a Lum fails to appreciate subtle mainstream cultural connotation or is unable to adequately express context in the second language. It reminds me in some ways of the often goofy, loopy humor of Native Americans. Think of the joke in *Smoke Signals* about John Wayne's teeth – a total nonsequitur but funny in some indefinable, almost child-like way.

“Oatmeal and chocolate both count as pastries,” Sonny said in defense of grabbing two chocolate bars for himself. “You got three bags of oatmeal. I prefer the oatmeal, but I want you to have it...Chocolate can give you cancer. Uncle Phil told me about research that proves it...” For weeks afterward and despite Esther’s prodding, Larry would not eat chocolate for fear of cancer.

Hilarious? No. But amusing in a charming, child-like sort of way.

Or consider this example, when Bo joins the Boy Scouts.

Melvin decide Bo had to learn to start a fire before his first Scout meeting. “A basic skill he needs to know.”

“Are the other boys going to ask him to start a fire for them when they meet?” Esther asked. “Is he going to have to bring them the head of deer, too?”

...Bo’s first fire-making lesson began with Melvin placing a piece of cloth at the end of a stick. He lit the cloth with a match and then tossed it into a coffee can to snuff out the flame. Bo watched silently.

“What are you doing?” Esther asked.

“Charring the cloth,” Melvin said.

“Why?” she asked.

“It’ll catch sparks that Bo will make. It’ll burn easier after it’s charred.”

“You just lit it with a match. If you didn’t put out the fire, you would have fire.”

“Yeah,” he said.

Cute, cutesy, and mildly humorous. The scenes are deadpan like that, no nudge, nudge, wink, wink to the reader, giving the reader plenty of distance to look down his or her nose at the cute immigrants. I found it not only tedious, but slightly offensive. Also, notice how the clunky tagging of every utterance in the dialog parallels the family’s clunky use of English.

It’s a well-reviewed book by an up-and-coming young author, but I found the writing loose, the humor predictable, and pointless contrived scenarios clever for the sake of being clever. If there is a serious theme in the novel, it is the expression of what it’s like to be a person (and a family) caught half-way between two cultures. I didn’t hate the book; it just left me indifferent.

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### **Yasmin says**

I actually felt stupid at how much I realized I didn't know about the chinese american culture -- so much better for it!

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## **Megan says**

I picked this one up solely because it fit the book challenge category "set in your hometown", figuring Orange County, CA was close enough. As a result, I once again knew nothing about the book before starting to read it. Notice the theme this year?

Anyway. I was quite pleasantly surprised by this story. While I couldn't necessarily see myself in any character, I could definitely see the humanity in each of them. I loved the realistically flawed family, the one that can't admit grandma's cooking isn't good, the one with the son who must escape the overbearing mother, the one with the father drinking himself to death over the loss of his spouse, the one with secrets revealed only when they believe no one is listening, the one that isn't entirely sure whether or not to believe in the family curse.

To keep it interesting, the book jumps around in time, place, and perspective; remarkably, it's still easy to follow. Chieng does an excellent job of keeping the reader along for the ride.

I would recommend this as a light, quick read, especially if you're looking to diversify your bookshelf. It's been more than a decade since Chieng published, but I do hope there might be more in store sometime.

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## **Dufus says**

Very entertaining read of growing up Asian American in Orange County, CA, especially as told through the eyes of three generations of Lums. Accurate and poignantly funny, it's a great first novel for this emerging local writer.

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## **Mariah says**

I like this book despite the occasional odd mismatch between the serious themes of family and history and the comedic tone overall. Quick and fairly amusing read that raises worthwhile issues of family and identity without getting too dark or bogged down.

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## **V. says**

The funniest, most honest book I've ever read about being part of a crazy immigrant family. And if anyone I'm related to ever happens to find this page and this review, I swear I was referring to immigrant families in general and not anyone specifically. Especially not you, Mom.

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## **Jana Bouc says**

It was OK, but not compelling (Chinese immigrant family in Orange County, CA from son's point of view) and other more interesting audio books became available on my library download queue and since they're

only available for 2 weeks I decided to skip finishing this one to listen to the next.

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