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The Great Fortune Cookie Caper
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What I like best about Lu's Yin-Yang restaurant is that it's kosher. I know there are jokes about Jews liking Chinese food. Perish the thought someone would point out that putting shrimp in a Chinese dish doesn't make it kosher any more than a priest could anoint a steak and make it a trout in the olden days when Catholics couldn't eat meat on Friday. Treyf is treyf with or without sweet and sour sauce.

This is something that my friend Lu understands. Because this is Brooklyn and he depends on Jewish clientele, Lu had an Orthodox sign maker paint "Kosher Chinese Food" across the front window with gold letters resembling Hebrew.

Maybe that's why they call America the melting pot.

The integration doesn't stop there, because Lu employs Jess, a Mexican waiter who's learning Yiddish. It's a bit startling at first to be handed a menu by someone resembling Pancho Villa, drooping mustachios and all, who says, "So nu? Vas villst du?"

Another reason I eat at the Yin-Yang often is because Lu gives me a professional discount. I suspect he thinks that because I'm a private detective and have a license to carry a gun my mere presence might deter troublemakers like hold up men. Not that I'm going to have a shoot out with someone freaked out on meth or crack. Believe me, I don't want any innocent bystanders getting shot, myself included.

Anyway, Lu came out of the kitchen one Saturday night with a sample he said he wanted me to try. It was a pretext. He had an ulterior motive and thought he'd soften me up with a bit of his version of kugel made with Chinese noodles. It was not a success, and I cautioned him that kugel, being made with cottage cheese, is dairy and mustn't be baked in the oven when there's a beef dish in the wok on top of the stove.

What Lu really wanted was to show me something else, not failed kugel. Standing by my table, he smothered over me like a Jewish mother waiting for a compliment. His greasy apron was in my face and looking up I could see that beneath the sweat on his brow was a worried expression. "What you think?"

"About the Chinese style kugel?"

"No. Fortune cookie."

Some detective. I hadn't noticed the fortune cookie on the plate beside the noodle sample. I gave a shrug and shot him a quizzical expression.

"Open it," Lu insisted.

I cracked it open and removed the slip of paper inside.

It wasn't your usual fortune. Your usual fortune says something cryptic, like "A good friend may give bad advice." In this case the fortune said, "Good for one free entrée of same or lesser value with purchase at Juarez Central."

I happen to know that Juarez Central is a new joint across the street. How could I miss? Besides playing annoying south of the border music on the loud speakers the manager of the Mexican restaurant has an exhaust fan that blows the pungent smell of salsa out onto the sidewalk. It's powerful enough for walkers of dogs with delicate noses to turn back and cross the street.

"How did an ad for Juarez Central get into your fortune cookie?" I asked.

"You're the detective. Find out."

"You hiring me?"

"Free Sunday dinners for a month and bring your mother." Lu knows that my mother doesn't believe his restaurant is bona fide kosher. She thinks it got a bent blessing from a rabbi whose palm has been greased. Or maybe Lu does know and isn't risking much.

"Can I bring my girl friend instead?"

A reluctant shrug. How can he refuse?

To business. I study the fortune cookie. The crunch is OK, so it's not stale but I detect a distinct flavor I can't place at first. I check out the printing on the slip of paper, pretend I'm Sherlock Holmes and can tell by the feel of the paper stock that it came from a mill in Wisconsin and was printed on an offset press by a hunchback from France. Actually, I'm almost that good. "This was printed on cheap twenty pound generic computer printer paper, not the brightest. See?" I compare it with my business card which is white-white. "This is no better than 80 brightness, an off-white." I hold it up to the glow of the forty-watt bulb in the fixture that hangs low over the table-- plenty of atmosphere, but not much light. "No watermark either. You can buy this stuff anyplace." I chew the last of the cookie and identify the taste. Jalapino. Whoever heard of a jalapino fortune cookie? "You got more of these?"

"All the same," Lu says, pained. "I can't open first to inspect. Customers laugh. I lose business. You gotta help, Mo."

Lu knows my name is Moishe, but he's into one syllable names and can't get his mouth around that many letters at one time, so in his joint he's Lu and I'm Mo, and his Yiddish-speaking immigrant waiter is Jess, Jesus not being very appropriate for a Kosher Chinese restaurant.

"I'll do what I can," I say and take a sack of the cookies with me. Tracking down illicit cookie fortunes is a change of pace from tailing an errant husband to catch him on film in some motel with a broad.

First: the usual source of Lu's fortune cookies. It's a factory about ten blocks south, easily located by the distinct fortune fragrance. The owner, Rudolf Reinhart, turns out to be a Reform German Jew who survived the Holocaust in Shanghai. He

gives my paper take-out sack of fortune cookies a quizzical look, but doesn't ask. Reinhart shows me the spotless machine that cuts the cookie dough and deftly folds in a single slip of paper. And I thought those things were made in some sweatshop by smuggled, immigrant labor. Clearly I've a lot to learn about the cookie business.

I finally resolve his curiosity and hand him one of the cookies from my paper sack. "Try one," I suggest.

Reinhart cracks it open and takes a nibble like one of those wine tasters who swish a mouthful of the finest around in their mouths and then spit it out. He's a connoisseur but has never seen the Juarez Central fortunes and doesn't like the taste. "Counterfeit," he says, spitting out the residue. "We don't make these."

"You got an unscrupulous competitor?"

Reinhart shrugs.

"Who usually delivers the cookies to the Yin-Yang?"

"Mr. Lu has someone pick them up or he comes himself. But he didn't get these from us."

Somewhere along the line the product was switched, but by whom?

Before going back to the Yin-Yang to find out who picked up the batch of counterfeit cookies, I decide to drop in at Juarez Central and try to cash in on one of the fortunes.

The Juarez Central Mexican place more than fulfills the promise of the smell broadcast onto the street. This joint makes any previous ideas of ethnic look like a pale imitation. Huge sombreros decorate the walls. The muzak is south of the border. The waitress wears a flouncy skirt and off the shoulder blouse that, when she bends over to hand me a menu, threatens to dump the contents on my map of Mexico paper place mat.

The authenticity ends there, because she has a Brooklyn accent that suggests she's never been as far west as Manhattan. She puts down a glass of ice water. "What'll you have?"

I show her the two-for-one-deal fortune. "What can I get with this?" I remind myself that this is work, no flirty remarks.

"Two of anything," she says.

"You get many customers with these?"

"A few."

"Know where they come from?"

She shakes her head and adjusts the top of the blouse, which had slipped an inch closer to illegal.

"They're in counterfeit cookies that showed up at the Yin-Yang across the street."

"The kosher Chinese place?"

"Yes." She obviously doesn't know anything. "Could I talk to the manager?"

She hesitates. "You want to order something?"

"In a minute." Truth be told, I'm not much for Mexican food. "You're doing a wonderful job, Miss, but regarding this advertising gimmick, I'd like to talk to your boss."

After ten minutes he shows up. His name is Mr. Sanchez. Unlike Lu, who is also cook, the owner of Juarez Central wears a suit. It's a polyester blend off the rack, two button, single breasted, but with a tie. Sanchez isn't one of those guys who wear a jacket over a T-shirt or a turtleneck. At least, unlike Reinhart at the cookie factory, Mr. Sanchez is authentic. He looks vaguely familiar, but just as to some people all Chinese look alike, I have similar trouble with Mexicans. Many Mexicans wear similar facial hair, so if it's the mustache you're using as a distinguishing mark, forget it. The owner of Juarez Central has a droopy mustache that reminds me of Jess, Lu's Yiddish speaking waiter.

I smell a clue. Maybe they're relatives. It helps to have someone on the inside.

I hold up the cookie fortune and show it to Mr. Sanchez. "Can you tell me where I might get some of these printed up?"

Sanchez is suspicious. "Are you in the restaurant business?"

"No. I'm a detective." I hand him my business card. "Moishe Niebieski. I thought maybe I could drum up some business by planting my advertising in fortune cookies."

Sanchez raises an eyebrow. "You offering to locate two missing persons for the price of one?"

I've underestimated Sanchez. Maybe, besides being Mexican, he's Jewish. "This fortune came out of a cookie at Lu's Kosher Chinese across the street. Maybe you know how it got there?"

Sanchez feigns cluelessness and shakes his head. Not that he doesn't know. He's not ready to talk.

"Would you by any chance be trying to put Lu out of business?"

It's time I stood up. Since I'm six inches taller than Mr. Sanchez, I need the intimidation factor. "Let me give you some advice, Mr. Sanchez. Unless you can come up with kosher Mexican food, forget about it. Eating Chinese is a Jewish thing and this is Brooklyn, more Jewish than Tel Aviv. A fake cookie fortune isn't going to give you the edge."

Confession time. Sanchez sits down at my table and suggests I do the same. "Not my idea," he admits. "It's Jesus."

"Oh? Jesus made you do it?"

"Not that Jesus," Sanchez says. "My nephew Jesus. It was his idea to switch cookies. He wants to get even for a trick Lu's been playing on him."

"What's that?" I take a sip of ice water.

"Jesus found out that Mr. Lu hasn't been giving him English lessons. Lu's been teaching him Yiddish and telling him it's English."

I almost spill my glass of water. And I thought that was just an old joke. Recovering, I make a suggestion. "Well, Mr. Sanchez, since this is Brooklyn, why don't you hire Jess as a Yiddish-

speaking Mexican waiter? It won't make your food kosher, but in this neighborhood it will be a giant step forward."

I hadn't found out where Jess a.k.a. Jesus found a maker of jalapino flavored fortune cookies, but I had solved the mystery. Nor had I solved Lu's problem for having deceived Jess.

I crossed the street, leaving behind the south of the border music and smell of salsa. I conferred with Lu. If he puts it to Jess in the right way he'll see that in this neighborhood Yiddish is more important as a second language than English. Not only that, but having a Yiddish-speaking waiter in a kosher Chinese restaurant is enough of a word of mouth drawing card to justify a raise in Jess's pay. That should satisfy everyone.

"You solved that pretty quick," Lu said.

"I'm a professional." I can see he's already trying to bargain me down from the agreed fee. "Don't forget: you agreed on a month of Sunday dinners, and I bring my girl friend."

Lu sighs.

"And one other thing," I caution him. "Make sure next time you need fortune cookies, pick them up at Mr. Reinhart's factory yourself. That way nobody's going to pull a switcheroo."

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About Harley L. Sachs:

Though born in Chicago and raised in Indiana, Harley L. Sachs considers himself an international, having lived in Germany, Sweden, Scotland, and Denmark. He earned a degree in English at Indiana University, then served in the US Army in Germany. After getting his Master's degree at I.U. he returned to Europe and worked under cover for several years. He met and married Ulla Hintz in Stockholm, Sweden and they spent a year's honeymoon in a Scottish castle. Returning to the USA, Sachs taught English briefly at Southern Illinois University then moved to Michigan Technological University in the Upper Peninsula where he and his wife raised three daughters. He now divides the year between Michigan and Portland, Oregon.

Harley L. Sachs is the author of many novels, short stories, magazine articles and newspaper columns. His short stories have been broadcast on the BBC World Service short wave and on Oregon Public Radio's Golden Hours. His awards for writing are too numerous to list. He has over 900 publications.

His mysteries are *Ben Zakkai's Coffin*, *Conspiracy!*, *The Mystery Club Solves a Murder*, *The Mystery Club and the Dead Doctor*, *The Mystery Club and the Hidden Witness*, *The Gold Chromosome*, and *Scratch--out!* Collections of his short fiction are *A Troll for Christmas and Other Stories*, *Threads of the Covenant: The Jews of Red Jacket*, *Scandinavian Stories*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, and *Irma Quarterdeck Reports!* *The Search for Jesse Bram* is his science fiction. *Never Trust a Talking Horse* is his distopian novel.