



The Jazz Age. Two musician brothers experience love and loss.

Mr. Chen's Sweet and Sour

by Chuck Harris

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MR. CHEN'S
SWEET
AND SOUR
CHUCK HARRIS

Mr. Chen's Sweet and Sour

a novel by

Chuck Harris

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This is a work of fiction. Although based on actual occurrences it is not an entirely factual depiction of them. Many of the characters are real, and events the author has included happened in the places, times and manner he describes. He created others to fill in gaps in the known story and to provide the reader with Morey and Charley's story as he understood it.

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Chapter 1: Traveling to Charley

Quickening my pace I rushed through the Vanderbilt Square Station's massive steel doors that warm July morning. I was thinking of Charley. It had been months since I'd seen him. My shaggy haired and driven kid brother had left Syracuse for New York hoping to find work as a musician. And he had found it -- getting paying jobs as a banjo player -- and I was anxious to hear and see first-hand what I had only gleaned, reading between the lines of his infrequent letters.

I was looking up at the departure board when I heard a familiar voice.

"Morey," Frances panted, her face flushed from running across the lobby. A few strands of hair clung to her forehead. "I'm glad you're still here."

"My train doesn't leave for a while. What's up, Sis?"

"I made you lunch. Why spend money for that overpriced train food."

"Fabulous. Thanks a million."

"And I added a strudel. To share with Charley."

"Even better."

I found a window seat in the third car on the 11 a.m. train. The spot next to me would remain empty the whole way, giving me a few hours of privacy and a chance to prepare for the weekend. The train lurched

then gained momentum, settling onto a rhythmical sway. I lifted my new leather satchel, black with accordion pleats, opened the clasp and removed the lunch Frances had made. Laying the paper bag on the neighboring seat I started searching through it. I took out the strudel. Thoroughly wrapped (where does Frances find all that brown paper?) its fresh baked aroma escaped, reminding me of October apple picking in Genesee Orchards.

I pulled out a few sheets of Charley's compositions I'd plucked from the pile he'd left in the room on Standard Street we'd shared for eight years. "You can have them, Morey," he had said. "When I get to New York I want to start fresh -- no more of that music from the boonies for the big city crowd."

The tune on top was called Hooterville Stomp. I was struck by the attention he had given even to the title's design: not simple, unadorned, script but highly embellished letters. It was as if he wanted to convey not just the words, but their meaning. There were dashes everywhere -- before, after, above and below the title. And, the way he signed it, with his full name: *Composed by Charles Saul Harris*. I wondered why he included his middle name, not just the initial 'S'. After all, he had hated the name 'Saul'. I remembered him as a ten-year old, writing lists of alternate names that began with an S -- Steven, Stanley, Stuart, Scott, Sam -- searching for one more to his liking. As a sixteen year old aspiring songwriter maybe including Saul made sense. Perhaps he had finally grown to like that middle name, or at least come to accept it.

As I studied the rest of the page, it became clear that the two instruments included, violin and piano, were not equally thought out. The violin part that carried the melody was drawn in bold strokes. The piano part, in contrast, was sketchier, as if only there to showcase the violin. I played the piece in my head. While it seemed vaguely familiar, it had an original flair -- fast tempo, clever chord changes, and quick transitions from low to high notes. It would take some fancy fiddling to play this one, I thought. Although I enjoyed creating tunes and had written some in the past, this one was beyond my writing ability.

I spent the rest of the trip studying the other compositions: Salt City Stomp; Bluein in Red; Bassett's Blues; Strings a Hoppin. I played them one by one in my head and was struck by how different they were. Some were written in a quick, almost frenetic tempo that would make even a casual listener take notice. Others were more like ballads; their long lyrical lines would challenge the performer to sustain notes, many of which would sound foreign to a listener attuned to more conventional sounds.

While they were roughly drawn and in need of some serious editing, the raw talent they reflected was striking. Charley was self-taught. Though he had taken a few piano lessons from Mrs. Rogers, our neighbor, he'd never studied violin or taken a composition class. As a fellow musician who had taken many lessons, I was envious. But as an older brother I was proud.

"Next stop, Grand Central," the conductor announced as he moved briskly down the aisle. I

packed up the satchel, pulled the overnight bag from above my seat and joined the line leaving the car. We were salmon swimming upstream, struggling up the stairs to the main hall. Unfamiliar sounds hit me before I could even see the massive lobby. The hushed sounds of the Vanderbilt Square Station back home were replaced by the cacophonous noises of Grand Central. My New York City weekend had begun.

The sounds grew louder as I entered the great hall. The din had been anticipated, but now I challenged myself to tease out its sources. Focusing on the conversations around me I found I could identify most words and phrases, particularly the ones in English and Yiddish. Others eluded me. To my left I heard something that sounded like Chinese. From behind me a phrase in a Slavic tongue. Over all of them the loudspeakers boomed garbled announcements of arriving and departing trains.

Not far from the entrance I noticed a young couple standing still, looking up. They had dropped their bags and were staring at the ceiling, pointing and talking. I looked up and caught my breath. The enormous domed light teal ceiling, resting on two rows of massive columns, was adorned with dozens of gold stars that formed constellations. After a bit I identified Orion and began counting its stars. And to the east I saw the outline of the Big Dipper. How many travelers, I wondered, had walked through this hall and not looked up, missing this unexpected delight.

Then there were the smells. Grand Central was awash in layered, pungent aromas -- part man, part man

made. The tang of sweat was in the air, as hundreds gathered here on a warm summer day at the end of their work week. Some were probably waiting for the train that would take them away for a few days of respite from the crush of the city -- to Atlantic City or the Jersey shore. Others were anticipating trains bringing in out-of-town visitors -- parents, aunts, uncles, buddies, and sweethearts.

Walking across the great hall toward the subway station, I passed a string of restaurants tucked into the station's southern wall. The aromas were more enticing -- roasting chickens, freshly baking bread, frying onions and garlic, and the waft of spices, many of which were new to me. I thought of Frances's strudel tucked away in my bag, my mouth watering as I conjured up the taste of its apple and raisin filling nestled in a flaky pastry. Moments later, I took in scents from the flower stalls -- lilacs, lilies, gardenias. And roses, my late mother's favorite.

I descended the stairs to the 42nd Street subway station, dropped coins in the pay slot, and walked to the Uptown platform. The crowd was thinner now. Standing near the back, I again noticed the people around me, particularly the young women. These were not the well-nourished Upstate girls I was used to with their casual cotton outfits and simple hairdos, but slim, high-styled New Yorkers, more carefully put together. Wearing lipstick and rouge they sported high heels and figure-hugging outfits, complemented with hats, gloves and stockings, many with black seams along the back showcasing their shapely legs. While I was eager to see

Charley, I was having a grand time just waiting for my train.

Twenty minutes later I was at the rooming house at 46 West 73rd Street. I climbed to the fourth floor and knocked on the door of the apartment Charley shared with two musician pals. I almost didn't recognize the man who answered. The clothing indifferent, shaggy-haired lad who'd left Syracuse was gone. From his neatly trimmed, slick backed hair to his highly polished two-toned shoes, this new Charley was every inch an impeccably groomed young man. And I was struck by the outfit's fine fabric, wondering how he could afford it on an itinerant musician's pay.

But I said nothing.

In truth, he had always been the better looking brother. I had inherited our father's coarse features and mother's small frame. Charley had inherited Dad's height and been blessed with Mom's fine facial features, bright green eyes and jet black hair. His just-stepped-out-of-a-bandbox outfit and my rumpled togs only exaggerated these differences. A casual observer might have pegged him as a salesman or a banker and me as a country boy from Upstate visiting the big city.

"Welcome to my humble abode, brother," Charley said. "How was your trip?"

"Very nice. Not too crowded," I replied. "I had room to spread out."

From the back of the apartment a tall, thin man emerged.

“This is one of my roommates, Ross Mercer. He plays piano with our group. Ross, this is my big brother, Morey.”

We shook hands; his grip was firm and his hands large. I imagined those long fingers reaching an octave or more on the keyboard.

It was already past 7:00, late for dinner Upstate but early for the City, as we began to plan for dinner. Charley led us to a Chinese restaurant a few blocks from the apartment.

The restaurant's sign read, MR. CHEN'S SWEET AND SOUR. An odd name for an establishment, I thought. Maybe it referred to the proprietor's mood swings.

The restaurant's narrow front was misleading; once we entered I realized that it had a long, thin footprint, like a 12B shoe. The hostess greeted us, handed out menus, and ushered us to a table near the back.

A few minutes later a slim, well dressed, middle-aged Chinese man glided up to our table, greeting Charley warmly:

“Good evening, Mr. Harris. How is music business?”

“Going great, Mr. Chen. You remember my friend, Ross. And this is my brother, Morey. He's in for the weekend from Upstate.”

“Special occasion, then,” he responded. “Not order from menu; I bring you best dishes.” I took it that Mr. Chen was in one of his “sweet” moods.

I looked around and noticed a large number of Asian diners, reminding me of our mother's advice about picking restaurants. "Listen to the customers," she would say: "They should be speaking Sicilian in an Italian restaurant, Yiddish in a delicatessen, and an Oriental tongue in a Chinese restaurant. And never eat in hotels; they can serve lousy food and still survive."

Soon, Charley's other roommate, Lou Chambers, appeared and Charley introduced us. He was shorter than Ross, but blessed with a leading man's looks. He had just finished an audition as a trumpeter for the Biltmore Hotel Orchestra.

We began talking about music, the interest we all shared. As Charley and Ross talked, I realized that they had worked on quite a number of jobs together in Manhattan, other boroughs and even on Long Island. Charley had mentioned only a handful of them to me since leaving Syracuse; now I wondered what other parts of his life he hadn't shared.

They traded stories of their gigs and assessed the musical abilities (or lack thereof) of bandmates. They were serious about their work -- cared about their performance, the venues, and the audiences. I had never heard of most of the players and song titles they bandied about. As their conversation became more intense, Lou and I were swept to the side. I considered starting a separate conversation with Lou. But then, a petite, Madonna-faced waitress brought steaming bowls of soup to our table. Ross and Charley took little notice.

I concentrated on the first course, wonton soup, one of the restaurant's signature dishes. I had ordered it

many times at Syracuse's Sampan Café on Clinton Street, but this version was a revelation. The stock was rich and full bodied, the wontons were plumper and seemed homemade, and there were tiny shrimp floating in the broth. I took my first spoonful and was hooked, thinking that I needed to return to this restaurant, sooner rather than later.

Charley and Ross began to focus on their meal, giving Lou, who had only recently moved to the city, a chance to talk. He shared a story about a gig in Chicago he had played that was reviewed the next day in the Tribune. Laughing, he said the critic had written: "Upon leaving the hall, it was a relief to hear the clanging of street car bells, the rattle of elevated trains, and the blowing of automobile horns after hearing this orchestra play their abominable jazz."

The conversation moved on to our social lives. Lou was determined to go on about a girl he had recently started dating. He described Annie as the most beautiful creature he had encountered since coming to New York. She was a band singer whom he had met on a job and begun pursuing the same night. I gathered that they were now an item, spending every available minute together. Charley and I shared some eye-rolling moments, but were too polite to interrupt his monologue.

Later I learned that "Annie" was Annette Hanshaw and, when I met her in person, I realized that he hadn't exaggerated. Not conventionally pretty, she was a tall, green-eyed, auburn haired young woman with an aristocratic air. After they broke up she had a rather

successful run as a band singer. Her relaxed, soulful singing style complemented the larger bands she worked with. She recorded with both Pathe and Columbia, earning residuals that went on for years, even after she married and left the business.

Mr. Chen reappeared and brought out the remaining courses, announcing each with the kind of flourish a proud father might use to introduce his offspring: stir fried chicken; General Tso's pork; and whole fish with garlic sauce.

When the bill appeared, I grabbed for it immediately. After all, I reasoned, I was about to have two nights of free lodging, and I was flush from a monthly bonus from the Hotel Syracuse. Waiting for my change, I broke open my fortune cookie. It read: "Unexpected events await you."

No one objected to my generosity nor did any of my companions seem surprised by it. Returning to the apartment, I unwrapped our sister Frances's homemade strudel, hoping that someone might have enough of an appetite left to try some. Placing it on a plate I noticed an envelope underneath the pastry with Charley's name on it. Handing it to Charley I recognized Frances's handwriting. He accepted it without a comment and slipped it into his breast pocket.