

# Mistaken Identities

*Or “No, I’m not Sandra Oh.”*

**Pang-Mei N. Chang**

**The waitress at Atticus Bookstore in downtown New Haven** looks at me and says, “You look familiar.”

I smile.

Although 100 percent racially Chinese, I’m accustomed to being mistaken for others. You might say that to people in the United States, all Asians look alike, but frankly, I’ve been mistaken for a native even in every Asian country that I’ve ever travelled to: South Korea, Japan, China, Thailand, Burma, Tibet, Siberia. Once on the New York subway, when I was tan, a young Peruvian man began speaking to me in rapid Spanish. Other times, I’ve been asked if I’m Cherokee.

In the past few years, however, my latest and most regular misidentification has been for the Korean-Canadian actress, Sandra Oh, who was seen this past summer as the stern schoolteacher in the film adaptation of Beverly Cleary’s *Ramona and Beezus*, but is best known for playing Christina Yang, a hardcore, blunt-speaking surgeon on the hit ABC TV show *Grey’s Anatomy*. Sandra Oh also played the motorcycle-riding single mother who falls for a womanizer in *Sideways*, and the pregnant lesbian who shares a villa with Diane Lane in *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

I’ve had people follow me for blocks, and approach me for my autograph. I’m used to sidelong glances in elevators and subways and receptionists excitedly reaching for their telephone the minute I sit down.

On the face of it, this can be quite flattering. But when you return to your hometown, New Haven, after nearly twenty years away—after living in cities as varied as New York, Boston, Moscow, and San Francisco—after all that, you just want to be known as you. You, the girl who used to spin in the bar stools at Clark’s Dairy until the owner told you with his heavy Greek accent to stop. You, whose father taught you never to ask for ketchup on your burger at Louis

Lunch, just “a medium rare with all the works.” You, who used to hike up East Rock with your dog and imagine that every other city in the world looked like this: Gothic spires, billowing trees, and three churches on a green.

I left New Haven as an eighteen-year-old and came back as a thirty-five-year-old, pregnant with my first child. My husband, a Russian-speaking American who’d done well as an investment banker in Moscow after the Wall fell, stayed behind in Russia, where we’d lived for nearly six years. I wanted to live with my parents while I had the baby. Then I was going to think about whether I wanted to return to Moscow to raise the child.

I moved back into the room that I’d grown up in. Though things were pretty much the same, I felt the changes more keenly. The big oak tree outside my window had been felled in a storm. Two of my schools—the Hamden New Haven Cooperative Education Center by Lake Whitney and Sleeping Giant Junior High School—had been turned into old-age homes. The office of Dr. Bornstein, my pediatrician, had once occupied a charming Victorian house on Washington Avenue in North Haven. It was now a funeral parlor.

And yet another part of me felt that no time had passed at all. When I took my daily walk up and down the single block of my parents’ road, I imagined the neighbors looking out the window and saying, *isn’t that the Chang girl? Has she come back pregnant? Where’s her husband?* At the Glenwood Drive-In, I embarrassed myself asking the familiar-looking young waiter if we’d gone to school together. He looked at me as if I was crazy, and I realized that even though he was still in high school, I wasn’t. Then, a few months after I had my baby, a woman came running up to me saying, “Sunny? Sunny? Is that you? You look great!” Sunny is my mother, who taught in the New Haven school system for thirty-four years. She was sixty-two years old when I got mistaken for her. Memory plays funny tricks, freezes people at all ages.

As a writer, I’ve never dreamed of being recognized by my face. Only once in my life have I been spotted out of the blue: I was sitting

with my family in a hot sticky airport in Mexico waiting for an early morning flight, and a woman came up to me and said, I recognize you from your book jacket. I felt instantly naked and exposed. But I honestly never imagined that I would be recognized for someone else’s face.

#### **Psychologists say that there are four aspects of the self:**

subconscious, conscious, secret, and blind.

Newly pregnant, I had a dream one night about a small house by a lake. When I woke up, I said to my husband, “We need to move to New Haven, and live in a little house by Lake Whitney.” That is how it is with me and New Haven. My conscious self, the part of me known to myself and known to others (my husband) was a good wife who wanted to stay alongside her husband in Moscow. But my subconscious self (the part of me unknown to myself and unknown to others) wanted to return to New Haven and raise our child there. I was sick of living in Moscow, of being taken for Siberian, Uzbeki, Kyrgyz, or Mongolian. I was sick of pulling on Versace to go to the supermarket, tired of the whole unreality of it all—the maid three times a week, the driver to fetch groceries and run errands. I wanted my kids to learn to pick up their own toys, rake leaves, and shovel snow from the driveway themselves. I wanted them to be able to wear L.L. Bean flannel shirts until there were holes in them, inherit twelve-year-old BMWs when they got their licenses. I wanted them to live a New England life like I had, not a wealthy expat one. I wanted them to have a sense of place, a sense of real home.

The part of self that is unknown to you but known to others is the blind self. And that is how it is with Sandra Oh and me. People see in me part of her that I don’t even recognize in myself: the turned-down mouth, the two-dimensional, almost Modigliani face. This is not your usual Zen beauty—a Gong Li or Zhang Ziyi—who moves with grace through exotic air. This is a kickass babe who crosses her legs, cusses, and speaks her mind, however roughly and abruptly. Sometimes, depending on her role, I have trouble watching

her on screen. I know that I look like her (although I don't feel like I do), and it's almost as if my secret self is up there. When she beat the shit out of Jack, her weekend lover, with her motorcycle helmet in *Sideways*, did I know that my husband and I were going to be divorced within five years?

The first time I got mistaken for Sandra Oh was in 2000, on a flight from Park City, Utah, where I'd been attending the Sundance Film Festival with screenwriter friends. As I got on the airplane, the flight attendant beamed at me and said to me, "Congratulations."

I had no idea at the time that she was mistaking me for the actress from the then-HBO series, *Arli\$\$.* Instead, I just smiled politely and thanked her. I figured she was just as happy as I was with my last-minute upgrade into business class. Only after she had given me a full bottle of champagne, and the guy next to me showed me a picture of Sandra Oh from *USA Today* did I get it. I let my seatmate know who I really was and he and I drank that whole bottle, laughing at our secret.

I didn't bother disabusing the flight attendant then because it seemed so unimportant. But now, I tell people, especially people in New Haven, that no, I'm not Sandra Oh. What is the point of a hometown if no one knows you? If people are more familiar with your doppelganger on TV than you?

Scarlett O'Hara has Tara. I have New Haven, the place I grew up, the place I return to when I have no place else to go, the place I come back to in order to feel grounded. Here, I wish to be known just as me—with all my history—and to be accepted as calmly as a tree with rings of age, gnarled branches and scarred trunk. So if you see me in New Haven, feel free to tell me I look familiar to you. But tell me because you saw me at the Neighborhood Music School fundraiser, or having an Absolut Greyhound at the Anchor. Please don't tell me it's because of Sandra Oh.