

PODCAST: “Dear Houston — Love, Asian America”

TITLE: *When Haru Met Saavi...*

Subtitle: *Love Stories from the Houston Asian American Archive*

Summary: In the spirit of the season for love, the Houston Asian American Archive has selected three love stories from our archive to premiere on Valentine’s Day. These stories from past to present consist of ones crossing the ocean, crossing generations, and crossing gender norms. We hope this episode will bring you some laughter, some nostalgia, and... some love from Asian America.

Credit:

This podcast is directed and produced by Ann Shi, written by Tyler Stoddard Smith, and audio-edited by Matthew Lai (Senior, NYU). Assisted by Gordan Liu (Junior, Rice).

Music contributed by:

- Misha, "We're Gonna Have it Out (Modern Love)"
 - Kevin Trinidad, "The Ghost in the Window"
 - Jimmy Lin, "Nai-Chung Kuan & Joel Hoffman: Chinese Orchestral Works"
 - Naomee Chen, "詩經 · 關雎"
-

Transcript:

Sponsor Message

Program Manager (Anne Chao):

The Houston Asian American Archive collects individual oral histories, making these stories accessible in the forms of recordings and transcripts. Our heritage speaking for itself. Discover how your heritage fits into the story of Houston at haaa.rice.edu.

Intro

Host: Dear Houston:

Happy Valentine’s Day and welcome to this very special love-themed podcast, “*When Haru Meets Saavi — Love Stories from the Houston Asian American Archive*”. I’m your host for today, Ann Shi, and we’re

going to hear stories from members of the Asian-American community about their experiences with and feelings about love.

Love is, of course, a broad subject and one open to all kinds of interpretations. That's why we've tried to incorporate stories old and new, that resonate across time, space, and culture, to explore the quantum entanglements— or are they just hormones? — that can sometimes conjure up butterflies in our stomachs through a mere glance from across a crowded room. We'll hear stories that speak to both unorthodox and traditional notions of love; stories of forbidden love, love at first sight, and love preordained. We'll ask the question: Can we, as Asian Americans, be in love as who we are? And more broadly, can *any of us* be in love as who we are? But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's sit back and listen to love tell its own story.

STORY #1: Beck Hong Gee

Love at first sight. It's our most romantic notion, and one that transcends geography, culture, and for the most part, common sense! Who hasn't been instantly enamored by a total stranger, only to discover we've fallen in love with an ideal, or even a mannequin at Niemann-Marcus? I have to confess that is only partially a joke.

But in some cases, 'love at first sight' lives up to its lofty name, and even sustains itself, sometimes against incredible odds. Our first love story features **Beck Gee**, who was born in a small village in China in 1922.

Beck Gee:

Okay let's see now, I arrived— I arrived in San Francisco after about 23 days on the ship coming from Hong Kong to San Francisco. I spent about 30 days on Angel Island alone at the age of nine until I had passed all the questioning and was allowed to come on to the mainland. And I stayed in San Francisco for a few weeks, and I ended up joining my grandparents in Algiers, Louisiana, which is across the s—uh, river from New Orleans. And I start school there, and a couple of years later in 1954 I moved Mississippi where I—my schooling stopped because Mississippi had a law that prohibit Chinese children from going to school—to a white public school. And I work from the age of 13 until I was 20 years old, when I got drafted into World War II.

Host:

Mr. Gee was drafted into the U.S. Army as a photographer. He trained for a year in the States before arriving in England in 1943, where he was stationed for ten months. This was followed by a year stationed in France, and finally, four months in Germany. Despite bearing witness to and documenting the horror of war, Beck Gee, who sadly passed away in June of 2020, always maintained that one scene stood out among them all.

Beck Gee: *I arrive in England in November of 1943, and on New Year's Day I was stationed in Manchester, England. And on New Year's Day, another Chinese soldier and I decided that New Year's Day would be a good day to try and find a good Chinese restaurant and have a good meal. So Liverpool was one hours bus ride away, so he and I got on a bus and went to Liverpool and we asked the bus driver to drop us off as close to Chinatown as possible, and he dropped us right in Chinatown.*

We went to—the first restaurant it was crowded, it didn't have room for us, went to another restaurant same thing; went to a third restaurant, packed, we start walking and the waiter came running after us, said "we got two people leaving!" So, we went back and sat at a little table for two and it so happened that I sat facing a large round table with six or seven people and when I look up there was a young girl, we were staring at each other and as I was eating and she was eating we looked up, we keep stare at each other. So finally, she went to the front door for something, so I told my friend, I said, "I'll be right back." So, I walk over to the front door and introduce myself. And got out my little black book. Anyway I ask her if we could get—get to know each other, or whatever I said, I don't know what I said. Anyway, she said you come back and meet my mother and see what she said. That was her mother at the table. So she said to her mother, and actually asked me what my name was, and I couldn't tell her my real name because we had been advised not to get involved with the local people, so I didn't know what to do, so I said well just call me Johnny—Johnny Doughboy.

Host: The girl's name was Joyce, a half Chinese, half Caucasian British girl. her mother was not amused that her daughter had brought an American G.I. to the table, much less one named "Johnny Doughboy."

Beck Gee: *But then she softened, she said, "You can go home meet her father and then ask him." And so, I said, "Well, I've got nothing to lose!" So okay so I told— I told my friend I said, "I'll see you back at camp." So, I followed them home, I met the father and by that time... oh uh, the time had passed it was evening time, dinner time, they were having dinner, so they invited me to stay for dinner. And after that*

it was— the busses stopped running because it was blackout time, war time, the busses quit running when they had their lights because nobody—no cars could run their lights, so I had to—ended up spending the night at the English Red Cross type of, you know, it's for soldiers. So, I spent the night there. And the next morning I found my way back to their house, and I—asked if I could come back again. So, I keep going back and July, that summer...

We were supposed to get married the same week as D-Day but I didn't know that D-Day was gonna happen on June 6th. We were scheduled to get married on June 10th 'cause nobody was able to leave the base because we were invading France. So, we postponed our wedding to July 29th so we got married and we met—we got married and we stayed married until she died at age 79.

Host:

From a romantic story of love at first sight, we're going to pivot in another direction to a love story some might consider less romantic, but certainly no less enduring than that of Beck and Joyce Gee.

STORY #2: THE SALHOTRAS

Poonam and Atul Salhotra met each other through their parents in an arranged marriage. Their first two meetings were with both their families, and the third time on their wedding day. They have been married for over 30 years.

As first generation Asian-Americans, and from traditional families who believed in arranged marriage, both Mr. and Ms. Salhotra found the open way of dating and courtship a little daunting in the context of their upbringing.

Poonam Salhotra: *I made a conscious decision to go this route. So it was, you know, dating is no, clearly very common, is easily available. But I did have, I did have reservations about it, because in the Indian culture, dating, especially for women, dating was considered to be very, very negative thing that if you were dating that, you know, perhaps your morals were not so, not so high. And, you know, and of course, I was reminded of that, too, by my parents that if you do end up doing a lot of dating, then— then you should probably plan to marry that way and not try to marry the arranged system way, because, you know, it just doesn't work that way, especially, especially where women are concerned. Now, it is, it was a little bit different for men, men versus women.*

Atul Salhotra: *Yeah, so I guess the family structure is very important. And almost it was almost, I grew up with the idea that it's the parents' prerogative to help the children find their spouses. And since the parents know the children very well, I always thought they could probably come up with a better decision than perhaps I could on my own. And also, there weren't too many opportunities for dating, and so forth. So I think as long as the children have the veto power, and they are not forced into a situation; I think, in parents doing the homework, before introducing potential eligible partners to their children, I think is a very good idea. And I think it works in any society, as long as there is not the pressure that they have to marry the person that the parents select. And we certainly didn't have that pressure. And so, to a large extent, it was our choices.*

Poonam Salhotra: *Well, I would say it was our mother's choices.*

Host: The Salhotras maintain that while they could have ultimately vetoed their families' decision, there was certainly no "love at first sight."

Poonam Salhotra: *I wanted a tall guy, so I happen to be quite tall for an Indian woman, I'm like, 5'6. And, you know, I always thought I would marry somebody who's like six feet tall, that's what I used to dream about. And but, you know, that was kind of that was not really a deep reason to not marry someone.*

Atul Salhotra: *Well, obviously, we each got a passing grade test. I guess that's one way of putting it.*

Poonam Salhotra: *My parents really liked him, and a lot of it is family. So, our families are very, I would say, very similar, from the same part of the country, similar values and ethics. And so, I think that was super important.*

Host: The Salhotras have two children, one of whom, their son, Raj Salhotra, founder and executive director of Momentum Education in Houston, has a decidedly different take on love. He reflects on how his upbringing first influenced his own perspectives on love, dating, and marriage

Raj Salhotra: *I think, in terms of the romantic or marriage sense, I think there was I don't know if this quote was said— sort of how frequently but it certainly came up— as this notion of love will grow over*

time, after, you know, an arranged marriage perhaps happens. And so that, that was sort of the extent I'm thinking in elementary, middle, you know, kind of high school even, that was sort of the extent to which the conversation revolved around love, with regard to the marriage sense.

Host: Over the years, Raj has found it challenging to reconcile his parent's views with his own. It's a debate that continues to this day.

Raj Salhotra: *I think that they're, they come at it from the perspective of what they have seen. And they have seen in their own situation, you know, an arranged marriage, where the focus was on aligning the family background, most importantly, kind of worked. And they see their friends from a similar generation, both back home in India, and here, who have had a similar situation, and it has, "worked". And then I think there's a contrast with the, "American way" of doing things where someone find someone who they are compatible with directly. And they see, well, 50%— or whatever the number is— of American marriages end up in divorce. And so the conclusion is, well, the family background way, is superior. And don't worry about the kind of love piece because that will come with time.*

That kind of comparison of "American way" versus "Indian way", it misses is that you want to consider both stabilities, of course, and compatibility, but also kind of a joy and happiness. And I think the "Indian way", kind of index is more for stability and alignment of important characteristics but doesn't index as much for joy or happiness; whereas perhaps the, you know, "Western way", index is a bit more for that at the risk of potentially not— not focusing so much on, on the compatibility of some of the other aspects.

Host: Can love be stable? *Should* it be? The fact is that almost half of American marriages end in divorce, so it's safe to say that the conventional route of dating before 'marriage' isn't exactly cutting it. How then, can we explain that statistics on arranged marriages report that only around 4-6% of these "loveless" relationships fail. Should we be treating marriage more like a business arrangement?

How do we account for love—or even define it? In his famous work, "The Devil's Dictionary," the writer Ambrose Bierce defines it thusly: "Love, **noun**: A temporary insanity curable by marriage."

Perhaps that's too cynical. Perhaps, suggests Raj Salhotra, a compromise in cultures can help bridge the proverbial divide between head and heart when we consider what love is, or should be.

Raj Salhotra: *And so, for someone like me, who has seen both the traditional Indian mindset, and the Western approach, it's about finding the best of both worlds. And I take that perspective in everything in my life, is how do I find the best of both worlds, to have the strength of being someone who, parents are one culture and is living in another culture? Because to me, that's a big strength, but only if you can draw on the best from both. Because it can become like a weakness if you're sort of paralyzed and unable to go to each side, because you're very unsure of where to go. And that's when it becomes a challenge. I think it is, for many of us, you know, in high school, or even in college, but I think as we get older, reflect more and are better able to take the best aspects of both sides, it becomes a huge, huge advantage, actually.*

STORY #3: JIMMY & DEBBIE LIN

Host: It doesn't matter where you were born, how you identify, or from which culture you came: There is no accounting for fate. In the case of Jimmy and Deborah Lin, a last-minute change of plans has led to a lifetime of love and laughter. Well, sometimes laughter.

Jimmy Cho-Liang Lin is originally from Taiwan. At age 11, he moved to Sydney, Australia to study violin at the prestigious Sydney Conservatorium. When he turned 16, he moved to New York City to study under Professor Dorothy DeLay at the Juilliard School of Music. Today, Mr. Lin teaches at both Juilliard and the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University.

Jimmy Lin: *... In 1993 I went to Atlanta for a recital. And, you know, as you can imagine, the pianist who plays with me always needs a page-turner.*

Host: Debbie Lin is originally from Taiwan and moved with her family to Atlanta when she was 17. Debbie is an accomplished pediatrician in her own right.

Debbie Lin: *I was a medical student at Emory University at the time. Um, so, my best friend, or, one of my best friends was the page-turner for the pianist. Um, she was a piano major herself. And I still remember it was... October 25th.*

Jimmy Lin: *And that— the first page-turner had gotten ill that day. And she was my wife Deborah's friend. And Debbie has—had played the piano—had studied piano. So the page-turner asked her to step in for—to sub for—for this page-turning duty.*

And of course, page-turning is a very—it's terrible job because you don't notice the page-turner until he or she screws up, and then, you know, everybody suddenly turns their gaze to the page-turner. It's so embarrassing, you know. And the musicians get really angry at the page-turner. But if all goes well, we barely say a thank you to the page-turner.

Debbie Lin: *And because I was so nervous—I play piano, but I don't play that well, and, um—and this is not exactly a piano recital, so the pieces were violin pieces. So, I was very, very nervous. So, I said, "You know what? When you rehearse, can I come and practice?" First of all, they probably never hear of anybo—page turner need rehearsal, okay? So I'm only one who actually has to rehearse page turning.*

So, I did. I went there. And, then—then there was like two and three hours between the rehearsal in the afternoon and the performance, which is at 7:30 at night. So, I—it was, you know—it was too far to go back home, and there was nothing to do in the concert hall. And, they were just sitting in the backstage, and—and so I was sitting there and looking at the drinks and—and, you know, you know, eating the food...

Jimmy Lin: *And I took one look at her and said, "Oh, wow, this is great! What a nice person, beautiful gal." So we started chatting, you know, between the rehearsal and the concert, and so we— we I think hit it off okay, you know, that first time. And she asked for a photo to be taken with me. I even put my arm around her. I don't know what got into me, but clearly something was not quite normal. And so I wanted to ask for her phone number, but being, you know, Asian, Chinese, whatever, you know, it was not so appropriate to ask, "Hey, what's your number?"*

Debbie Lin: *And so there was a reception after the concert. And long story short, so he probably, you know, asked around like, "Who's this girl? Does she have a boyfriend?" And so—so—so he found out I was single and available, so he decided he wanted to ask me out.*

Jimmy Lin: *So, at the end of the reception, I waved good-bye to her, and then I—I went back to the hotel with my pianist, Lee Jian. And I said, “Oh, man. You know, Deborah, she’s a lovely girl. And, I’d love to, you know, ask her out but I don’t have her phone number.” And suddenly he said, “Oh, you want her number? I have it. She gave it to me.” So he pulls out a piece of paper from his pocket and says, “Here, you can have it.” So I said, “Okay, I think— I think maybe that’s a smart lady after all, you know?” She didn’t want to be too obvious in giving me her phone number. She gave it to my pianist instead.*

Debbie Lin: *And—and somehow, he got a hold of my phone number. And he called me that night! And, of course, you know, he called me and—and I was like, “What?” So, he said— I think this is what he said, if I quote it correctly, “Doctor, doctor, my head hurt.”*

Jimmy Lin: *I don’t know if you watch Monty Python—... One of the favorite, you know, was this, John Cleese character with—you know looks really dumb, and he’ll have a handkerchief torn—twirled around [indistinguishable], and he’ll come into a room, you know. [doing an impression] “Doctor, my brain hurts.” So I thought I’ll break the ice by saying, you know, since she’s—Debbie’s a doctor. So I said, [doing an impression] “Hey Doctor, my brain hurts....*

Debbie Lin: *I think it’s probably a quote from... the Oz, right? Wizard of Oz. I think one of those. And of course, I have no sense of humor. I—I said, “Oh, you have meningitis.” You know, hang up.*

Jimmy Lin: *And, of course, she didn’t get it. She says, “Oh, you probably have meningitis.” Okay, whoops. I just started on the wrong foot or maybe she—it’s better that she knows that I have a really warped mind to start with. Maybe that’s good. But needless to say, we—we—we—we still spoke for over an hour. So—so that was probably okay.*

Host: One thing we can be certain of is that love cannot always be relied on to get the facts. This is one of the beautiful things about love. There is a truth to it, a truth stronger than culture, or tradition, or even memory. Love is immediate but it can linger for a lifetime. Who are we when we are in love? Does being with someone we love make it easier to be our true selves? Or does our true self only reveal itself once we’ve fallen in love? For many Asian-Americans, it can be hard enough to architect an authentic identity when we are influenced by two or more conflicting cultural attitudes, about what makes a good person, what makes a family, or how to characterize “love.”

Outro

Host: It comes as no surprise that we're at the end of our program and our ideas about what love is or what love should be are no more clearer than when we started. Love is elusive, and it's avoided capture for this long, perhaps it's better to let love keep doing its work. That's because love is as expansive and as nuanced as each of us are as people. Most of all, we hope these stories have illustrated, at least to some degree, the transcendent quality of love that travels over time and space to find us, and unite us, whoever, and wherever we are.

Happy Valentine's Day! See y'all next time.

Love, Asian America.

[The end.]