**COMING HOME TO VAN NUYS**

From DEPTH TAKES A HOLIDAY: ESSAYS FROM LESSER LOS ANGELES

Copyright 1996, Sandra Tsing Loh

Originally published by Riverhead Books

Enjoy and reprint at will

 It can be hard, sometimes, to come home to Van Nuys.

 Especially via LAX, when you’ve just gotten off the plane from New Mexico or Minnesota or some other faraway place where pale green cornfields shiver under a cobalt sky. . .

 So unlike Airport Parking Lot C, really, where Burger King debris sucks up around your ankles and rows and rows of battered automobiles sulk beneath an oily sun. You step over a smashed Michelob bottle and suddenly you remember your life: you’re poor, you’re anonymous, and you drive a shitty car.

 You think about the scenic drive ahead, deep into the Grid of the sweltering Valley, home of a hundred King Bear Auto Centers, a thousand Yoshinoya Beef Bowls, and ten thousand yard sales, some consisting of no more than a couple of “Disco Lady” T-shirts flung out on a scabrous lawn like some kind of SOS. You want to close your eyes and say, “There’s no place like home.” But, in fact, you *are* home.

 On my last return to L.A., the mantra I put to myself as I wandered the grim expanse of Parking Lot C, looking for my 1973 VW with its bad clutch, was: “What do I love about Van Nuys? What do I love about Van Nuys?” Twenty minutes later, when I found the car (in section Ss), I had an epiphany.

 What’s great about living in Van Nuys is that we, uh. . . we have a pretty good variety of take-out. Maybe that doesn’t sound like much, but it’s something they sure don’t have in Minnesota.

 And besides, we’re talking a whole world of take-out possibilities. My kitchen drawer is bursting with menus that must have been hurled onto my front porch in the dead of night. Within five minutes of my house I can get at least a dozen different kinds of “ethnic” food—including 100 percent authentic soul food, Thai, Chinese, Salvadoran, East Indian, Northern Italian, Spanish (the chef is from Barcelona, not Mexico), Israeli, Cajun, German, and Japanese.

 Ah, yes. You’re imagining the vivid cadences of exotic languages. The bustle of wonderful bazaars and open-air markets full of kiosks, and street cars, and flapping geese, and bicycle bells. French guys with fresh baguettes roller-skating in Gene Kelly pants, mariachi music, an honest cobbler from Istanbul, and a very wise man from Tibet who can tell you everything about yaks.

 The problem, of course, is that this joyous melting pot doesn’t describe Van Nuys at all. Walt Disney never made it over here to redecorate. The notion of “ethnic charm” is a hoary old Americanism from the seventies. There are few vibrant ethnic enclaves in the Valley; what I didn’t tell you is that for each nationality I’ve named, there is exactly one restaurant. One. Marooned by itself in a tiny strip mall, generally sandwiched between an X-rated video store and a Sally for Nails salon. Not all of them do very well.

 The take-out places that do flourish here are ones that dispense terrific food at terrific speed. At one of my favorites, Golan Restaurant, the employees wear perpetual scowls as they hurl peppers and falafel into paper bags with deadly urgency. And the folks at Thai Koon Café, another find, do a mean delivery—clocking in at something like twelve minutes from their door to mine—no doubt having knocked down a few Domino’s delivery guys on the way.

 More common are the ethnic restaurants that are slowly dying on the vine. They have a certain lost quality I can identify with. No one seems to understand what they’re doing here. It is the way of the Grid.

 One example. About three years ago an Egyptian restaurant opened in a strip mall not far from here. And I don’t mean your generic Middle Easternish Pita Hut chain. I mean *Egyptians*. I’m not sure if this place ever had a name. The location’s previous take-out tenant was a Chicken Delight franchise, and the sign, featuring a startled yellow bird, remained up for a while even though the Egyptians didn’t sell chicken. Nor was there much cause for delight; the place was always empty. You could see the young cook through the window, sitting by himself in an orange plastic chair, smoking cigarettes, reading the paper.

 About two months later, suddenly a crudely lettered sign that simply read KABOB went up. Still nothing. Soon after, the management decided to abandon the idea of using English at all; KABOB came down, and energetic banners in Arabic flew up around the windows.

 It was at this point that I really became interested. (I’m the worst kind of consumer: small income and exacting standards. You have to do a lot to get my attention, because when I let go of twelve dollars, I don’t do it lightly.) Aha! I thought. They’re only communicating with their own people. Something really fabulous must be going on.

 But still the masses failed to flock. Why wasn’t the Egyptian community (wherever it was) catching on to this? An eager visit to the restaurant revealed the answer. The authentic Egyptian-food experience turned out to be an overpriced (paper) plate of stringy beef, instant rice, and runny tomatoes. Three more dollars earned you a trip to the salad bar—featuring Lady Lee peas, which the cook poured expressionlessly from the can. They made a gentle splattering sound as they slid into the copious salad-bar vat.

 What inspires some folks to relocate halfway around the world to the San Fernando Valley in order to feed bad food on paper plates to their own people? Perhaps the chef really did not want to be in the food industry at all. Perhaps his family pushed him into it, like my own Chinese father pushed me to be an aeronautical engineer. (He believed I was destined to shine in the Advanced Tactical Weapons Division at Hughes Aircraft Company. He was wrong.)

 But the take-out place that makes me feel the worst is the one in the strip mall on my corner—the home of Royal India. I’ve come to know the owner; his name is Shah. Unfortunately, I’ve also come to know his troubles. Like many Indian restaurants languishing in the Valley, the food is in-credible: there’s rich vindaloo, tikka masala like red paint, lamb sag delicately aromatic in its gleaming metal dish. The interior, too, is embarrassingly classy for a place flanked by an “All-Nite” liquor store. There are white tablecloths, napkins stuffed in wineglasses like bouquets, and two bow-tied waiters who speak in perfectly modulated British accents. And it’s going out of business. It kills me. I want to write the owner a note:

 Dear Shah, I can’t afford to spend twenty-five dollars on dinner

 every night, but I want to keep you in my neighborhood. You are

 a culinary genius. I wish I could help!

 But I don’t. Instead, I slide another frozen dinner into the microwave. One block away, Shah peers out of Royal India’s red curtains, watching for invisible customers on what is called Victory Boulevard. Up above him, a neon COIN LAUNDRY signs blinks on and off.