

KIM GOLDBERG

Mao Pao Tofu

Dude, where were you last night? Out looking for your brain? I think you left it at Ruby Palace congealing in the Mao Pao Tofu we couldn't finish our last time there—before they shut down for good. And we never could find another half-decent Chinese joint in this dump of a town. Can you believe it? Nanaimo, with four successive Chinatowns in the past century. Generations of tofu gourmands building this island's backbone out of steel rail and creosote timbers, caking their lungs with black soot to pry coal from the earth in murderous mineshafts honeycombing this pissant city. Was *that* our problem? No more Mao Pao Tofu? Was that when we became two quarks in a particle collider? Do you suppose it's their revenge for the fire? Like, dudes, we weren't even born! It was nearly fifty years ago when Nanaimo let Chinatown Number Four burn to a briquette because it was on the wrong side of Pine Street, which was Harewood back then—not their jurisdiction. It smouldered for weeks, they say, while treasure hunters raked through the coals looking for tin cans with rolls of bills. They kept them hidden under the floorboards of their shacks trying to save enough to bring their families over (like that was ever going to happen). Rumour was that's how the fire started—someone wanted to go after the cans. And the men in the trees ... that's just too creepy. Every week after

the fire another Chinese guy was found hanging in the apple orchard. They didn't have any cash, didn't speak the language, nowhere to sleep, no chance of ever seeing wives or kids again. Except for the few that were here with families and had some dough. They just moved across the street to Nanaimo and opened restaurants. Or what pass for Chinese restaurants in this mall-bloated milltown pocked with factory outlets erupting like bad acne.

Ruby Palace was the only one worth two bean cakes. Just our luck that would be the one to go tits up. If we could find another kick-ass Mao Pao Tofu somewhere in this turdfest of a trainstop would it all be okay again? Would we sit there past midnight with chairs upside down on the other tables, jabbering like jays about the infinite potentialities contained within your chopstick and the sweet beauty of Bertuzzi's hat trick? As we poke through the snotty remains would we find your brain shivering under a slimy slab of bean curd crabbing "Thanks a lot, you guys—I thought you forgot about me!" I've ransacked all the restaurants in the yellow pages, dude, and there's nothing but a whack of ersatz hybrid "Chinese-Canadian Cuisine" dives, which we both know ain't gonna cut it. Fuck, we might have to go to Parksville.