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SICKO

Grace Shuyi Liew

Runner-up for the 2022 Barry Hannah Prize in Fiction, judged by Deesha Philyaw



At the time, we lived above an ice cream shop. It was a Baskin Robbins franchise, the first of its kind in our town.

One day, the Baskin Robbins sign fell and crushed an innocent customer to death.

I was not home when it happened. I was out bowling with Jenny. For weeks, I'd put it off. Jenny wanted me to meet her new

girlfriend. I didn't care. I even pulled the poverty card, which I should have known would only complicate things. Then I had to turn down her offer to pay for me. I made a great fool of myself, citing this and that reason. Jenny looked at me with amusement, saying nothing, she waited until I finally ran out of excuses. The new girlfriend was a random user on Taobao who commented on Jenny's product review. Jenny had bought a pair of nude stockings and was obsessed with how it totally matched her leg color. Or maybe it was some eyeliner with infinite staying power. I lost track. Jenny was always buying fake Chanel jackets or beauty shit and then sharing elaborate reviews on the internet with strangers. She liked the attention. She'd tell me all about her latest hauls too, but maybe she always knew, I was faking my interest. Her excitement went out my other ear. Besides, I seldom bought things.

Then, out of nowhere, a whole girlfriend. The idea that people could fall in love over their shared opinions about what they bought felt as far-fetched as flying to the moon.

I couldn't believe it.

That same day, right before the sign fell, we were supposed to receive a piano.

Only Ah Ma was home. Bobo was at school. Mama had work as usual.

But after Ah Ma let the delivery people in, she pretended to be a hired cleaner who didn't live there. She retreated to the kitchen.

Ah Ma at age seventy was still a bull. She wanted nothing to do with the piano, sent to us by Mama's Big Boss. She thought Big Boss smelled like death.

You can't pay me a million dollars to touch his things!

That's the thing about Ah Ma, she believes in her feelings. If she was pleased to be proven right, she never showed it, not even when a local reporter came around to interview her after the accident.

"I was cooking yellow coconut stew, the kind you cannot find here. Suddenly the walls started shaking. Even the TV jumped!" The English translation crawled in a ribbon under her stunned face. "This sort of tragedy is fated."

Big Boss owned the chili sauce factory – our town's pride and biggest employer. We all had a sort of reverence toward him, but I think secretly we all felt he was beneath us. This was because his birth parents were first cousins.

Everyone knew the story: He came out of the womb completely yellow, with a head full of curly hair and a pair of quiet lungs. In their panic, the nurses dropped him. No one could say if his mental impediments were the result of an incestuous union or falling on his head. He never cried. His parents held out until his fourth birthday. Then they gave him up to his infertile aunt, who raised him as her own. Maybe it was her love that healed him – he spoke his first word just shy of his sixth birthday and appeared normal ever since. Eventually, he inherited the aunt's chili sauce factory. Not long after he took over, he put his product on the internet. People from overseas started eating his chili sauce. It made us even prouder. We laughed about the angmohs sweating and getting all red-faced from our small town's chili sauce.

But we were also shrewd. Mama's shift partner, Xiao Ting, had a son who went to America on the Rotary Club's scholarship. On a visit home, he told his mother to fight. She laughed at him at first. But when she told other people in the factory, with some self-effacing pride, ha ha ha, America has filled him with some crazy ideas, some of us said we saw his point. We debated for a few months. Eventually we took a risk. We surmised Big Boss was a reasonable person. So we complained in unison. The spicy fumes. The long work hours. The low wages. The sudden increase in production. Even the unreliable A/C in the bus that took us to the factory.

He soothed every demand until we were convinced of his sincerity. So it was true. One's character in this life could erase one's sins from the previous life.

We forgave him for being born in incest.

I only met Big Boss that one time.

He'd invited himself over for dinner. Our cramped apartment never saw a single guest, but Mama could not turn him down.

We had to lift Bobo's mattress from the living room and stack it on the bed I shared with Ah Ma and Mama. The apartment only had one bedroom for all four of us. Then we unfolded a table in the bright vacant rectangle where Bobo's mattress used to lie.

Ah Ma muttered under her breath the whole time about bad luck. She believed in karma. Big Boss's birth meant he was destined to be a dark star in this life.

But Mama said, everyone has a past, no?

I was surprised when I finally saw Big Boss. He was a small man. He had the kind of face that appeared eager to be happy, but somehow fell short. His throat gurgled when he spoke. His words came out murky, as if greased with spit. It made you brace for impact. I locked up my knees so hard during dinner that they almost buckled when I finally stood up.

Mama cooked for five hours.

Roast duck, pig's blood, chicken heart, pig's kidney, the kind of food that repairs, which told us either Big Boss was broken somewhere, or Mama was already loving him in secret.

Ah Ma said, with some bitterness, she was born clever, better than any of us, when Big Boss asked Mama who taught you how to cook like this.

Ah Ma continued dismissing his compliments until even Mama looked sad. After we cleared the table, Ah Ma disappeared immediately to the kitchen to soak in the warbling sounds of her little TV.

Big Boss had no choice but to turn to me.

Eh, I said, my day was fine. I was just at Jenny's house, as usual. Did my homework in her room while she took her piano lessons downstairs.

Big Boss's eyes grew big.

He had a well-traveled great aunt. The kind who enjoyed music and parties, went abroad to study. Oxford? He thought I had her spirit. *Doesn't she?* He asked my mother, as if she knew this great aunt too. *Too bad she died without marrying.*

She left behind a piano, which he had no use for.

At this point we grew a little blue in the face.

I waited for Mama's voice of reason, no way a piano could fit in here. But she kept smiling, newly eager to be happy. I started to say, piano is more Jenny's thing, I don't care, but Mama sent me a message with her eyes, so I stopped talking.

Later, I asked Ah Ma how she detected that this man brought bad luck. *That's easy, he had yellow energy, like a light bulb waiting to be switched off.*

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It took five men and two hours to move the piano up the flight of narrow stairs, before finally scraping it through our front door.

Then, someone must have let go without warning.

The piano crashed to our floor with so much force that the Baskin Robbins sign downstairs shook loose. When it fell, a swooshing sound was heard. Then, a thud. The victim, a man in his thirties, was licking a mint chocolate chip ice cream cone. He didn't even have time to scream.

Ah Ma said out loud what we were all thinking. *It should have been the landlord!*

That would have been nice. But evil people lived longer. Our landlord was a slick man from Shenzhen who hated our guts. He owned our apartment and the Baskin Robbins downstairs. Every day, he ran upstairs to bang on our door like a reliable little alarm.

Your feet! So heavy! Are you humans or elephants?

Turn down the TV!

Did someone die? Who is crying so loudly?

We endured his humiliation without once complaining back about him. Did he think we wanted to live above his shop? The smell of ice cream coated the insides of our noses. I can still smell the rancid-sweet dairy if I just close my eyes. The worst part was the roaches. We plugged everything – the tub drain, kitchen sink, bathroom sink – and still the roaches flitted around as if we were the intruders to their rightful lair. It was normal to wake up and find a flattened roach pressed under your calf, behind your neck. Once, when I got up to change into my school uniform, a dead roach fell out of my pants. I shrieked and shrieked just to wake the landlord. Ah Ma had to slap me in the face to get me to shut up.

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The death changed everything; it made me realize how emotionally unstable adults could be. Mama grew stony. Ah Ma told her, every morning, for a whole month, that this was the sort of thing that happened when you shot above your station. Big Boss took the piano back. We stopped talking about him. I never saw him again. I wanted to ask Mama when did she meet Big Boss's great aunt. I was curious about the sort of woman who didn't marry and spent her days listening to music. But the way Mama's shoulders bunched up permanently led me to believe she had no straight answer to my question. Her shoulders stayed that way for a whole year. The dead man's widow pursued a settlement with the landlord, but it's not clear if anything ever came of it. Ah Ma often said, with excitement, that she deserved every cent she could squeeze out of the landlord, but Mama just left the room whenever this discussion came up. The landlord stopped knocking on our door, no matter how loud we got. He was probably afraid of our bad luck. But I knew not to say that out loud too.

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Before all that, Jenny laughed until she cried when I told her the story.

Did it smooch his head like a watermelon?

That made me start laughing with her, both of us vibrating as if a motor buzzed up our insides, uncontrollable *ha ha ha ha ha* shaking something loose between us, until her new girlfriend called her *sicko*.

That broke the spell.

Jenny's chest puffed out. *I can be sicker.*

She took off running. I knew what she was looking for, but Jenny's new girlfriend just followed along. She was like a sheep.

We ran until we were out of breath. We stopped downstairs of my apartment.

The sign was already reinstalled. Awash in the perkiest blue and pink, it was lit up like a homing beacon. Inside the store, our landlord was flitting around in his bright pink polo uniform. I looked at Jenny, who was lit up in her own way. Her face looked ready to wash out with the tide.

I felt called to the moment, but for what, I had no clue.

I didn't care if we didn't find bloody brain mush on the sign. Death was cool enough as a concept; I didn't need further evidence. But Jenny was buoyant on a quest.

The sign was too high for us to get a good look in.

I followed Jenny's lead and, on tiptoes, craned my neck and squinted hard. The bottom of the sign was so clean you could be convinced it never killed anyone. I felt Jenny's disappointment. Her new girlfriend just stood to the side, not even trying to look.

When the store doors swung open, we all jumped back.

The landlord handed us free cups of butter pecan ice cream.

Then he shooed us. He told us we looked like homeless ghosts. He told us to stop haunting his shop.

Jenny's new girlfriend immediately started apologizing.

But the way he said *homeless ghosts* activated our motors again. It made us crazy. Jenny cracked first. Then I exploded. The sound that came out of me felt ambitious, like it was waiting to be released this whole time. It made me believe in the sort of things you had no words for. Jenny was laughing so hard she looked pained. I started to believe my feelings were all true, even the unspeakable ones. I felt wise, I finally understood a deep truth: everything was only a matter of intention. If I tried hard enough, I had the power to mentally command the sign to come unhinged once more. I could, I really could. This time it wouldn't miss. It would flatten the landlord's head. Split it open like watermelon. Show Jenny everything she wanted to see. Jenny, who was still cackling, Jenny, who got everything she ever wanted. I felt her like a distant happiness. I felt finally capable. I could make her craziest dreams come true. I could laugh like this forever.

Born and raised in Malaysia, **GRACE SHUYI LIEW** is a lesbian poet and fiction writer currently living in Brooklyn, New York. Her awards include the MacDowell Fellowship, Tin House Writer in Residence, Stella Kupferberg Memorial Short Story Prize (judged by Min Jin Lee), Center for Fiction in New York, and more. She is the author of the poetry collection *Careen* (Noemi Press, 2019), which has been named Electric Literature's "14 Unmissable Poetry Books of 2019."