

Mr. Lim

“I’m busy *Ba*, gotta go.” The bell jangled bluntly as the glass door closed behind Peter. Mr. Lim sighed. His son Peter had come in early with him to the convenience store, as he did every weekend. When Mr. Lim asked him if he was staying, Peter made a face.

Ever since Mr. Lim had strained his back a couple of years ago, his son would help carry in and unpack the newspapers and magazines that were delivered in the morning. Until recently, Peter would stay on to help with the weekend rush—standing behind the counter, serving customers, restocking the shelves. But lately he had been leaving as soon as he carried in the newspapers and magazines, barely looking at them now and dumping them into a corner before saying he had to go.

“At least he wakes up early on a weekend to help us,” Mrs. Lim said. Mr. Lim grunted whenever she said that in response to his complaints. If that was the standard for judging kids in Australia... He shook his head. He imagined that soon Peter would not bother coming in at all.

Mr. Lim paused for a moment at the counter in the silence of the store. He could feel the pleasant, cool air in his newly air-conditioned shop. The air-conditioner had just been installed last week and Mrs. Lim had protested the cost, saying it was hardly justifiable given how expensive it was and how little they would use it, but he thought it was a good long-term investment. It would come in handy during the dreary, stifling summers that often plagued Sydney, particularly out in the western suburbs where—far from the coast—it often felt like they were in a bowl of hot air; having nowhere to escape to, the air simply circulated around and pressed heavily on them. The new air conditioner meant not only more comfort for Mr. Lim and his wife, but also for the customers who might stay longer and therefore potentially buy more things. It was good for business.

Mr. Lim was proud of his store. It had taken a lot of hard work by all the family—early morning starts, saving every dollar, staying open seven days a week—to finally get here. His shop had previously occupied smaller premises further down the street, but, two years ago, as business had grown, he was able to move to their current location, a larger establishment and prime real estate position. The shop now took up most of the space on the corner of a block.

The shop was actually situated directly opposite the local train station—a hive for drug dealers, addicts and barely concealed prostitutes as well as school children, office commuters and the elderly with their half-price senior citizens transport cards. Over the years, Mr. Lim had become accustomed to the rattle of suburban trains grinding along the tracks and the announcements from the station’s PA system were like annoying but faithful friends. In front of the shop, the riff raff would often loiter outside, scoring or dealing, or just standing around conspicuously on the footpath. Looking like they had nothing else better to do, thought Mr. Lim.

And then, last year someone won the Powerball lottery from a ticket they had bought from his shop: nearly a quarter of a million dollars. Afterwards, Mr. Lim made sure there was a prominent sign

in the shop window letting his customers know about this marvelous occurrence. It brought much excitement, with some customers buying extra tickets that week because they saw it as a good omen. Mr. Pao Li, one of his regular lottery buyers who also came in everyday to get the *Australian Chinese Daily* newspaper, told all of his friends how a winning ticket had come from this very shop—here was concrete proof the lottery system worked! Mr. Lim’s revenue from lottery tickets nearly doubled that same week.

It was going to be a blistering day, the kind that seared exposed skin and made car handles too hot to touch. Mr. Lim looked at the newspaper section that his son, Peter, had arranged so sloppily this morning that he may as well not have done it at all. He knew his son hated helping out in the shop, but what could he do about it? Everyone had to pitch in. Even his eldest daughter, Anna, who had her own job working as an auditor at Deloitte came to work on the weekends when it was particularly busy. Peter and his sister Anna spent whole weekends at the shop when they were younger. Peter used to enjoy unpacking the Chupa Chups whenever they came in, and Mr. Lim would give him one as a treat when he finished. He always chose the one that Mr. Lim thought had a disgusting taste, cherry bubblegum flavor or something.

“Ooh, it’s so hot outside.” Mrs. Lim’s voice and the chime of the bell as she entered the shop interrupted Mr. Lim’s reverie. Mrs. Lim was a short, small woman with wavy dark hair tied back in a knot. She walked into the shop with a plastic bag of bean sprouts. She had spotted them in the nearby grocery shop as they were opening the store that day and had told Mr. Lim that she would be back soon.

“Is Peter gone?” she asked, noticing the empty shop. Mr. Lim nodded.

Mrs. Lim paused just for a second before raising the plastic bag. “These are so fresh. Samnang said they came in early this morning. It will be good with our noodles for lunch.”

Mr. Lim nodded and continued rearranging the newspapers. Mrs. Lim stood there in the middle of the shop, and Mr. Lim thought that despite the new air-conditioning she looked just as hot as if she was still outside. She moved behind the counter, and Mr. Lim could hear her begin to put change into the cash register, the sound of coins lightly clinking.

“I think we need to do something about Peter,” his wife said suddenly, the cash drawer slamming shut with a bang. She had distractedly left the plastic bag of bean sprouts next to the cash register. Mr. Lim stopped what he was doing. “You have to talk to him,” Mrs. Lim insisted.

Not this again. Last night they had both stayed up in bed waiting to hear the front door open and for Peter to walk in, which he eventually did at 2 a.m. It wasn’t the first time he had come home so late. Mr. Lim did not know what Peter was up to when he was out, only that it was becoming increasingly frequent.

They knew of friends in the neighborhood whose sons had joined a bad crowd and were now living on the streets, locked up in prison, or worse—shooting up in alleyways. Every night their mothers cried for them. His own wife tossed in her bed waiting for Peter to return whenever he stayed out late. Peter was in Year Ten. What if he did not finish school and go to uni? What if he had joined a gang?

Unspoken between them was their worst fear: that Peter might be doing drugs like their friends’ sons. Last night, after Peter finally came home, Mr. Lim got up out of bed to confront him.

“Where have you been, Peter?” Mr. Lim had turned on the hallway light and found himself looking



into Peter's eyes to see if he could notice any telltale signs of drug-taking. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, maybe red or puffy eyes, but he could not see any difference.

"I was with some friends," Peter replied dismissively, looking away. He attempted to reach his bedroom, but Mr. Lim blocked his path.

"I said, where have you been Peter? Do you know how late it is?" Mr. Lim's voice rose louder, and he could hear his wife shuffling in her slippers behind him.

"Dad, I'm tired, okay? Let me go to sleep." Peter's face flushed with annoyance. Mrs. Lim pulled at Mr. Lim's arm, encouraging him to move aside. Peter brushed past him and Mrs. Lim.

"Now is not the time to argue with him." Mrs. Lim whispered. "Let him go to bed and we can talk in the morning."

The next day, Mr. Lim found it easier to say nothing and to focus on opening the shop. In any case, Peter was a sullen boy who never told them anything. In fact, Mr. Lim had the distinct feeling that he was deliberately hiding things from them. He could barely speak to his son, not only because of the language barrier but also because Peter simply did not want to listen. Why couldn't he be like Anna? She always helped out her parents, never made them worry about her.

"Talk about what?" Mr. Lim now repeated to his wife in the shop. "Do you think he listens to me? I tell him not to go out, and he goes out!" He slapped the last newspapers onto their pile and walked over to the greeting cards stand. "Everything we do for him, and he appreciates nothing!" Mr. Lim felt his face grow hot.

Mrs. Lim stepped out from behind the counter and came over to him.

"Ah Meng," she said gently. "It's how you talk to him. Don't yell so much." She picked up a pastel pink birthday card that had fallen on the ground and put it back in its place on the stand. "He's at that difficult age. You've got to be a bit easier on him."

Mr. Lim thought that was nonsense. But he looked at his wife's face scrunched with worry lines. Wisps of grey and black hair hung at her temples, escaping her bun. Mr. Lim mumbled, "OK, I will talk to him."

"Good." Mrs. Lim started to head back to the counter before turning around to say, "Ai-yah, I forgot to buy chilis. Those noodles won't be good without it. I should go now before the shop gets busy."

Mr. Lim nodded. He walked over to the magazines section.

"Also, don't forget to ask Sonny and Chun if their family is coming to Anna's engagement dinner next weekend," Mrs. Lim added. Sonny was Mr. Lim's brother and Chun was his brother's wife. "I booked tables, but they haven't confirmed yet. All of the other side have already said they are coming." The other side was Robert, Anna's fiancée, and his extended family.

Anna had initially wanted to hold the engagement dinner at a flashy restaurant in the city, but Mr. and Mrs. Lim had persuaded her to have it locally. They knew the food was good here; what if that place in the city didn't know how to make proper banquet food? What would her in-laws think of her choice? Anna had at first been annoyed, but eventually she came around to their arguments. They booked four banquet tables at Golden Century Seafood, a restaurant on the other side of the train station.

"Yes, I'll call Sonny later today," Mr. Lim replied as Mrs. Lim left the shop.

He was alone and carefully arranging the magazines—*Cosmopolitan*, *Popular Science*, *House and Garden*—into their correct sections, when the doorbell rang again rather abruptly. Mr. Lim stopped what he was doing and looked up, expecting to see Mrs. Lim. Instead, he saw a young man in black jeans, a dirty white t-shirt and, despite the heat, a black puffy jacket, at the door. He had short hair which brushed the top of his slightly jutting ears, emphasizing the gauntness of his face. Mr. Lim noticed that he stood awkwardly looking around before stalking over toward the drinks section in the fridge.

Mr. Lim always made a point of going behind the counter when a customer came in to let them know that someone was there and ready to serve them, and accordingly he moved to his position. Besides, as he told his wife and children, it was the best spot for monitoring what a customer was doing. Strategically placed mirrors in each corner of the ceiling meant that from the counter you could see every angle of the shop. Not that Mr. Lim had a big problem with theft since many of the items in his convenience store like newspapers and magazines were difficult to stuff into a pocket or down a shirt. Nonetheless he always felt it was better to be prepared for these things. In the mirror, he watched the young man.

The young man did not seem to notice Mr. Lim and was now scanning over the newspapers, picking one up and slowly turning its pages with his surprisingly delicate-looking fingers. He currently had in his hands *The International Herald Tribune*. The young man reminded Mr. Lim so much of his own son, Peter, maybe because he had just been talking about him with his wife.

The young man put down his newspaper and passed by the counter without saying anything, but before reaching the door, he changed his mind and returned to the counter. Having a closer look, Mr. Lim thought that with his angular face and hollowed out eyes, this young man resembled a Halloween jack-o'-lantern—like the kind that would pop up in shop windows in October nowadays, following some American tradition—but with a bushel of black hair on top. He was tall and thin, and in Mr. Lim's eyes, a bit sickly-looking. Mr. Lim also noticed that the white shirt underneath his jacket had a light brown stain all over the front that looked unwashable.

"Hello, can I help you?" Mr. Lim asked him.

"Yeah, can I have a packet of Winfield cigarettes please?"

"Sure, light or regular?"

"Uh, regular. Also, this." The young man grabbed a packet of Wrigley's spearmint chewing gum off the counter display.

Mr. Lim turned around to get the packet of Winfield's from the cigarette cabinet behind him, and as he turned back, had another chance to glance at the young man who was looking sideways towards the door. There was something about the way he stood there, or maybe the way his profile looked against the morning sunlight, that made him seem younger and sparked a light of recognition in Mr. Lim.

"Hey, you Phu Nguyen's son. Used to live in Fairfield yeah?"

"What?" The young man looked startled.

"Your parents have a take-away shop here before, right?"



“Uh, yeah. They did.” A quick look of recognition flickered over the young man’s eyes.

Mr. Lim laughed, “I remember you used to stay at their shop after school. What your parents doing now? I hear they move to Melbourne?”

“Yeah,” the young man mumbled, looking away.

Mr. Lim stared at him. Was he just being shy? Or was that how young people talked to their elders nowadays?

“I’m surprised to see you. You don’t go with them?”

“Nah.” He put his hands into his pockets and looked down.

“OK.” The young man was obviously not going to say much more. “Tell them I said hello. It’s a long time I don’t see them.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“That’s thirty-five dollars and sixty ce—”

It took a few seconds before Mr. Lim saw the glint of steel. It came from behind the young man like a flash, the blade refracting the light that filtered through the glass windows of the shop. The small kitchen knife the young man took out from his back pocket looked brand new, as if it had been bought just for the occasion. He held it up to Mr. Lim in a slow, dream-like way.

“Give me all your money,” said the young man, his voice rising as he finished the sentence.

“What? What is this?” Mr. Lim shouted.

“Give me all the money from the till,” the young man repeated, this time harshly, quickly looking sideways for anyone entering the shop. There was no one.

Mr. Lim stared at the young man in disbelief. He thought the scene was happening exactly as if they were in some Hollywood movie.

“Are you joking, boy?”

“Just give me the fucking money, old man. Give me the money!” The young man screamed the last sentence, a rapid blush of red creeping up his jack-o’-lantern face. “Now and quickly!” He continued nervously, glancing back at the door while waving the knife in Mr. Lim’s face.

“This is stupid. I will not give you my money.”

The young man moved closer and leaning over the counter, pushed the tip of the knife onto Mr. Lim’s chest. “You don’t think I can do it, huh?” He applied pressure on the knife. “Well I can. Give-me-your-fucking-money!”

Mr. Lim stepped back, surprised. “Okay, okay,” he said pressing the button to open up the till. His hands trembled as he handed over the notes and coins that Mrs. Lim had just put in the register be used as change.

The young man looked at the meagre notes. “Is that all?!”

“It’s all I got. It’s only the morning so no one come in yet,” Mr. Lim said.

The young man left the coins on the counter and stuffed the couple of notes into the pocket of his jacket. He slid the kitchen knife into the back pocket of his jeans and turned around to leave.

As the bell over the door jangled loudly as he went out, Mr. Lim felt a swell of something come over him like a cold, ocean wave. It began as a tingling sensation in his stomach that unfurled into a snarl, washing over every corner of his body and dragging along parts of memories and images like flotsam

and bits of wood: their joy when Peter was born and how happy they were to have a little boy, his tiny little feet pressed into baby blue woolen booties; the coldness of the Deli Frozen Desserts factory he worked in before they bought the shop, and the leftover cakes he brought home every week for Anna and Peter; the first time he and his family went into the city upon arriving in Australia, overcome by the glass buildings and magnetic skyscrapers; the heels, suits and pencil skirts of the bustling office workers on the streets.

And then riding over the top of all of this washed up another memory: this time of the hut he and his comrades had built and lived in for several weeks at a time. They had to be careful to keep it well camouflaged to keep it hidden from the American bastards and their all-powerful machines in the air. A dozen men squeezed into a tiny space covered in leaves, sticks, mud, and whatever else they could find. It more than did its job during the hot dry months, but in the wet season rain water seeped through and soaked them, causing illnesses and forced returns to headquarters. At night they hid most of their equipment under piles of leaves and branches, except for their AK-47s, which they kept beside them while sleeping, by habit alert and awake at the slightest noise that sounded out of place. Mr. Lim could still smell the sweet soil, the aroma of banana leaves mixed with the men's sweat, and stink of their bodies.

He also remembered when the cluster bombs were dropped, exploding mid-air like a relentless rain of hailstones, thundering down, and the consequent scattering of men. At least those that were still alive. Mr. Lim had miraculously escaped the bombing, jumping into one of their dug-out underground tunnels before exploding hot metal could reach his soft flesh.

All of this blazed in his mind in the few seconds after the young man had left. And following those images, Mr. Lim had the feeling inundate him that something important had been taken away from him, more than just the few notes the young man had grabbed. Nausea rose in the back of his throat. All the things he'd had to survive. The constant barrage of obstacles he'd had to overcome, some of them unbearable. Enough!

The bell stopped clattering as the door closed behind the young man, but in Mr. Lim's mind it was still ringing. As if its sound gave him permission—as if it awakened his body and cut him loose—Mr. Lim ran out of the shop after the young man.

The heat assaulted him as soon as he stepped outside.

“Hey!” he shouted. The young man turned around. “What are you doing?”

The young man looked surprised.

“*Bạn đang làm gì đấy?*” Mr. Lim cried. He had learnt Vietnamese in the army and now it came naturally to him, almost like his mother tongue Teochew.

“I know you understand me,” Mr. Lim grabbed the young man by the shirt with both his hands.

“What the fuck?!” replied the young man in English. “Let me go!” He looked worried, tried to push Mr. Lim's hands away but Mr. Lim would not let go.

“Are you doing drugs, is that it? Your parents break their backs, work hard every day so you can waste your life?” Mr. Lim's felt the heat rise in his face.

“Let go of me!” protested the young man, still trying to break the vice-like grip Mr. Lim had on his shirt front. The young man was taller but Mr. Lim's strength seemed to belie his shorter stature.

“Give me back my money, you little bastard,” cried Mr. Lim, shaking him. “Give me back my



money!” He reached up and grabbed him by the shoulders. The young man’s face went bright red. He took in a breath.

“Fuck off!” he yelled and, giving a mighty push with both hands, released the hold Mr. Lim had on him.

Mr. Lim stumbled, took a few steps back. But then he quickly recovered and lunged forward again with abandon into the tall, skinny frame of the young man, falling against him. The young man, surprised, grabbed onto Mr. Lim to steady himself, and with that Mr. Lim was able to reach for the man’s back jean pocket.

“Get away from me!” screamed the young man, as he, too, reached for his back pocket.

From the outside they almost looked like they were in some kind of a passionate embrace, enclosed in an erratic tango on the streets of a suburban town centre. All of a sudden, Mr. Lim felt a pang of deep pain, and let out an animal sound of agony. Mr. Lim stopped pushing and struggling, he seemed to crumple into the young man’s arms, and with his weight they both fell to the ground, still enfolded in each other.

The young man felt the knife go into Mr. Lim’s side, but even as he did, he could not let go of the knife nor could he let go of Mr. Lim. He lay frozen, with Mr. Lim in his arms, shuddering as the blood drained out of his face in the same way it did from the knife wound in Mr. Lim.

Afterwards, passersby had to break the young man out of this position. Even when the police had arrived and had taken Mr. Lim away, had unlocked them out of their embrace, the young man was unable to move or speak, or wipe away the blood that was now staining his white, unwashed shirt.

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