



The Elders

READ THE FIRST-PLACE WINNER OF OUR
2020 FALL SHORT STORY CONTEST.

By Jennifer Chen

The brick building on the Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, block was in desperate need of repairs. The front steps crumbled like silken tofu. A spider web of broken glass was the front door. The basement was packed with half-working, coin-operated washers and dryers. But inside, the lobby shone. The chocolate brown mailboxes were filled with boxed treats for the kids, letters from faraway loved ones, and sometimes Korean beauty products if there was a clearance sale at Pearl River Mart.

On a normal day, 86th Street bustled with yellow school buses, the crackle of kids chattering,

a Chinese woman squawking into her cell phone, and people crossing the street, waving off the angry honks of drivers with a flick of a wrist or a finger.

But in the face-melting humidity of late July, Elder Yen walked by the cheap shoe stores, Yaya Tea, and check-cashing shops that were dark and hollow in the daytime. In a blue shirt so old it was practically white, Yen moved stiffly toward her apartment building with two red plastic bags bursting at the seams, the handles stretched taut.

The grocery bags' plastic handles numbed her fingers. Inside, a container of dried shredded pork

hay – a gong-gong favorite. A bag of lychee coconut jelly cups for the kids. Glutinous black sesame rice balls for Andy, who could finally chew again. Bitter melon for the elders. A sushi mat for Ren's granddaughter. A small pack of haw flakes for herself. Yen's grandchildren wrinkled their noses at the treat, murmuring, "not real sugar," but as a young girl in a tiny Taiwanese village, she cherished haw flakes as a Lunar New Year indulgence. Something she sucked on for hours until the flattened red disks disintegrated on her tongue. As a kid, she peeled each one from the flesh of the other flake, gingerly, afraid to lose a lick.

Yen paused in front of Duck Wong Restaurant to read the black Chinese characters on bright yellow paper: "Pick Up Only." An empty soda can stopped at her feet like a puppy begging to be petted. She instinctively picked it up.

An instant flash. Now, in her mind's eyes, she sees Shutao, the one all the kids affectionately called *gong-gong* because he was everyone's grandfather. He, overturned on the sidewalk like a turtle, groaning and clutching a spot on his side. Yen touched delicately and knew who cracked his old bones. His bag for collecting recycling – a stretched white hefty bag reused to an inch of its life – was gone, but his right hand was still gnarled, frozen, as if the bag was there. She turned her head at the sight of his empty hand, like seeing gong-gong naked. She led him to her apartment and texted one number. Within minutes, they gathered. One brought fish ball soup. Another black tea. Bandages arrived. The kids in the building brought red plastic milk crates filled with burgundy wine bottles, LaCroix tin cans, and Mexican coke bottles. The kids, grown into teenagers, performed gong-gong's old magic tricks for him, the ones he did when their parents dropped them off at his doorstep. He chuckled, though the laughter rippled

to his ribs in searing pain.

The other elders gathered around her like hens. Yen knew that they were seeing their own futures in gong-gong's frightened cloudy black eyes.

"Now," they urged her, but Yen shook her head slightly so gong-gong wouldn't notice.

"If not now, when?" they implored.

"It will be worse for us if I do," Yen whispered. She hadn't tried in decades. What if she couldn't control it? What if she went too far? She kept those fears hidden behind her wrinkles.

The memory released when Yen shoved the soda can in her plastic bag. A city bus dragged by on the street. The bus groaned with the effort to stop. The doors snapped open. Yen saw a few masked riders like ghosts haunting distanced spaces. The driver waved at her.

"Aiee!" shouted Andy.

She smiled in response. The groceries weighed her arms down. She spied his purple bruises, splotched like a giraffe, along his neck. Passengers shuffled in. Andy waved goodbye as the foldable doors flapped shut. Yen closed her eyes for a moment. The wounds of Andy's face imprinted in Yen's mind. The blood in his teeth. Matted hair. His grandmother's cry alerted the whole building, shook it along the brick, sizzling the June day with extra degrees. Andy's grandmother offered Yen specks of jade and a tin container of ginseng. Yen shook her head at the gifts. The elders hissed at her for days after, in the hallways, in the lobby where blue masks littered outside like leaves against the glass doors.

Instead, the building's occupants collected offerings to piece together what Andy's family needed. Groceries. Liquor for his father. Relatives beckoned their doctor children, exhausted from their own efforts to keep the city alive. Exhausted at being the nice quiet Asians. But they came so Andy never

had to step foot outside. He avoided reporters hungry for their headline: *Bus Driver Beaten with Bat After Asking Passengers to Wear Masks.*

Yen shook her head to release the tendrils of anger after seeing Andy's lingering bruises. But the heat weaved through her, threatening to trap her heart and twist it. She rested the bags on the hot pavement. She took in three long breaths, a technique she learned to soothe the spark. It loosened. For a moment, she controlled it.

Yen bent down to pick up the two plastic red bags. The note slipped out of her blue shirt front pocket, tumbled to the ground. She considered not picking it up and letting it fly away in the stale breeze to get trampled on by the wheels of a cab. But she couldn't. She must not. She pulled out a white handkerchief, stitched with her initials in red, to grasp the note. Try as she might to slip it back in her pocket undetected, her fingertip grazed it.

Yen could feel the note writer's fear as if it were her own.

The bags sat on the sidewalk like bored children. Yen was frozen. She had only visited the young woman's pristine Japanese cookware shop on the Upper East Side once, but instantly she was back in the aisles with expensive rice cookers that had intricate instructions in Japanese. Young couples unsuccessfully rolled rice and seaweed sheets in sushi mats. Yen remembered Ren's granddaughter pressing homemade green tea mochi into her hands and bowing many times, thanking the elder for coming such a long way to the store's opening. Yen reveled in the taste of the white sweet rice dough and the grassiness of the tea. That night, she heard the granddaughter crying in the lobby, surrounded by her friends, with the note in her hands.

Yen scooped it up later when it was left on the cracked floor. A photocopy of the original. The police had the real version.

“We don’t want your foreign food. Go back to Japan. Don’t forget you are in America and we can do what we want here.”

With the note in her hand, Yen, at 89 years old, could feel the heat of her palms on her white bedsheets. She slipped on mittens, even in the mugginess of summer, and yet, she still dreamt of flames, but at least, she told herself, it was contained in her mind.

The sidewalk in front of the brick building was desolate. Before she crossed the street, Yen noticed the elders peeking out their windows, watching her, moving with bent backs, liver spots on their hands.

Yen stared up at the unassuming bricks of the building that took care of its own – swallowed their hurts, bruises, cuts, and disappointments. She carried the groceries up the crumbling cement steps. A lighter clicked. She felt it first. The warmth on her back, then the smell of her T-shirt burning. The bags hit the sidewalk with a thud. Two young men sliced the plastic, kicked its innards, dispersing the carefully chosen items into the muck of the street. The two young men left. She didn’t cry out in Taiwanese. Instead, she calmly pressed her back against the brick wall of her building. The flames extinguished. On the back of the shirt was a brown circle where the fire went out.

The haw flakes, in their tightly rolled pink and green paper, were smashed by the lumbering wheels of a garbage truck. The pork popped out, strewn in the street like seaweed. The lychee cups now tiny jellyfish wobbling on the asphalt with dirt caked on. Bitter melon vomited out in green chunks, and the mat was broken. The white rice balls squeezed out the black sesame like an octopus releasing ink in fear.

The flashes of their faces came next. She pictured the kids running through the halls with their treats raised above their heads, calling out to the others. Andy’s dimples when he saw the

familiar package. The granddaughter clapping in joy.

Then, Yen slowly and deliberately touched the note in her pocket. It ignited her.

When she released herself from the wall, the flames returned, but not on the back of her shirt. They came from her mouth. Fast and hot. Fireworks almost. The 89-year-old Taiwanese woman thrust her arms back and widened her mouth to release the flames. In the heat, the two young men returned, peeking around the corner.

They thought they’d see her on the ground by now, withering in pain, a smoldering smell of skin. Instead, the two young men witnessed the greatest fire they’d ever seen. The elders didn’t rush to the windows to watch, but they pressed their hands against the walls of their building and felt the fire. They closed their eyes and waited. *Finally*, they murmured.

The 89-year-old Taiwanese woman stood over the two young men. She looked bigger now, especially with flames for a mouth. Brick buildings blackened with the lick of red that consumed cars, trees, and soon, them. The young men clasped their hands and begged for mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

With the burn mark on her back, Yen sucked in the flames around the building, swallowed them whole. Ate red and orange for dinner.

She peered down at the two young men as the blaze burned them. The 89-year-old Taiwanese woman climbed the steps of her building, went to her apartment, and washed her burnt shirt. 🔒

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Interview with
JENNIFER CHEN

What was your writing process like for “The Elders?” What about your revision process?

As a freelance journalist, I spent most of 2020 reporting on anti-Asian hate crimes, which meant I read a lot about violent attacks. Writing “The Elders” was my outlet for processing the violence. The incidents in my story are inspired by news headlines. I have to credit my literary agent, Caitie Flum, for her sharp editorial eye. My first draft had no names for the characters, and Caitie wisely pointed out that it was hard to follow who was who.

What’s your best advice to fellow short story writers?

Ask a fellow writer or editor to read your first draft to help you see where there are holes or elements that don’t make sense. My first drafts are for me to get the bones down, and my beta readers help me see what’s working and what’s not.