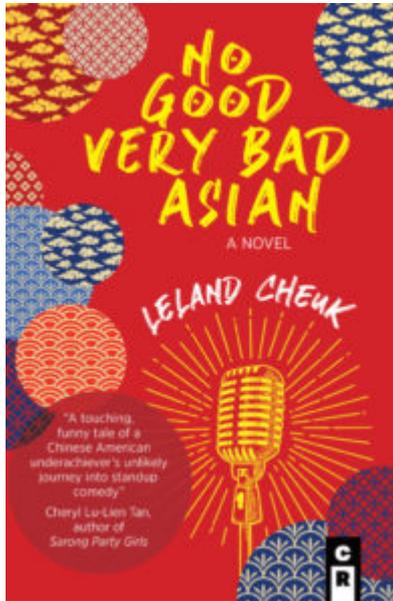


Small Press Release: No Good Very Bad Asian (an Excerpt)

written by Jacob Singer | November 11, 2019



No Good Very Bad Asian by Leland Cheuk
250 pages – [C&R Press](#)/ [Amazon](#)

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Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine becoming a successful anything, let alone a comedian. I fully expected to be a huge disappointment.

Life's first disappointment was my name. My real name isn't Sirius. My Chinese name is pronounced "whore." Hor Luk Lee.

I was born in America.

Your grandparents saw *Sixteen Candles*. They were quite familiar with Long Duk Dong.

They named me Hor anyway.

It was my dad's idea: he wanted to keep me as Chinese as possible. For much of my childhood, I remember him as a yellow version of a Black Panther. He wanted me to learn *Teochew hua*, understand every little Chinese tradition, and eat only South Chinese cuisine (even those lotus seed mooncakes that taste like sand and a sprinkle of piss).

You know what his name is?

John.

One of my earliest memories was of my dad having a conference with my kindergarten teacher Mrs. Jarmuschki. Mrs. J was my first crush. (God rest your pants suits, Mrs. J.) She was also sixty.

As a kid, I had bowel control problems (foreshadowing events in adulthood). In Mrs. J's classroom after school, my dad had to squeeze into one of those kiddie desks and explain my accidents.

Even though he had cleaned me up on many an occasion, my dad denied the existence of my loose bowels like they were Iranian nukes. "Why you don't think it someone else, eh, Mrs. Ja-moose-ski?" he said. "Why you think it my son? Is it because he Chinese?"

Mrs. J rolled her eyes. "Of course not," she said. "Half the class is Chinese."

"Does that make you angry?"

"You're being ridiculous," replied Mrs. J, who glanced at me apologetically. "You white women are all the same," my dad said. "I will report you to principal."

Mrs. J planted elbows on desk. Her palms met like she was in prayer. "Listen, Mr. Lee," she said. "Your son smells like God's vomit."

I let out an embarrassed laugh, which turned into an uncontrollable fit of giggles. The more I thought about what she said, the funnier it became. Wouldn't God's vomit smell like flowers made of soap and glow like cartoon gold? Mrs. J and my dad both stared at me like I'd been possessed.

That was the first time I remember laughter making me feel better about myself.

I didn't have a happy childhood. I don't know what to do around people who have a love-love relationship with their families. When folks talk about how nostalgic they are for their upbringing, I expect someone to cue a laugh track.

I grew up in Alhambra, California, near Pasadena, in San Gabriel Valley. There are lots of Chinese people there. By "lots," I mean when people talk about "white flight," San Gabriel Valley is *From Where The Whites Flee* (that might be a children's book). The Chinese there aren't very assimilated. My parents knew millionaires who'd been in America for three or four decades and didn't speak or read a word of English. Most of the kids I grew up with in my neighborhood never left the Valley. They had thick accents despite being

American-born. They lived with their parents well into their thirties. When they married and had babies, they lived with their moms and dads, their grandparents, their spouses, and their brood in the same house—the ultimate Yellow Panther achievement! The America outside San Gabriel Valley—where it was okay to be gay, where every black person wasn't a likely criminal, where women didn't have to take a back seat to men—might as well have been Mars.

My parents owned and worked at a round-the-clock liquor store near Hollywood. Mom, Dad, his parents, and I lived in a tiny two-bedroom apartment, where I slept on a sofa every night (Yellow Panther bonus points!). To this day, I have trouble sleeping in real beds.

Mom and Dad argued a lot. My mom didn't like the way my dad spent his days, and my dad didn't like being questioned. When he wasn't working, he loitered at a Vietnamese deli where they served *banh mi*, sweet coffee, and gambling addiction. Whenever my mom mentioned condensed milk, we all knew she meant baccarat.

My grandma and mom hated each other. Grandma took my dad's side on everything. If Dad wanted to gamble a little bit after a hard day's work, put it all on red! If my mom had a problem with it, get a second job!

Grandma was often horrified by what American schools taught us. In first grade, around Thanksgiving, the teacher made us make Puritan hats out of black construction paper, with the buckle cut out of white cardboard. White is the color of death for the Chinese, and Grandma couldn't have that. She took a red ballpoint pen and colored in the buckle so I wouldn't risk being suddenly struck down by the Chinese gods. I cried and cried and told her that I'd be ridiculed nonstop, but she just kept scratching away that evil color, steadfast and uncaring. I had to wear the defaced hat to school, and sure enough, the white kids called me "ricepicker," "boat monkey," "refugee," and many, many other names.

"Why didn't you listen to me?" I wailed when I came home.

"Why would we?" she said. "You're just a child."

Our apartment was so small that I could hear it whenever my dad tried to get frisky with my mom, usually on Sundays when the liquor store was closed. He didn't succeed often, thank God. As for the times he did? Let's just say it didn't sound like he was any good. I was nine when I realized what they were doing.

Once, on the drive home from the grocery store, my mom and I were in our pickup truck at a stoplight, and in the car beside us was a white couple making out.

"*Ai-yuh*," Mom said, disgusted. "Don't watch! White people are always having sex. They look at each other and that's it! They can't control themselves!"

There's something wrong with Americans. Always having sex like animals! Your dad learns from them. Always wanting to fool around!"

I did my best to tune her out as she went on and on.

She did not like sex. This, she made clear.

As I reached puberty, the Lee women agreed on one thing: something had to be done about my face. Mom hated the way I looked. I was chubby. My hair stuck up from multiple cowlicks. My acne was so bad that my mom got tears in her eyes when she stared at me too long.

She spent the little money we had dragging me to dermatologists, who did painful extractions and made me a lab hamster for Accutane and Retin-A. My mom would often say that no one would want to marry me unless I lost some weight and did a better job of washing my face. (Now that your mom has left me, my mother has resurrected this talking point.)

Grandma distrusted American medicine so she kept flushing my pills down the drain. She preferred to scrub my face with natural products Chinese people could vouch for. Chrysanthemum tea, warm water and ginger, and lotus root soup. They fought over me like I was a Middle Eastern oil field. With them buffing my face like a truck, it was a miracle I didn't reflect sunlight.

My future was the only thing everyone in the Lee Council could bond over. From the time I was in middle school to when I left home, entire dinners were spent debating what I should do when I grew up.

"Once he's old enough to work at the store, I'll teach him how to succeed in business," my dad said. "*Een-vess-mun!*" That's how he pronounced the word "investment."

"Doctor," Grandma said.

"Lawyer," Mom said.

Dad slapped the dining table. "C-E-0!" He thrust a finger skyward with each letter.

My grandpa was a quiet man who absorbed, with a sublime and distant grin, every one of my grandma's insults ("rice bucket," "deficient brain," and my personal favorite: "professional airplane hitter"—a euphemism for chronic masturbator). Sometimes he'd just say, "Suffer today so you can have a better future. That's what we do." He glared accusingly at Dad and Grandma. "For generations and generations, that's what we have done."

When they weren't planning my future, my family would make up stories about

why America was the way it was.

On why Mexico was poor: Dad concluded that no one could make big money selling tacos.

On Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, Mom said that his infidelity showed that the president was born smart because naturally intelligent men deserved multiple wives, as exemplified by her grandfather, who had four wives and happened to be a scientist.

On the Oklahoma City bombing, Grandma asserted that Jesus was, in fact, a living white man in hiding, sent from God to control American terrorists via telepathy.

Even Fox News would have called my family's nightly hot takes total nonsense.

Sometimes, after the rest of the Lees went to bed, I'd sneak out of our apartment and walk a mile to the South Pasadena metro station. I'd watch the light rail trains go by and fantasize about stepping in front of one. I knew from an early age that I was growing up in a pile of bullshit and that I could never be happy in that home. I learned how families were supposed to behave not from my own but from watching sitcoms. We were supposed to love each other no matter what. You were supposed to learn useful lessons from your parents. Home was supposed to be the one place on Earth where you could do no wrong.

There were nights on that platform when I'd close my eyes and step close enough to the tracks to feel the whoosh on my face as the train passed. But when I imagined my parents screaming and crying over my dead body, I couldn't bear it, so I'd step back.

I'm glad I didn't have the balls to do it. Otherwise, I wouldn't have achieved my lifelong dream of becoming a comedian.

And, of course, I wouldn't have had you.

When I was twelve, the old Chinese lady in the apartment next door croaked, and it turned out that she was a hoarder. Our landlord hired a team of Mexicans to clear her tiny apartment, and in the hallway, I discovered that the woman had a treasure trove of used VHS tapes, including *Rant in E-Minor* by Bill Hicks and Eddie Murphy's *Raw*. She was one of those ladies who went around collecting aluminum cans to recycle. Who knew she was into the funny (and Eddie Murphy's endless bits about the nature of a lady's private parts)? Life is a self-published mystery.

I stole those tapes, and when I watched Hicks, in that black suit jacket and turtleneck, being smarter and funnier than everyone else, doing that bit ripping parents for thinking their babies were special even though children came from millions upon millions of sperm, I laughed harder than I'd ever

laughed.

I started stealing from my mom's wallet to buy standup CDs from the Tower Records near home, and then I'd sneak them into the house in my baggy shorts like a prisoner hiding a shank so my family wouldn't ask me any unwanted questions. Late at night, I'd plug headphones into an old Discman and listen to *Strategic Grill Locations* by Mitch Hedberg or *Bigger and Blacker* by Chris Rock. My living room/bedroom transformed into an imaginary comedy club where I wasn't a chubby, pimply teen suffocated by his family anymore. I was just another person in the audience.

There's this Hedberg joke about a talk show featuring an inspirational story about a lady on TV born without arms. "They said, 'Lola does not know the meaning of the word "can't."' And that to me was kinda worse in a way," Hedberg said. "Not only does she not have arms, but she doesn't understand simple contractions." For a solid year, I listened to that joke over and over, and every time, it made me laugh until tears fell.

Comedians spoke truths I couldn't speak at home, and people laughed and felt okay about their disappointing lives. *I* felt okay about my disappointing life.

Comedy saved me.