

“Neighbors” by Robert Raymer is one of the stories from his book, *Lovers and Strangers Revisited*. To buy his book or to get more tips on writing, visit his website at <http://www.BorneoExpatWriter.com>

Note: Once you’ve read this story, join the ongoing online discussion on “Neighbors” at the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA) at http://www.melta.org.my/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id=510&forum=5&jump=1

NEIGHBORS

by

Robert Raymer

“I suppose there’s a mess in the back seat,” Mrs. Koh said, shaking her head. She stood in front of Johnny Leong’s terrace house. Her face was flushed and her arms were crossed, as she waited impatiently for Koh and Tan to get out of the car. They had just returned from the hospital. “You had to volunteer our new car, didn’t you? Why didn’t you borrow someone else’s car like I told you, or wait for an ambulance? Now it’s probably ruined. Ruined!”

Koh didn’t bother to respond as he got out of the car. He rubbed his back and stretched it a little. His attention was drawn to the mournful sound of someone playing the saxophone.

Both Koh and Tan were Johnny’s immediate neighbors. The Koh’s terrace house was to the left side of the Leong’s house, while Tan, a bachelor, lived to their right. The medium-income housing area was new, less than two years old. Malays, Chinese and Indians lived together in relative harmony – a mini Malaysia. The streets were narrow, and since the monsoon drains were uncovered and there were no sidewalks, they had to walk – and even talk – in the street, moving only to let a car pass.

Across the street, Miss Chee, a secondary school teacher, unlocked her gate and let out her white Pomeranian Spitz. Miss Chee was tall and thin, with short black hair and razor sharp bangs. Upon noticing Mr. and Mrs. Koh standing in front of Leong’s gate, she waved and crossed the street to join them. She was halfway there when she realized that Tan, the new math teacher at Penang Free School, was standing with them. She blushed, but already it was too late to turn back; he might think she was being rude or was purposely avoiding him.

Mrs. Koh was bent over, looking through the side window of the car. She didn’t see any mess, though she was convinced that the evidence was there somewhere waiting for her to find it. She looked up to see Miss Chee approaching. Before anyone else had a chance to speak, she blurted out, “Hear about Johnny?”

Taken aback, Miss Chee asked nervously, “Were he and Veronica fighting again?”

Mrs. Koh’s beady eyes lit up like shiny coins.

“Did you hear them fighting this morning?” She turned to her husband with an I-told-you-so look on her face.

“Wait a minute, were they fighting?” Tan asked, glancing at Koh.

“No, they *weren’t* fighting,” Koh said, glaring at his wife. “I told you that already. I was outside all morning, and I would’ve heard them.”

“I didn’t think so,” Tan said, and adjusted his glasses. “When Veronica and Lily passed by my house, they seemed fine. In fact, they both smiled and waved liked they usually do.”

Mrs. Koh twitched her nose. “Veronica didn’t say where they were going, did she? Gambling, that’s where! Every Sunday she plays mahjong and I’m sure she’s in debt!” she said, and paused to catch their surprised reaction. “She once tried to borrow money from Koh.”

“She only wanted five ringgit-lah – to buy some vegetables,” Koh said, shaking his head. “She didn’t have time to go to the bank.”

“You’re not her bank either, otherwise she’d be borrowing from you all the time,” Mrs. Koh said. “Thank heavens you didn’t give her any.”

“You wouldn’t let me, and she’s our neighbor!”

“It’s bad enough she always collecting advance money for her catering, and now that Johnny’s dead—”

Miss Chee’s mouth dropped wide open. “Dead?”

“He’s not dead yet,” Koh said to his wife. “He’s still breathing.”

“Dead? Still breathing?” Miss Chee’s mouth went slack, as she looked from Koh to Tan for some answers.

“He’s as good as dead,” snapped Mrs. Koh.

“I don’t understand,” Miss Chee said quietly, in frustration. “Who? Who are you talking about? Johnny? Is he all right?”

“All right? He’s all *wrong*,” Mrs. Koh said. “Him and his whole family!”

“Johnny tried to commit suicide this morning,” Koh said to Miss Chee.

“Wah! Why?”

“Because Veronica ran up all those gambling debts!” Mrs. Koh said.

Koh glowered at his wife. “We don’t know that. We do know that he drank weed-killer. He was drinking it with his beer.”

Mrs. Koh planted her hands squarely on her hips. “Drinking! That’s all that man ever did – sit around and drink. And that – that Veronica! The way she lets that daughter of hers run around like some tramp!”

Miss Chee’s eyes opened wide. “Lily? She’s an all-A student.” She leaned toward Tan and said, “Lily is my best student.”

Tan nodded and smiled politely. He again adjusted his glasses even though he didn’t need to.

Miss Chee asked Tan, “When did you find Johnny?”

“Just before noon,” Koh replied. “Isn’t that right, Tan?”

“Yes – about noon.”

Mrs. Koh nodded. “Koh told me he heard Johnny groaning exactly one hour after Veronica took Lily gambling. I happened to look at my watch when they went by.”

“I didn’t hear the groaning until after Tan called me from his gate,” Koh said, gesturing with his closed fingers to Tan, as if to salute him. “If it wasn’t for Tan, Johnny might already be dead-lah.”

“And *you* had to put him in our BRAND NEW CAR!” Mrs. Koh said. “Just imagine if he died there. All the bad luck it’d bring, and with the New Year just around the corner! We’d have to sell it, and it’s not even two months old!”

Dr. Nathan, an Indian dentist who lived next door to Miss Chee, waved as he slowed down his car, not wanting to hit any of them. He pulled into the driveway. Instead of locking his gate, he smiled and waved again, and then crossed the street to join them. He extended his hand to Koh, who was one of his patients. Koh was a full head taller than him and had a full head of hair, unlike Nathan, who was balding on top.

“A fine Sunday afternoon,” Nathan said.

“Not for Johnny,” Mrs. Koh replied, “he’s dead.”

“Alamak!”

“He’s not dead, yet,” Koh said, and shook Nathan’s hand. “Tan and I had to take Johnny to the General Hospital. He tried to commit suicide by drinking paraquat. We managed to contact his son, and he’s now over there. Veronica and Lily haven’t been told yet. We don’t know how to contact them.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Nathan said, looking as if he had just pulled the wrong tooth. “I never realized. Just last New Year – yes, it was just last New Year – Johnny had that party and everyone was there, having a grand time.”

“Especially Koh,” Mrs. Koh said, eyeing him. “He was so drunk I had to drag him home.”

“I was not drunk – just celebrating.”

“Celebrating, ha! That’s what you call it – you had a hangover for two days and had to miss work!”

“I was on annual leave,” Koh corrected.

“Same thing – you missed work!”

Nathan cleared his voice and asked, “Who found Johnny?”

Nodding her head sideways at Tan, Miss Chee said, “Mr. Tan did. He heard Johnny groaning.”

“I can’t take all the credit, Miss Chee. Your name is Miss Chee, am I correct?”

“Why yes, it is,” Miss Chee said, and her smile widened. “My friends call me Alice.”

“My friends *and* my patients call me, Nathan,” Nathan said, and offered his hand to Tan. Tan shook it and introduced himself.

“Anyway,” Tan continued, “it was Koh who was the first one inside the house. He also called the ambulance.”

“But we decided not to wait,” Koh said. “The hospital was asking all these foolish questions that we couldn’t answer, so we took him in ourselves.”

“In our BRAND NEW CAR!” added Mrs. Koh.

“Really? You have a new car, I never realized,” Nathan said. “I haven’t had a new car since I bought my Proton Saga – our first national car, mind you. We’ve

certainly come along way since Independence, haven't we?" Nathan's smile overflowed with pride. "Now Johnny, he was a good neighbor. Yes, a good neighbor, even though he still owes me for treatment. Root canals aren't cheap, you know."

"That reminds me," Koh said, "my tooth has been hurting again."

"Oh, dear. You mustn't wait, or you could find yourself in a lot of pain. That's what happened to Johnny. He waited until the pain was unbearable."

"Should I call your office for an appointment or..."

Two passing motorcycles drowned out Koh's question and Nathan's reply. Miss Chee's dog barked and feigned a chase. After a few frantic steps, it turned around and came back to Miss Chee.

"Ramli's kids!" Mrs. Koh said, staring down the street after them. "Race here, race there. And last week I saw one of them teaching Lily how to ride. I don't know why Veronica lets her daughter – at that age – run around with boys. I'd never let *my* daughter do that! And today, of all days, she takes Lily gambling."

Nathan scratched his left ear. "Oh dear, I never realized Veronica gambles."

Mrs. Koh was nodding, as she added, "Every Sunday. She once asked me to go with her to her cousin's house in Air Itam. That's where she gambles."

"You told me you had no idea where Veronica went," Koh said, frowning, annoyed. "Johnny's son was trying to reach her."

Mrs. Koh defiantly crossed her arms and said, "It's none of my business where she gambles."

"You should never gamble with your teeth," Nathan said, and nodded to Tan. He took out a business card and passed it to him. "If you ever need a reliable dentist, I live right across the street. Koh here knows where my office is. You can't get more reliable than a neighbor," he added, chuckling.

Ramli, an elderly Malay who sold satay at the night markets, was walking down the middle of the street in their direction. His back was ramrod straight. He nodded to Tan, one of his regular customers, and joined them.

"My eldest daughter tells me Johnny hasn't been at school the past three days," Ramli said. "Then yesterday she saw him walking along the main road carrying his helmet – without his motorcycle. Imagine that!"

Miss Chee asked Tan, in a low voice, "Is Johnny a teacher, too?"

"No," Tan replied, "he's a janitor at my school."

"A dead janitor," added Mrs. Koh.

"Dead? Don't talk about *dead*. No joke-lah!" Ramli gazed from face to face, as though he had missed the punch line to a sick joke. Still, he hoped someone would explain it to him. "So, who's dead? Huh?"

"Johnny, but he's not dead – at least not yet," Koh said. "But he did try to kill himself by drinking paraquat."

"Paraquat? Ya Allah!" Ramli said, and his dark brown eyes rolled upwards to heaven.

"Koh heard him groaning around noon," Mrs. Koh said. "One hour after Veronica took Lily gambling."

"Wasn't it Tan who heard the groaning?" said Miss Chee. She glanced at Tan for confirmation.

Koh nodded. “That’s right. If it wasn’t for Tan, Johnny might already be dead.”

“It has to be about money-lah,” Ramli said to no one in particular.

Everyone was looking at him.

“Why else would he sell his motorcycle?”

“He’s right-lah,” Koh said. “Why else? Unless he was involved with another woman. Was he?”

Tam and Ramli shrugged.

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Mrs. Koh said. “Gambling, drinking, womanizing – what a family!”

“Now I’ll never get that root-canal bill paid,” Nathan said, and grimaced.

“I’m sure Johnny has some insurance somewhere,” Tan said, trying to be helpful.

Koh frowned as if he had stepped on someone’s chewing gum and just found it stuck to his shoe.

“Well if he does, he didn’t buy it from me,” Koh said. “I must’ve asked him a half dozen times. What good did it do me? And I’m his neighbor!”

“Tell me about it! One of my sons had offered to buy his motorcycle for its license plate number. Willing to pay him good money, too,” Ramli said, “and now look what he did – sold it to someone else. A stranger, too.”

Miss Chee was watching her dog go back and forth across the street. She sighed in exasperation and said, “It’s a good thing Veronica has that catering business to fall back on – if worst comes to worst.” She caught Tan’s gaze. “Are you buying from her, too?”

“Well, no – not yet,” Tan replied, “but I was thinking about it.”

“It must be difficult living on your own like that.”

“I’ve been doing it for fifteen years,” Nathan said, “and I can cook, too.”

Miss Chee smiled politely. “Now if Johnny doesn’t make it–”

“He won’t if he drank paraquat,” Ramli said. “That one’s a sure killer.”

“Either way,” Miss Chee said, politely, “I’m sure the good Lord will look after Veronica and Lily.”

“Are they Christians?” Tan asked.

“He has a Christian name, doesn’t he?” Mrs. Koh said. “So do Veronica and Lily.”

“Come to think of it, I don’t think they are,” Koh said, scratching his head. “In fact, I think they’re Buddhists. Or, used to be. With Johnny you could never tell, though. Back in school many of us added Christian names but we weren’t Christian. Even you did, long before you converted.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” Mrs. Koh said. “They’re being misleading.”

Tan said, “I think Johnny told me he was a free-thinker.”

Koh laughed. “That’s Johnny for you – he liked everything *free*.”

“You should know,” Mrs. Koh said, “you were always over there drinking his free beer.”

“You’re just jealous Johnny never asked you to come along.”

“I wouldn’t go over there even if Johnny *and* Veronica begged me to.”

Tan was gazing at the round table not far from Johnny’s gate.

He cleared his voice and said to Miss Chee, “We used to sit right there and talk. The very night I moved in – even though I was a total stranger – Johnny invited me over.

We must've sat up half the night philosophizing about everything under the sun." Guilt crept into his eyes. "Just last night I was over there."

"I saw you." Miss Chee blushed as Tan looked at her with surprise. "I happened to glance down from my bedroom window."

Tan looked up at the window. He then looked at Miss Chee.

"You know, I really think Johnny was just a lonely man."

"You think he's lonely?" Nathan said. "My wife has been dead fifteen years. FIFTEEN YEARS! Johnny can't be lonely, not with a wife and daughter at home. And his son comes visiting often enough."

"Johnny has a son?" Ramli pondered this. "I thought he only has a daughter."

"Danny's his name," Miss Chee said. "He was one of my first students. A bright student at that."

"Yes, we had a long talk at that New Year party," Nathan said. "Danny's a good boy with a good job."

"Good boy, ha!" Mrs. Koh said. "Ever since he became a big shot at the bank he certainly acts like one – living in town and wasting money paying extra rent. What for? A good boy would stay at home and help his father pay the bills, especially the way Veronica gambles and throws away money on Lily – always buying her the latest styles."

"At least Veronica works," Koh said.

Mrs. Koh twitched her nose. "Her food isn't much to talk about – so bland! And she's always asking for advance money. Why can't her son give her some of *his* money? Huh?"

"I wish my elder two sons would settle down and find good jobs like that," Ramli said. "Before I was twenty, I had a job, a house and a wife! Back in those days, boys had more responsibilities."

"It sure would be nice if your sons stopped racing up and down the street," Mrs. Koh said. "The noise is deafening!"

"See! See! That's what happens when grown boys stay at home – they get restless!" Ramli said, his arms raised in surrender. "Only a wife will settle them down. A wife and a job will teach them some responsibilities. If you ask me, Johnny had it too easy. Too easy – has a working wife and only two children. One living on his own like that. Look at me, six of them, and a mother-in law at home who's driving me crazy! You don't see me committing suicide, do you?"

Mrs. Koh was staring past Nathan's shoulder to one of the houses further up the street. "Who's playing that – that thing, anyway?"

"It's a saxophone," Koh said, fingering his mole hair.

"People shouldn't play those things unless they already know how," she said.

"If he doesn't practice," Koh said, "how can he know how? When I was a boy I had an old trumpet and I used to practice ALL DAY." Koh smiled to himself as he closed his eyes, remembering.

Ramli was straining his neck to see around them. He was looking in the opposite direction, down the street.

"Here comes Veronica," he said, and all of them looked.

Veronica and Lily were walking side by side, each carrying several plastic bags.

Koh turned to his wife and said, "Looks like they didn't go gambling after all – just shopping."

Mrs. Koh twitched her nose in defiance. She peered around their car to get a better look.

Miss Chee asked, "Think she knows about Johnny?"

Mrs. Koh shook her head. "I bet she was too busy spending all her money on that daughter of hers to know anything."

"If you ask me," Ramli said, "Johnny had it too easy. Too easy."

"I hope they don't move," Miss Chee said. "Lily is my best student."

"Don't even mention it," Nathan said, "or I'll lose two more patients."

"Of course they'll move," Mrs. Koh said. "Wouldn't *you* move if your husband commits suicide right in your own home?"

"I'm not married," Miss Chee replied, and glanced at Tan.

"Hey, what time is it?" Koh asked. "There's a football match I wanted to watch on TV."

"Oh my, it's nearly two," Nathan said, as he glanced at the time. "I haven't had my lunch yet – no wonder I feel hungry."

"Two? Already? I got to run-lah," Koh said, and hurried next door.

Tan asked, "Who's going to tell Veronica?"

Ramli and Nathan both shrugged as they returned to their respective terrace houses before Veronica and Lily arrived at the gate.

"Not me," said Mrs. Koh. "It's none of *my* business."

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