

Happy Daughter

by Greg Lam

inspired by *Happy*, a short story by Joyce Carol Oates

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At rise, an empty stool in the middle of a small stage. Carol enters. She is an Asian American woman in her early to mid-twenties. She is very talky and a bit woozy, like she's having drinks at the bar. She primarily addresses the audience directly throughout, not the other characters, though she may be looking at them from time to time.

Carol: So where was I? What time is it? (*Checks watch.*) I'm a little frazzled now. I just got back from taking my parents to the airport. Well, my mother, anyway. Geez. I mean, this past couple of days.... so chaotic. I mean, it started when my mom came last week to visit -

Sound of a plane passing overhead.

Carol: Why she wanted to come here to Iowa rather than have me go back to San Fran is beyond me.

Mother: *From offstage.* What a darling little town!

Carol: Oh, she was sooo over the top. It was right off the plane with hugs and "Oh, how pretty you look...."

Mother rushes onstage, thin but a very strong personality. She hugs Carol hard and says:

Mother: Oh, how pretty you look. Simply gorgeous, don't you think so, dear?

Carol: Oh yes. She brought along her boyfriend. Right. She has a boyfriend now. She's not supposed to have a boyfriend. Divorced middle aged Asian women are not supposed to have boyfriends, right?

Boyfriend enters. He's much younger than the mother, a little older than Carol. He's friendly and gregarious, if a bit tacky. They start to shake hands.

Boyfriend: Yes, ma'am. I'm glad to meet you Carol. I've heard so much about you.

Carol: And Caucasian. Did I mention he's Caucasian? Divorced, middle-aged Asian mothers are not supposed to have cute Caucasian boyfriends who are decades younger than they are. Didn't she get the memo? She's supposed to play mah-jong and go on group vacation tours with her other lonely friends. And didn't she give an evil eye to those white guys I dated in High School?

Boyfriend: I'm just so happy to finally meet you! Come here.

The Boyfriend spreads his arms for a bear hug, but the scene freezes as-

Carol: Uh- Next we stopped for drinks on the way to their motel.

Rita, a waitress/host dressed in something black and tight, brings on the set for next scene. She smokes constantly. Small table and three chairs. Bad music plays in the background.

Carol: Which, in Iowa, meant Highway 80 Sunnyside Café, conveniently located just off Highway 80.

Rita finishes setting table, and says in a deadpan monotone:

Rita: Welcome to the Highway 80 Sunnyside Café, conveniently located just off Highway 80. My name's Rita. Table for three? Right this way.

They sit. Rita takes order.

Carol: And I ordered-

Mother: A diet Coke with a twist? Come on! It's us. Live it up.

Carol: And they had-

Boyfriend: Two martinis on the rocks.

Mother: That's our special drink.

Boyfriend: For special occasions like this.

Carol: They have a special drink? Since when? They've been together for like two seconds.

Rita: Two martinis, rocks, dc with lime. Be right back.

Rita exits.

Carol: I never had a special drink with anyone. What's wrong with me?

Mother hands Carol some photos.

Mother: Carol. I'll show you pictures of our trip to Italy.

Carol: Italy? Italy! And we talked-

Mother: So, darling. How is the writing thing? Are you Amy Tan or Margaret Cho yet?

Carol: And when that subject passed it was-

Mother: How about a boyfriend? When do I see a grandson?

Rita enters with drinks. Sets them down semiconsciously while the Boyfriend's eyes wander. Exits.

Boyfriend: So we were both in Tai Chi class together, right? That's how we met. She was my warmup partner.

Carol: Isn't that so sweet?

Carol rolls her eyes or makes a gagging noise. Rita enters.

Rita: Beer nuts.

Rita carelessly tosses a tray of nuts on table, exits.

Boyfriend: Thanks, doll!

He starts eating them.

Carol: And then *she* started talking about *him*.

Mother: Yes. Oh, I know it's sudden in your eyes. You don't think mom should have a boyfriend. But that's how this type of thing is. Someday you'll feel this way. Wait and see, wait and see.

Carol: And I was all: Yes, I guess so, I suppose. But Mother was still-

Mother: He makes me feel young again. After your father left I was all... But now I feel, you know. Like I can live again.

Carol: As... As long as you're OK, Mother. As long as you guys are happy, I said. But then the entertainment started. Oh my God, the entertainment....

Rita enters with microphone. She speaks into it in the same deadpan monotone.

Rita: It's Friday night boys and girls. So you know what that means. It's the Okey-Dokey Karaoke celebration. And I'm your hostess with the mostest.

Carol: Kill me now.

Rita: Let's start out with some Cher. Everybody likes Cher, right?

Carol: They, um, seemed to like it.

Mother and Boyfriend: *Sings* "It's in his kiss, that's where it is!"

Carol: But then afterward Mom's New Boyfriend said-

Boyfriend: For an old biddy, that Cher sure has a hot piece of-

Carol: Moving on... It's best to get past that part quickly.

Scene freeze. Mother and Boyfriend rearrange the chairs to form a car, with the Boyfriend driving, Mother in shotgun, and Carol in back.

Carol: After that, we got into the car, and it was on to dinner.

Mother: I don't care, we can eat anywhere. Is there Chinese in Iowa?

Carol: "Mom, WE are the only Chinese in Iowa." Well I didn't actually say that, but I wanted to. Oh, the ride was loads of fun.

Mother: Should we stop there?

Carol: I don't think that's a good idea.

Mother: No? Is "Bebe's Exotic Club and Grill" not in the Zagats?

Boyfriend: I don't think that's the type of place that's primarily known for its cuisine, hon.

Carol: But we did finally find a place, though.

Rita, the same actress, enters in a slinky Oriental dress. Same deadpan delivery.

Rita: Welcome to the Wok of Life, Iowa's finest Chinese/Polynesian/Miscellaneous Oriental Cuisine. Table for three? Right this way.

Rita carries on the table for three. Exits.

Carol: Everything seemed to be all right at the restaurant, though. They laughed at each other's jokes.

Mother and Boyfriend laugh.

Carol: They held each other's hands.

Mother and Boyfriend hold each other's hand. Rita enters with tray of drinks.

Carol: They ordered drinks.

Rita: Scorpion Bowl, Diet Coke, Suffering Bastard.

Rita exits.

Carol: And, of course, they sipped each other's "exotic" cocktails.

They sip each other's drink.

Carol: And this, well, this was the strangest thing of all...

Rita enters the stage with a microphone.

Rita: And so on Friday Night, it's of course time for the Karaoke Kaos Krew. And we have a special request to start things off.

Carol: I had this sinking feeling in my stomach all of a sudden...

The Boyfriend steps to the microphone.

Boyfriend: It's a honor to be able to sing this to a very special woman.

Mother: He's embarrassing me. Silly man.

Music starts. It's a romantic song. He sings shockingly well.

Boyfriend: "Are you lonesome tonight?
Do you miss me tonight?
Are you sorry we drifted apart?
Does your memory stray to a bright summer day
When I kissed you and called you sweetheart?

Do the chairs in your parlor seem empty and bare?
Do you gaze at your doorstep and picture me there?
Is your heart filled with pain?
Shall I come back again?
Tell me dear, are you lonesome tonight?"

While he sings softly, Carol keeps talking.

Carol: And it was very sweet and stuff, but I don't understand any of it. I don't get how this happens to her. She... She has like this brand new life that has nothing to do with me, or dad, or my brothers or the 25 or so previous years of her life. How does this happen? How does someone turn herself into someone completely different while I wasn't looking? I can barely run my own life. Anyway, all this weirdness kept happening all throughout the visit. They... They even kissed in front of me. *Grimaces*. So, by the end of the visit, I was all set for them to go. At the airport, Mom went to the bathroom and I was in the airport alone with -

Boyfriend: It was nice to meet you.

Carol turns to talk to the Boyfriend for the first time.

Carol: Yeah, it was good of you to come.

Boyfriend: You were weirded out by this.

Carol: No, it was...

Boyfriend: You were.

Carol: OK, yes. I so completely don't get what's going on. Who are you?

Boyfriend: Is it so hard to believe that I could be interested in your mother?

Carol: Well, yes. She was always like this terrifying authority mom figure. Now I gotta see her as a single gal with a dating life. This is just wrong.

Mother reenters, listens to the conversation.

Boyfriend: Your mom's a sweet woman. All she wants, all she ever wanted, is to have a happy daughter. That's it, you know? She just wants you to be happy with yourself.

Carol: She never said that to me.

Boyfriend: No, she probably didn't. But she has said it to me, OK?

Carol smiles. Mother enters. They give each other a hug.

Carol: Oh, mom...

Mother: Good bye, sweetie. Do you need money? Here.

Mother hands Carol some money. Mother and Boyfriend leave with a wave. Carol turns back to the audience.

Carol: And so that was my week. I don't know. They got on the plane, back to California, and then onto Alaska for a two week cruise.

Carol makes a brief gesture of "What the hell?", referring to the two week cruise. She shakes her head. Rita enters with an apron on.

Carol: I don't know. I mean, is it just me? Is all of this so hard to swallow? Or should I look at this as a good sign in the larger scheme of things? If she can do it, why can't I, right?

Rita: Lady, I just work here. Do you want another Diet Coke or what?

Carol: Sure, make it a double. *Rita starts to leave.* Hey, Rita?

Rita: Yeah.

Carol: Do you have karaoke tonight?

Rita: Karaoke's on Friday. Tonight we got bingo.

Rita slaps down a bingo card and exits. In the background, we hear the Boyfriend sing. Carol joins him, looking wistfully at the bingo card.

Carol and Boyfriend:

“Is your heart filled with pain?
Shall I come back again?
Tell me dear, are you lonesome tonight?”

As they sing, we hear Rita calling out Bingo numbers.

Rita: B-15, B-15... G-41, G-41... O-57, O-57... I-33, I-33...

The End