

Knock, Knock?

by James Wong

It was one of those bucket-shaped swivel chairs made of polystyrene, covered in a coarse, yellow-flecked brown material. The sort of material you could draw your fingernails over, feeling the tug and give as you explored its firm, furry ridges. To us, it was massive—easily enough room for two to squirm and fidget, wrestle, and fall off. It’s amazing what a spinning chair has to offer as a playtime prop: escaping crocodiles, giant maggots, or as a first-class spaceship simulator.

But it wasn’t spinning now. In fact, I don’t remember ever seeing it so still. Mum wasn’t saying anything. How could she? She had her face firmly cradled in her hands, the backs of which rested upon her knees. We saw a lot of Mum’s hands back then. Somehow, they were a good thing to watch, like when she baked cakes and was a little too thorough.

“Mum, Mum, Muuum, that’s enough now, there’ll be nothing left for us, Muuum,” my brother or I, or both, would whine as we watched her hands twisting and turning, running the spatula around the mixing bowl, scooping up its valuable contents.

They were also a good thing to watch out for.

“I didn’t mean to do it!” a last-ditch attempt to avoid the inevitable.

“Thwack!” Lesson learned.

My brother blew a raspberry—‘Pbbbbbt’—in my face. We squirmed and tumbled as the raspberry game continued, barely able to catch our breath to load up the next attack from too much laughter. Is there such a thing as too much laughter? We didn’t think so. We were always in a hurry to be happy. It was fun finding out the limits to how much fun could be had, and it came with excitement too if we overstepped the line. Mum’s hands let us know about that. Mum’s hands were always busy. Never this still.

Our wrestling and jostling slowed. I looked up. Flushed face ebbing, grin waning, my eyes unblinking. New territory. It had been quiet for a little too long. First curiosity, then puzzlement, and then... nothing. No scrutiny. No echo. No threat. No Mum.

And before emptiness could draw in anything worse, I looked at my brother. And he looked at me. And the grinning and raspberry wars took over, and we tumbled. But no need to test the limits any longer. Mum wasn’t playing.