

The First Two Pages of “Riviera Red” by Sarah M. Chen
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An Essay by Sarah M. Chen

When I sat down to write my story for Mysti Berry’s third volume of *Low Down Dirty Vote*, I had already spent days sifting through copious amounts of research to come up with a premise. The theme of the anthology was “The Color of My Vote” and I knew I wanted to touch upon the power of the AAPI [Asian American and Pacific Islander] vote, but beyond that, I had no idea.

Usually when I begin a short story, I have a character in mind and a “what if” scenario. With this story, I knew the theme but needed to figure out the hero and conflict. I researched a wide range of subjects that interested me like class inequality, generational gaps in voting, anti-Asian hate crimes, and treating Asian voters like a monolith. I brainstormed and stared out the window until finally—hallelujah!—a character spoke to me in the form of a biracial teen named Emily.

I opened the story with Emily and her parents going to dinner at a mall that had been the target of several smash-and-grabs. Emily’s white conservative father, Joel, laments how their beach community is going downhill, blaming it all on a homeless shelter that recently opened nearby. I pictured their town as a fairly upscale Southern California community where mega mansions and boutique shops populate the southern half, and strip malls, apartment complexes, and chain stores comprise the northern

half. Emily is mortified when her dad mistakes a classmate of hers for a criminal, but she's equally upset by her Chinese mother, Janice, who remains quiet and doesn't come to the classmate's defense.

This got me thinking about Janice and her refusal to get involved, not just at the mall but in regards to the homeless shelter. Why does she not speak up against her husband? Maybe she assumes her voice doesn't matter. Or she thinks unless her business as an art gallery owner is personally affected, she shouldn't risk taking a stand. Maybe defending the homeless shelter isn't an issue she cares enough about.

I knew there was more to her character that I wanted to explore so decided to broaden the scope of the story by adding Janice's POV. What does Janice care about? Does she always look the other way in order to avoid conflict? The more I wrote about Janice, the more complicated she became. Emily began to fall by the wayside.

During my initial research, I had read an article about Eagle's Landing—a mostly white community in Georgia—attempting to secede from Stockbridge to form their own city. Fortunately, voters shot the initiative down, but surely the rift between the two communities will be felt for a long time to come. I decided this would be the perfect backdrop to my story, so I created a similar initiative for my fictional town, Riviera Beach.

I could hear Joel rallying citizens to form their own city. He would make the perfect secession committee president with the expectation that Janice would support

him every step of the way. Problems arise when she tries to remain neutral. I scrapped the entire intro at the mall and instead of using Emily's POV, I open with Janice and her husband as guests on a conservative radio talk show. Janice is extremely uncomfortable while Joel relentlessly plugs the secession campaign, trying to stoke fear into listeners.

My intention with the opening is to give the reader a sense of who Janice is but through the dialogue and actions of the other characters around her—characters who are much more outspoken. Janice is someone who is used to not being heard, which is why she doesn't utter a single word in these first two pages. She's often ignored and doesn't give herself enough credit. I wanted the reader to sympathize with Janice, who is clearly anxious about being a guest on this talk show, but at the same time, the reader isn't entirely sure where Janice stands on the secession campaign. Like Janice herself.

I dropped Emily's POV from the piece entirely once it became clear that this was a hundred percent Janice's story to tell.

The First Two Pages of "Riviera Red"

Janice fidgeted in her chair. The tiny broadcast studio she and her husband sat in was making her anxious. Or maybe it was the pressure of the radio show. Joel instructed her on everything she needed to say and they practiced enough times, but still.

"We've got to look like a united front," Joel had reminded her. "As president of the secession committee, image matters. Otherwise, people

won't take the referendum seriously and they won't go to the polls. We need every single South Riviera Beach resident to vote."

South Bay Scotty, their radio talk show host, sat in a T-shirt and shorts like he'd just returned from the beach, which he probably had. The aging surfer with his scraggly hair and signature wraparound shades perched on top of his head was in stark contrast to her perfectly put-together husband in his designer suit.

"Residents of the South Riviera community are tired of carrying the load for everyone else in Riviera Beach," Joel laid out his usual spiel. "We pay more taxes than North Riviera, yet we get less out of it. Crime has gone way up and what we need is a new police department and new city leaders. We have to start fresh. A new city for a more promising tomorrow."

That was the South Riviera Beach secession campaign slogan that Evelyn, Janice's mother-in-law, came up with. She had it printed on red baseball caps, red T-shirts, and red stickers with the logo she designed herself. Evelyn owned a marketing firm, the same one Joel worked for, so, of course, all the advertising and PR fell on her shoulders. Something she insisted upon, the control freak that she was.

"What about the impending court case?" South Bay Scotty asked. "Any chance the referendum will be declared invalid?"

"Not a chance," Joel said. "It's totally legal and the judge will see the case is a waste of time."

As soon as the California state legislature approved the referendum last year, the city leaders of Riviera Beach sued, saying it violated the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The hearing for an injunction of the referendum was scheduled for next Friday, four days before Election Day.

Janice readied to say her plug. Her husband just had to say "Protect our small businesses. We need our specialty stores and boutique hotels to flourish. Businesses like the Janice Lawrence Gallery on Riviera Street."

She had to remind herself not to sound rehearsed.

Need a gift for that special someone in your life? Come to the Janice Lawrence Gallery for one-of-a-kind pieces. Peruse a curated selection of photographs, homemade candles, and jewelry. All lovingly made by South Bay artists.

Joel thought Janice's photography was a cute little hobby, but Evelyn had stunned everyone by loaning Janice the money to open the business. A gesture that in hindsight should've given her pause, yet Janice couldn't resist the idea of having her own space for her pier photos.

Later, she realized her mother-in-law just wanted to show off “her gallery” to her snobbish friends. Which wasn’t really that shocking. Janice knew the manipulative nature of Evelyn. Plus it wasn’t like Janice was that exceptional of a photographer where she deserved her own gallery. What she did excel at was spotting talent in others. Which led to the first of many confrontations with her mother-in-law.

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