

The First Two Pages: “Tone Deaf” by HC Chan
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edited by Heather Graham (Down and Out Books)

An Essay By Vera Chan

As a reporter/editor/pop-culture anthropologist, I’ve likely written more than a million words (largely all true). As an aspiring novelist, I’ve won a couple awards and honors for works in progress. As anyone in the business knows, success in traditional publishing can be a slog so when the opportunity to publish a short story came, I decided to give it a go. My debut appeared in the *Midnight Hour Crooked Lane* anthology, and astonishingly I was the only first-time author, in the illustrious company of pros and award winners. Second time around, I won the 2023 *Los Angeles Review* Short Fiction Award. So I figured I better keep the shorts coming while shopping the novels.

The next opportunity that popped up was the 2024 Bouchercon anthology. The blind submission wasn’t what made me hesitate: The locale was Nashville, where I’d never been, and the theme was music, which despite early piano lessons I was frankly ill-equipped. But in the rules was this sentence: “You can set it in Nashville or anywhere else the story fits.”

Anywhere? That seemed a reprieve. A sign. I decided to double down on two aspects: create a character who was woefully inept in music despite all her efforts and set it in a San Francisco Chinese music school—about as distinct as you could

get from a honky-tonk or blues club of the southern imagination. The title came naturally: “Tone Deaf.”

This story came together far more easily than I had expected. A school means a young protagonist. As mathematics and music are known for prodigies, I naturally went the other extreme. I then tagged her with the name Quiescent, trading on the acquiescent stereotype of Chinese girls. That one short first paragraph just piles it on the poor girl:

Quiescent Fung was a reverse prodigy. She was color-blind, had two left feet and couldn’t string two notes together without tripping over the chord.

Now if there is one thing that I do, as a Chinese American woman who has volunteer-taught martial arts to college kids, I make my female protagonists fighters. With Quiescent, her resilience comes from reverse exceptionalism. Intrepid incompetence, it turns out, carries its own spirit. After the first brutal, almost bullying, set-up, Quiescent is granted her voice:

That had to amount to something, she told herself.

When she was nine, she Googled female colorblindness and found her condition was uncommon (*one in two hundred girls, versus one in twelve boys.*) She’d written the mutations down in a yellow hardbound notebook, *OPNILW and OPNIMW*, and adorned the silk-finished page with glittery butterfly stickers.

The discovery made her feel special. It had taken a few years for her to understand that she saw things differently and a few more for mother to believe her...

Just like that, the conflict starts brewing. Her wealthy mother Miriam is described as controlling, distant, not loving. Colorblindness is inherited through the father, so poor Quiescent gets no breaks: Her dad is out of the picture and an opportunity to reinforce her mother's selfishness.

Quiescent didn't remember her father, who died when she was four. Her mother only ever mentioned him as the person who "left me widowed," as though widowhood was an object she'd inherited, and not a loss she experienced. They never discussed if the late Eddie Fung mixed up blue shirts for green shirts.

Her mother didn't much care that Quiescent couldn't tell the color of a tomato or strawberry from a chestnut. What she did care about was wringing musical talent from her child. When Quiescent turned six, she was signed up for the Horizon International Academy of Music. Four days a week, not including performances that Horizon held to prove to paying parents that their offspring was learning something.

Not so much with Quiescent. Two years of piano. Two years of Taiko drum. Trumpet. Mandolin. Violin. Her instruments got smaller with every failure, even as her mother's donations got bigger. In the increasingly lavish musical showcases, Quiescent was inevitably exiled to the back, laboring through a cycle of discordant notes.

"Just play softly," Mrs. Yun pleaded. (*Isn't that odd coming from a Taiko drum teacher?*) "As long as you show confidence." Quiescent did develop unusually muscular biceps for a nine year old.

If three stories are a pattern, I apply every short tale with a noir twist and, in this case, a dark humor. "Murderers' Feast" is corporate noir and "Tone Deaf" is Chinese American music school noir. I had expected this tale to evolve into more of a traditional mystery but the classic noir elements persisted:

- the solitary hero / the unloved child

- the cold society run behind the scenes by a powerful few / an indifferent mom
- the futile attempts to conform to societal expectations that aren't ultimately a measure of integrity and honor / incompetent in all music lessons

You get the idea. The music theme allowed me to layer and layer and layer metaphors, while I also had to paint a picture of this school, which would be unfamiliar to most.

She came to see Horizon as a place she could be stowed while her mother was away and not bother Auntie Lainie too much. Quiescent knew more Horizon staff than family members, like the blue-suited, glad-handing development director Walker Lam, the plump-bottomed secretary Lucy Yu-Landesberg who gave her special treats every Chinese holiday and reassuring one-armed hugs after every poor performance, and of course the music teachers — brusque Mrs. Yun on drums, cheery Mr. Olsen on trumpet, long-suffering Ms. Chan who doubled on violin and mandolin. Not all the teachers stuck around. Not her first, the twitchy wild-eyed Mr. Tom, a former piano prodigy whose frayed cuffs gave away his frayed nerves. After he disappeared, older students whispered he'd been locked up in an institution or joined a cruise ship where he played slow jazz improvisation.

In this most unlikely setting and cast of characters, what could possibly go wrong?

“Tone Deaf” turned out in tone—so to speak—like the classics I used to love reading in the old *Alfred Hitchcock/Ellery Queen*/Best of compilations. No matter the opposite direction I took with the character,

being part of a Nashville music anthology really forced me to layer in rhythm that I may not have otherwise taken the time to do.

I am grateful to the judges who read my submission and still thought it a great fit—because it is one of the few stories not set in Nashville. Regardless, all proceeds of the anthology benefit the Nashville Public Library and that’s what’s important. I hope y’all enjoy this piece and all the others.

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Veteran journalist, published author, and aspiring novelist Vera HC Chan has worked at the nexus of journalism and technology, from Bay Area papers to the world's biggest online destinations (Yahoo! and Microsoft's MSN), and is now as director of news & media at [Steelwork](#), a narrative architecture agency. Her fiction accolades include awards from Sisters in Crime and Women’s National Book Association Literary Awards, SF chapter. On the shorts side, she won [The Los Angeles Review 2023 Short Fiction Award](#) (“These Poor Mothers”), and her work appears in [Tales of Music, Murder & Mayhem: Bouchercon Anthology 2024](#) and [Midnight Hour](#). She also produced the nonfiction community memoir, [Working the Way: Martial Artists on Their Career Journeys](#), to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the internationally renowned University of California Martial Arts Program in Berkeley. Find more about her work at <https://verahcchan.com/>.