

Sidedoor Season 2 Ep. 8 Grandma Turned Me into a Ghost Final Transcription

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Tony Cohn: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Tony Cohn.

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Tony Cohn: Who were the very first people who helped you solidify your identity? I mean, the people who really influenced how you see yourself and how you interact with the world? For most of us, that's the role our families play, but in this episode on Sidedoor, we hear from a writer whose childhood experiences with a family member, her grandmother, make a strong case for why family members aren't always the best identity-shapers. Anelise Chen is Taiwanese-American, West Coast-raised, and, among many other things, she's *The Paris Review's* mollusk correspondent. There, her essays are equal parts science, history art and memoir and her experimental debut novel, "So Many Olympic Exertions," was released in June of 2017. We met Anelise when she visited D.C. this summer for the Smithsonian's first-ever Asian American Literature Festival. For three days, some of the best writers in the country converged on Washington for a weekend full of creative expression, cultural celebration, and camaraderie. Anelise visited us in the Sidedoor studio and read her essay, "Who Haunts." It makes for a different kind of Sidedoor episode, but we hope you'll enjoy this story as much as we did, after this quick break.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: As promised, here's Anelise Chen with her story, "Who Haunts?" Just a note before we begin. The story isn't about mature subject matter, but it contains some sentences that might give sensitive listeners pause.

Anelise Chen: Once, when I was in fourth grade, my grandma called me over to tell me that according to her Four Pillars of Destiny, astrological calculations, my *ba zi* chart made me susceptible to seeing ghosts. She said this like I'd caught a disease and I should live my life accordingly from that point forward.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: After she announced this news, she went back to watching her Taoist soap opera. Obviously, I had questions. Susceptible? Ghosts? We didn't exactly have a conversational relationship. We spoke maybe five phrases to each other in Taiwanese, consisting of, "have you eaten," "what are you doing here," "come here, do something for me," "go away," and her favorite, "*ni zo moh yong*, you're so useless." A drawn-out ghost conversation was clearly beyond anything we could handle vocabularily. Plus, I was afraid to linger too long next to her because she was a master of exploitation. She tended to see people as coal mines or virgin forest or, to give you the simile my aunts preferred, as coins of money. She pounced on perceived idleness like some corporate auditor. Nimble little hands were put to use. She'd park my sister and me on tiny stools for the loathsome task of hammering open raw

ginkgo nuts because it saved her a few bucks to get the unshelled kind. Raw ginkgo, in case you didn't know, smells like a festering, oozing thing. So, that day, when she told me about the ghosts, I ran out of the living room, shouting something about homework.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: My first worry was that if this ghost-seeing trait was in my *ba zi*, had I been seeing ghosts all along? How could I know? I summoned every piece of knowledge I had about ghosts. One - It is a person, but see-through. Two - It has a scary face. Three – It's an orb of light that wears a white sheet with eye holes cut out of it. Four - It goes "ooooohhh...ooooohhh."

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: I flipped through my memories and decided that I had probably never seen anything like a ghost. Unless, however, the ghost appeared to me on Halloween, which would be a smart tactic for an undercover ghost, like Quasimodo escaping from his tower on that opportune day when everyone gets to dress up like an ogre. Nobody yet had come to me with a plausible ghost costume. My powers must not have kicked in yet. Maybe when I got my period. That was my default answer for everything back then.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: Two years later, my period came, but still no ghosts. It's true, I wasn't looking very hard. In fact, I really didn't want to see a ghost, but now that I was 12, the idea of, "having a destiny" was newly appealing. Perhaps my destiny was to be a ghost whisperer. I tried to weave this into some kind of romantic fantasy. Christina Ricci kissing Casper the friendly ghost, transforming him into a real boy.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: At first, it was the small things that I attributed to grandma's bad mood. Lately, it had become a survival tactic to ignore grandma, because if my sister and I absorbed everything she said, we would have jumped into the pool with weights attached to our feet. It had something to do with us being girls. Something about being inherently useless, *moh yong*. It was like we were dirty dishwater thrown out of the door. It was like she was raising a pig for someone else to slaughter. Depreciation in rapid jumps, a stock ticker sinking fast, an instinctive desire to rid oneself of worthless goods.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: No matter what we did, we were always doing something wrong. She was like a roving camera recording every transgression, every kibble of cereal consumed, every item of clothing that looked a little bit nice, as though to provide enough evidence for the grand jury. If we ate, we were pigs; but if we didn't eat her leftovers, we were ungrateful food wasters. If we slept, we were slothful; if we stayed awake, we were sexually overcharged, itchy between the legs.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: Simply existing in her line of sight was enough of a transgression. So, we learned to disappear, learned to play piano in pianissimo, kicking that pedal down to mute. We learned to teleport ourselves from room to room. If she caught us, we paid the consequences. If she caught us reading a book, she would say, "Your eyes are going to fall out." Eating breakfast, "You're fat." Quietly doing homework, "You sure wasted a lot of time on that." Taking dad to the airport, "Are you leaving because you can't stand your wife and daughters?" Her words burned holes into us. A feeling of uneasiness began to follow me around, hovering just over my shoulder. I stopped looking into mirrors, washed my face with my eyes shut tight.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: My sister and I had certain defensive strategies. Whenever we heard her go on about our bad behavior to aunts, uncles, the strangers from the cultish Taoist temple she belonged to, we would mumble to each other in English, like a spell, "Grandma's so stupid. I hate Grandma. I wish she were dead." She didn't know any English, so we could say whatever we wanted. We said the words, "grandma," and "dead," and "die" so frequently in her presence, she must have thought it was grammatical scaffolding, a sound unit like, "and then," or "I am." I wonder if she ever figured it out. "Why doesn't Grandma just die?"

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: Grandma stopped going outside and retreated deeper into the house. She began waging a compulsive campaign of lock checks. If I walked down the driveway to pick up mail, the door would be bolted shut when I came back. She drew the curtains. The house grew dark and stuffy. She looked like one of those fish with no eyes that live near undersea volcano vents, shunned from the light.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: I was in high school when the objects finally began moving around in my room. By then, I had been waiting for these hauntings for so long it was no big thing. I was a full-blown teenager now, cynical, angry, exploding with acne. I laughed in my ghost's face! You can't scare me! My ghost was stupid and prissy. Little things, like flower scrunchies or small bottles of cheap perfume went missing and then reappeared in a different place, looking rumpled and used.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: I would pick up these poltergeist objects and shake them. Where had you gone? Tell me what you saw! Chocolates disappeared, which, now that I thought of it, this particular choco-ghost had been haunting me for years. All those missing fundraiser M&Ms, the dwindling bars of Ferrero Rocher toffees, my school-made Easter egg nests, suddenly bereft of their Cadbury eggs. The fox would come in the night.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: Door knob turning in the dark. Squeak, squeak, squeak. A light switching on and off. More unexplainable activity. Pulling into the driveway, a flash of a curtain opening, closing. My house key would be rendered unresponsive. Ringing the bell was futile. "I need my swim bag," I'd shout at the orange walls. "Please let me in." I'd return later with my parents, and the door would be unbolting, and miraculously, Grandma would be home, microwaving a dinner for

herself. No, she hadn't heard me ringing and ringing. She must have been asleep all afternoon. I go to my room: three chocolate casualties.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: In the smoky temple, when she was still strong enough to oversee the prayer ceremonies on important holidays, I would sometimes see forms, curling and curling in patterns. It had a pattern like breathing. I saw it and breathed it in and traced it as it came back out, because there was time, because we women always had to do the devotions after the men. Double the lung cancer, double the hallucinations. Lucky women of the sloppy prayer seconds. As we knelt there inhaling this curling, carcinogenic breath, I wondered why she hated us so much. What happened to her? Couldn't she see that she was one of us?

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: I won't go into all the hauntings I've experienced since then, because after I went to college, the incidents only increased. Except, it was strange how I was not only seeing ghosts, but becoming one myself. I recognized other ghosts because I had learned to adopt their ways. Ghosts mumbled in an uncertain, wavering voice, mildly irritating, but harmless. Shutting tight your eyes actually does make you temporarily invisible, at least until he comes.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: On film, a ghost registers as a fuzzy blur. She winces, blinks, jerks involuntarily, impossible to capture. A ghost may be so plain that she fails to stand in relief to anything behind her. So, it becomes possible to see right past her, as though her opacity were diminished. However, ghosts can evade criminals more easily than the buxom and rosy-cheeked. They avoid eye contact and dress as dowdily as possible. Loose clothing and sneakers will usually do it, or an ugly hat that covers your whole face. The preferred movement for walking down dark streets alone at night is the silent scuttle. If you're not very good at being invisible, you should try carrying pepper spray. Every year, my powers kept getting stronger. Now, the ghost followed me outside, into the street, walked with me to class. It kept my head bowed down, pinned my arms to my sides, pinched my mouth shut. If ever I felt an urge to speak, it would redouble its efforts, and I would leave class sweating through my clothes. The effort it took to fight the ghost. From there, it followed me to parties, clouding over like atomic fallout. I steered toward dark empty spaces. I would often find myself alone in the bedroom with all the coats. Loss of identity, I imagined a therapist writing in her files. Plummeting mercury, stiff to the touch, blood pressure zero over zero. How to know if your house is haunted: One - If you can't find things because they are always getting misplaced, such as your wallet, keys, contact lens case. Two - When you hear laughter and it startles you because it doesn't really sound like your own. Three - If you come home to find your apartment messier than you remember, as though someone had spent hours playing hide and seek. Four - If you are spooked by the curtains fluttering at the open window. One day, I called my dad and talked to him for three hours because I wasn't sure I existed. When did I become a ghost? Didn't I used to be so strong? Wasn't I judge of the underworld? How did I become this flimsy, invisible thing?

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: This is how hauntings happen, he said. History is a sheet that smothers the present moment. Haunted people feel suffocated by this sheet, and even though their families

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love them very much, she still can't throw off the sheet, which looks like a cheap Halloween costume anyway. Right?

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: I thought of the person who had thrown this sheet over my head. Why did she do it? Why did she see my sister and me, these solid, unbreakable girls, and want to cover us up in a white sheet? Perhaps when she was young, someone had told her that she was dirty water thrown out of the door and a drop got in her ear and infected her brain. She couldn't help it.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: When Grandma passed away, my mom drew open all the curtains for the first time in 20 years. I went home to help her sort through Grandma's things. They'd already moved her furniture out from the room and staged new furniture. This would be the guest room; my room when I came to visit.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: I hadn't stepped inside her adjoined bathroom for years. I took a deep breath and thought, "now it's all over." But when I turned on the tap, the water that gushed out was bright red. I jumped and called for my mom. "Oh, it's just rust," she laughed. Together, we watched the water run and run until it ran clear.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: That was Anelise Chen, reading her story, "Who Haunts?" After a quick break, we'll speak with Anelise to discuss the relationship that fractured her family and how they dealt with her Grandmother's trauma. Stay with us. We'll be right back.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: In Anelise Chen's story, "Who Haunts?," she talks about growing up in a multi-generational, suburban, California household with her Grandmother. We had the opportunity to sit down with Chen and hear a little bit more about her story.

Anelise Chen: (Laughs).

Tony Cohn: She says she decided to write the story after her Grandmother passed away in 2013.

Anelise Chen: So, this story is about my Grandmother, but actually, I think it's also a story about family and how families stick together. We have always lived together. Um, for as long as I can remember, she was definitely always present in our lives.

Tony Cohn: But shortly after she died, Chen's Grandmother started showing up in her dreams; fulfilling the prophecy of Anelise seeing ghosts. It was around this time that she decided to write about her Grandmother.

Anelise Chen: I tried to start writing a collection of essays about, about her, but um, I realized that I had no wisdom and I, it will take me some years to get there. (Laughs). I want to be able to talk about her like a real, complete person, but um, maybe I just haven't figured out how to do that just yet.

Tony Cohn: Even without the wisdom that long periods of healing time offers, Chen has thought a lot about her Grandmother and does have some perspective on what made living with her Grandma so hard.

Anelise Chen: When people become like this, I think its always because of fear and she definitely feared losing control and she didn't understand the culture and we couldn't help her bridge the... Yeah, she was just afraid. I mean, she would go, she would check the doors constantly and you know, she had all the windows pasted over. Um, she never felt like she got enough love.

Tony Cohn: And we heard a little bit about this in the story, but there was a cultural divide for Chen's Grandmother.

Anelise Chen: I grew up in Temple City, California, which is now a predominantly Asian-American community. She had an idea about how girls were supposed to behave. So, in Chinese, it's called, "父权" So, it's just basically patriarchy. She felt threatened and afraid and she was always trying to control our behavior and we refused.

Tony Cohn: But the issues weren't just cultural. Even though Chen's parents spoke the same language as her Grandmother, there was no way to overcome the meanness that caused the rift between her Grandma and the rest of the family.

Anelise Chen: It's difficult to love a cruel person and I think the inability to love translates into guilt. And so, the guilt is always there because you can't love. (Laughs).

Justin O'Neill: Yeah.

Anelise Chen: Yeah. I respect my parents a lot because they were so determined to just, to love my Grandma and it's not their fault that it didn't work.

Tony Cohn: Anelise believes that relationships like hers and her grandmother's don't ever fully resolve, but with time, she and her family are working to confront her Grandmother's abuse and her family's trauma.

Anelise Chen: Though, I mean, every generation passes down their issues to the next generation and it takes so long to, to undo these patterns. So, so my Dad reminds me of my Grandmother; especially in his, he has this inclination to retreat and to hide away and to shut out the outside world. And I also do that. I mean, I'm writing a whole column about molesks. Um, I, I do the same exact thing. So... (Laughs). So, yeah. It takes a lot of, a lot of work to undo the patterns and behaviors.

[MUSIC]

Anelise Chen: That'll just come with time, I'm sure. (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Tony Cohn: If you want to find more of Anelise Chen's work or learn more about other fantastic writers who were featured at the Smithsonian's Asian American Literature Festival, check it out at si.edu/Sidedoor.

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Tony Cohn: The original score you heard today, during Anelise's reading was composed by Nico Porcaro.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Our theme music is by Breakmaster Cylinder. And, we've been asking for reviews in Apple Podcasts and you guys have delivered! Thank you! And if you have anything else you want to know about the Smithsonian, you can ask us there. We'll keep an eye out for your comments and questions so please keep them coming.

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Tony Cohn: Our production team is Justin O'Neill, Stacia Brown, Jason Orfanon, Gabe Kosowitz, and Jess Sadeq! Extra support comes from John Barth, Genevieve Sponsler, Barbara Rehm, and Elisabeth Pilger. I'm your host, Tony Cohn. Thanks for listening!

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