

BODACIOUS! THREE REALMS

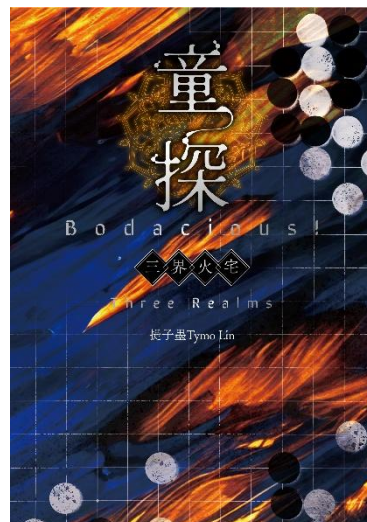
童探 Bodacious! 三界火宅

When a string of spontaneous human combustions roils Taipei, a child prodigy joins forces with police to crack the case. Applying the logic of the game of go, this youthful detective penetrates the confusing and contradictory web of clues to uncover a devious stratagem behind the deaths.

Taipei. Midsummer. Three events of spontaneous human combustion are linked by a mysterious phrase branded into the chests of the charred bodies: "The Buddha is gone. The world burns." Running out of leads, police detectives turn to the child prodigy who helped them on a previous thorny case in hopes of catching a serial killer.

With a Wechsler IQ score of 145, child detective Tung Chi-Chieh is the youngest person of Asian descent to ever serve on the board of Mensa International. He has passions for logical deduction and criminal psychology, and has developed a "peerless" methodology of crime detection based on the principles of the strategy game go. As the investigation deepens, Chi-Chieh and the police detectives uncover disturbing events obscured by the immolations: acts of child sexual abuse linked to a prominent family, and a deadly vendetta that has lain dormant for decades. Clearly, some of Taipei's rich and famous have dark secrets they are loathe to reveal.

Bodacious! Three Realms takes a passage from the *Lotus Sutra* as its central theme: "the world burns as a house on fire". This Buddhist text describes the human condition of being so absorbed in the pursuit of our desires that we are oblivious to the danger of our predicament, like people asleep in a burning house. In this tense crime thriller, the famous passage becomes a commentary on creeping moral decay – when we unwittingly play with fire, the fire will eventually consume us. Casting its gaze over an oppressive society and the dark shadows cast by childhood trauma, *Bodacious! Three Realms* transcends its genre



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roots, delivering penetrating depth and top-notch entertainment in a feat that has earned the praise of Martin Edwards and other luminaries of international crime fiction.

Tymo Lin 提子墨

Tymo Lin is Taiwan's only international author who is a member of Crime Writers of Taiwan, Crime Writers of Canada, and the British Crime Writers' Association. His novel *Wake Me Up at Happyland* was exhibited at the 2018 Frankfurt International Book Fair. In 2023, the Thai language version of the same novel was published by Piccolo. Currently, he is enjoying a long stay in a small farming community on the west coast of Canada.

BODACIOUS! THREE REALMS

By Tymo Lin

Translated by Roddy Flagg

Prologue: The Buddha is gone

I have two mothers.

One appears in the daytime.

I call that one mother.

The other one only appears at night.

I call that one the demon's mother.

And I am her demon, burning in the flames.

Liu Man-tsu held the flame of the stainless-steel lighter to the wicks of the candles on their tall silver holders. Then, rubbing her hands together, she took a moment to appreciate her work: a romantic dinner, perfectly prepared. Atop the Franz hand-painted porcelain serving platters sat delicious dishes, piping hot; embroidered placemats complemented two sets of Royal Doulton cutlery.

Happy with the effect, she looked up and out of the two-story picture window. The sky hung like blue velvet over Xinyi. In the distance the lights of the skyscrapers twinkled and above them all towered Taipei 101, stretching up to the clouds. It was an expensive view. Something she took hard-won pride in, after over a decade of shame.

When she was twenty-five, she had fled a violent and abusive marriage, endured the pain of leaving her three-year-old daughter with her mother-in-law. Bruised and battered, she traveled through the night to reach Taipei. Even in the capital she lived in constant fear of her husband tracking her down, dragging her home, back to that nightmare existence.

He had begged her not to leave, as he always did. Kneeling at her feet, weeping and wailing, repenting and promising. Her love for her daughter usually kept her from leaving, but it was never long before the return of the anger, the kicks, the punches. It was like living in a whirlpool. Constant suffering and no way out.

She knew abandoning her daughter made her a bad mother. Hsiao-shih still needed her, but she left nevertheless, simply to protect herself. On the nights she spent huddled in bed weeping, she consoled herself with the thought that no matter how brutal a man her husband was, she did not believe he was capable of raising a hand to his own daughter. And that her mother-in-law was herself a formidable woman, more than capable of protecting her granddaughter.

If only there had been someone to protect her. From the kicking, from the stamping, from the bottles across the head that left her dazed and bleeding.

A freshly showered Chiu Fu-jen emerged from the master bedroom. He had been exhausted when he got home from work, but a shower and a change of clothes had livened him up. He joined her at the picture window, wrapping his arms around her.

“So, my little chef, what delicacies do you have for us today?”

“Like I’ve got the time to play chef! It’s all freshly delivered from Danny’s Steakhouse. That’s prime ribeye steak. Tiger prawns from Australia. Oh, and Basque cheesecake for dessert!”

“Since when have Michelin-star restaurants done deliveries?” he asked.

Liu Man-tsu smiled as she took the covers off the platters. “Since forever. All the high-end places had to make changes during lockdown. And these aren’t ordinary steaks, by the way. American ribeye, smoked for five or six hours at a low temperature. They’ll be the exact same taste and texture as at Danny’s!”

She had been with Chiu Fu-jen for three years. Like her, he had been married before, and like her, had no inclination to remarry. To the outside world, though, they seemed like husband and wife. Chiu Fu-jen was a senior executive with a tech firm and, while not as handsome as her former husband, was a kind and attentive partner.

She had spent several years in Taipei alone, making a name for herself in marketing as the sector moved online, then using her earnings to set up an online store selling mostly to women. She had, at long last, won her economic independence, but her broken relationship with her daughter was something money could not fix. Her ex-husband and his mother had poisoned Hsiao-shih’s mind against her. She didn’t even know what she would look like now, in her junior high uniform.

“I’ve warmed it all up, just like the instructions said. Come on, let’s eat!” she said.

Chiu Fu-jen glanced at the pair of wine glasses on the table: “Ah, but with fine food and a fine woman... I need a fine wine!”

Liu Man-tsu called after him as he went into the kitchen. “There are a few bottles of the Chateau Croix Mouton in there. Or the California old vine red? You choose.”

Chiu spent a moment or two checking the contents of the cooler, then came back grinning, bearing a bottle of red wine and a corkscrew: “Let’s go French. The Chateau—”

He stopped mid-sentence, struck dumb by the sight before him.

A tongue of flame spouted from the center of Liu Man-tsu’s collarbone; her entire chest started to glow, lit by some internal fire. The flame ignited her hair, the silk of her clothes, the napkins, the tablecloth.

Liu Man-tsu looked down at her burning body as she careened about the room, screaming, knocking furniture and ornaments to the floor. The flames trailed behind her, catching the sofa, the lampshade, the curtains. Chiu Fu-jen, panicked, yelled at her to lie down and roll and then ran to get the fire extinguisher from the front door.

The sprinklers in the ceiling started to spray water into the room, but Liu Man-tsu was already on the balcony, stumbling, screaming.

A second later she was falling over the railings, plummeting headlong the twenty or so floors down the side of Xinyi Imperial Residences. There was a crash and a thud as she went through the glass roof of the lobby below and hit the marble floor underneath.

A few flames still licked from her corpse, casting a dark red glow on the blood and brains splattered from her shattered skull.

Forensics got there first, sealing off the lobby and erecting a police-issue blue tent over the corpse before the firefighters and the criminal investigations squad arrived. The tent served two purposes: to keep any evidence safe from the weather and to save any residents who happened to be looking down from their balconies from a distressing sight.

Yang Chia-sha and her team arrived at Liu Man-tsu's apartment to find it thoroughly soaked by the sprinklers. The charring of a recent fire, though, was still obvious.

Yang Chia-sha listened to Chiu Fu-jen's description of events, focusing on her notebook to hide her mix of skepticism and confusion. Chien Te-le's disbelief, on the other hand, went unconcealed.

"Fire just burst out of her chest?" he asked.

Chiu Fu-jen, dripping wet and in shock, stammered out a reply: "Yes! It was like a volcano. Her chest was glowing red and she caught fire..."

"And then she fell from the balcony into the lobby?"

Chiu Fu-jen looked to the balcony, nodding frantically, weeping, brow furrowed.

Yang Chia-sha briefly recalled the lantern with a human face from the Ghost Lantern movie and imagined it spinning to and fro between the dining table and the balcony before falling screaming to the lobby below.

She also remembered what the more experienced officers had taught her about apparent accidental deaths at home: the partner is always your prime suspect. Chiu Fu-jen's statement certainly left plenty of room for suspicion. How, exactly, was his partner's body meant to have suddenly burst into flame and caused all this destruction?

She put her pen away: "Okay. But we'll need to ask you to come down to the station for further questioning."

Chiu Fu-jen's expression changed, a little anger coming through. "Oh, so now you think I had something to do with Man-man's death?"

Chien Te-le took over, with the usual formulation: "Not at all, it's just a matter of following our investigative procedures. We'd like you to help us understand a bit more of the detail of what happened."

With that, he nodded at Yang Chia-sha to say he could take things from there.

Yang Chia-sha took the opportunity to retrace Chiu Fu-jen's steps, as he had described them. First, to the wine cooler in the kitchen. It turned out the wine cooler was taller than she was, with two zones for keeping bottles at two different temperatures. In the upper section, bottles of red wine from various vineyards sat in beech racks. In the lower section and at a slightly lower temperature, the racks held white wines.

She turned and walked into the hallway at the entrance to the apartment, the plastic disposable overshoes covering her flats rustling quietly against the carpet as she went. She looked about. On her right was another hallway, leading to the lounge and the two bedrooms. To the left, the dining room where it had all happened, with the picture window, the door to the balcony, and a dining table left in disarray by the firefighters' hoses.

So, Liu Man-tsu had been sitting at the table, facing away from the window. Then she caught fire and ran back and forth between the dining room and the lounge, setting fire to things as she went. Maybe she'd heard Chiu Fu-jen telling her to lie down and roll and headed to the balcony, where there was more space? Then tripped over one of the ornaments or pieces of furniture out there and gone head-over-heels over the railing?

So where had he been standing when she fell?

Yang Chia-sha looked at the sodden carpet just inside the door to the balcony, still splattered with the foam the firefighters used. The balcony outside, and the outdoor sofa and coffee table, were covered with the powder from a fire extinguisher. She ran through all the different scenarios that might have led to Liu Man-tsu going over that railing, and couldn't help but ask herself: Did she really trip over the furniture? Could she have been knocked over the railing by the force of the fire extinguisher?

She was still mulling over the possibilities when she was interrupted by the vibrations of her cell phone. She looked at the screen for a few seconds before hurrying from the apartment and catching the elevator just as it departed for the first floor.

She pushed her way through the door into the lobby, where the uniform on duty was quick to raise the police tape sealing off the scene and let her pass. Two forensics officers, both in coveralls and masks, were squatting outside the police tent, gathering evidence left from Liu Man-tsu's fall. They looked to be finishing up and she knew they would soon be moving up to the apartment.

One of them spotted Yang Chia-sha and called to someone inside the tent. A corner of the tent flap was raised and a white latex glove emerged, beckoning her inwards.

"Got anything for me, Dr. Leng?" she asked as she walked over and bent to enter the tent.

The medical examiner's expression was mostly concealed behind her mask, but there was a keen glint to her eyes which said yes. She gestured for Yang Chia-sha to approach the twisted and charred remains of Liu Man-tsu. A plastic sheet had been placed over the corpse's face, perhaps for fear of distressing Yang Chia-sha, but the burned mess of the torso remained exposed.

Silently, Dr. Leng raised a finger to point at the middle of the corpse's chest then looked up at Yang Chia-sha, her eyes wide and questioning.

Yang Chia-sha's eyes widened too. She even gasped. There was something strange there. A single line, a little over an inch long, of what looked like handwritten Chinese characters, bronzed into burned flesh.

The Buddha is gone. The world burns.

Chapter 1: Endless Summer

I was seven years old when, in a single night, my young world collapsed. God stole from me the person I needed the most. Then He crumpled me up like wastepaper, leaving me crushed, lost, helpless. He tossed me aside like litter and I landed in a room filled with white light, huddled by curtains through which the sun never shone.

He took her.

Then in return, gave me him.

The boy whose life would become intertwined with mine.

My mother died of cirrhosis of the liver. It was a long illness but one that did not show itself at first, except in a tendency to feel tired and weak. For several months my father had me stay with my aunt. The next time I saw my mother she was on her deathbed.

I'll never forget that room. My mother, lying alone in that hospital bed, seemed so very very far away. My father and aunt kept a tight hold on me, only letting me look at her from the doorway.

She was thin and weak, her face grey. The sheets were twisted about her and I could make out two swollen legs and the spiderwebs of broken veins across her skin.

"Is she having a baby? I'd like a little brother.... When can they come home?" I swung on my father's hand, hoping for a chance to break free and run to my mother's side.

Perhaps it was my foolish talk that woke her. Her eyes opened just a crack and she looked over at us. Those eyes, ringed with dark skin, grew bigger and bigger and I saw that smile I knew so well.

The smile of watching me throw pink blossoms into the air underneath the cherry tree in the garden. That glorious smile of sitting on the rocks by the river as I kicked up sprays of water with my tiny feet. That smile of sitting back at the table and watching as I enjoyed some delicious meal she had made. That smile...

She was so close to me yet felt so distant. She lifted herself up on arms as thin as sticks and gave a feeble wave, gesturing me over. My father pulled me away. Away from the doorway and the faint light shining through it. From the trembling arm outstretched to me. From her eyes, so sunken, so full of longing.

I was led down the long hospital hallways. Everywhere I looked I saw my mother's smile. I saw that smile again, on her corpse, placed there by the undertakers, as she lay on the white lace interior of her casket.

My father and aunt were quick to arrange the funeral. A crematorium, only a week after she passed away. A simple ceremony, a family funeral attended only by a few relatives from the Tsou side, my father's side, of the family. There were none of my mother's friends or relatives there.

Those on my father's side who did attend were of the younger generations. They said it was because of the old superstition: it is unlucky for the old to attend the funerals of the young.

But even at that age I could tell my mother had never been liked by her in-laws. Her own father, opposed to her marriage to my father, had long ago disowned his daughter.

It was only years later I learned my mother came from a military family. As a young man, her father fought the Japanese for the eight years of the Second Sino-Japanese War. He had even been at Luguo Bridge, where the war started. Living through that gave him, and others of his now-elderly generation, prejudices against the Japanese. How could he bless the marriage of his daughter to a half-Japanese husband? Much less some playboy type who had been educated in Tokyo.

I never understood how those prejudices and hatreds could outweigh the happiness of their children.

There were no other kids at the funeral, so I took particular notice when one arrived, late and led in by his mother, the click-clack of her high heels on the polished stone floor echoing from the chapel walls. She had her head lowered and a boy about my age in tow. They walked past empty chairs and took a seat at the back, by the window.

During the long minutes of the minister's eulogy and prayers, I twisted in my seat to sneak glances at the pair. The woman was not dressed to catch the eye – a navy-blue jacket and skirt. But it was clear even to me she had spent time on her hair and make-up and though her head was lowered over the prayerbook I could see long curled eyelashes in constant motion.

The boy seemed to sense my gaze and looked up, wide-eyed under his fringe. He stared directly at me. I'd never seen eyes like his. So limpid, so clear. His huge pupils left barely any white to be seen. His skin, though, was fair, with a healthy pink glow in the cheeks. The sun shined through the swaying curtains and illuminated him, as if he wore a golden halo.

Those delicate doll-like features seemed almost unsuited to a boy and yet somehow suited him. He looked just like a candlelit angel, gazing at me, expressionless. Then one corner of his mouth curled and he gave me a wicked smile before mouthing six words.

“What. The. Fuck. You. Looking. At?”

Shocked, I turned back and looked down at my prayerbook, trying to read along with the minister's words. When we all joined in the “Amen” I twisted around for another look.

As if knowing what I would do, he looked up just as I turned and this time gave me an entirely different smile. It was warm this time, accompanied by a light shining from his eyes and two dimples that appeared as the corners of his mouth lifted. I started to doubt myself. Had I misunderstood what he had mouthed at me? Had he said those words?