

ZIHAO

Written by
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A beleaguered son confronts his fears in an effort to overcome his unscrupulous father.

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BLACK SCREEN

A phone RINGS. A MALE VOICE answers.

MALE 1 V.O.

Hello?

A second MALE VOICE responds.

MALE 2 V.O.

He won't listen to reason.

MALE 1 V.O.

Then we'll need to convince him to listen... Do it.

FADE IN

EXT. STREET -- DAY

A beautiful young GIRL's face. BAI (6) is of Asian descent. She's looking at a store window, smiling wistfully at the items behind the glass. Her light summer dress floats on the breeze. Nearby, a well dressed woman, the girl's MOTHER (30), kneels tending to a small dog.

Suddenly, a black van with no windows screeches to a stop behind the girl. Two THUGS (THUG #1 Male and THUG #2 Female) in black masks jump out of the open side door. In an instant, Thug #1 covers her mouth with his hand and hauls her from the bustle of the open street. Her MUFFLED SCREAMS cut the air as she is dragged, kicking, into the darkness of the van.

Thug #2 jumps in and slides the door closed. Her Mother SCREAMS for help, but it's too late. The van peels away.

MAIN TITLE: ZIHAO

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE -- DAY

ZIHAO (17) works the front counter. He smiles as he hands MR. XIANG his change and comes out from behind the counter to hold the door open for his elderly friend and loyal customer.

ZIHAO

Most definitely... Okay then you have a great day.

The door CHIMES as Zihao pulls it open.

MR. XIANG

Good bye Zihao, See you tomorrow.

The old man smiles and waves as he leaves the store with his purchase. Zihao pats him on the back as Mr. Xiang slowly shuffles his way past.

With the lull in customers, Zihao takes the chance to straighten up merchandise. He works on some lower shelves in the rear of the store when the door CHIMES again. He calls out over his shoulder.

ZIHAO

Good morning, I'll be right...

A glance up at the convex security mirror cuts his salutation short.

In the mirror's distorted image, he can see his Father, DA, with Thug #1 and Thug #2, escorting a CHILD wearing a sundress. The child also wears a hood over her head.

He stands and watches, confused, as the trio march the child to the heavy wooden door leading downstairs to the cellar.

ZIHAO (CONT'D)

Father?

His Father gives him a stern look as they pass. He does not break his stride.

DA

Mind the store.

His comment comes as an order, not a request. Zihao slowly returns to his position behind the counter.

Da pulls keys out of his pocket and unlocks the pair of deadbolts on cellar door, opening it wide. Stepping aside, his Thugs proceed with the child down the stairs.

As they pass, Zihao's Father flips open his cellphone. DIALS with one button.

DA (INTO PHONE)

It's done. We're going to the drop spot. Send the note...

Father glances at the clock on the wall: 11:36

DA (CONT'D, INTO PHONE)

... about 30 minutes away, I expect.

The two thugs emerge from the cellar as he ends his call. Da locks the cellar deadbolts and lights a cigarette. The three head for the front door of the store.

THUG #2

Should one of us stay here?

DA

No. She's fine for the time being... We're going to need a show of force when we get there, to keep her father civil.

The door CHIMES as the thugs exit. Father turns to son, pausing for a moment. His cigarette smoke filling the air between them.

DA (TO SON)

(sternly)

This is not your business. You will never speak of this. You are to stay out of the cellar.

(beat)

Do we have an understanding?

Zihao cowers at his Father's imposing demeanor. He nods, WHEEZES.

ZIHAO

Yes, Father.

Da watches as his son struggles to breathe in the smoky air. With a disgusted sneer, he leaves. Again, the door CHIMES, though this time it seems to hang a bit longer, louder in the dead quiet of the store.

Zihao pulls a small asthma inhaler from his pocket and takes TWO QUICK PUFFS before returning it to his pocket. Placing his palms on the counter he leans forward, trying to calm his breathing. He looks at the heavy wooden door.

MONTAGE: Zihao glances at the front door of the store; Nervously runs a hand through his hair; Begins to pace; Looks to the thick wooden cellar door again.

Zihao looks to the set of keys hanging on a ring, just below the lip of the countertop near his thigh. The handle of a baseball bat rests in the crook of the counter, just beyond the ring of keys.

A glance at the clock: 12:14

The door CHIMES. Zihao snaps back to the moment. A customer, MRS. LING enters.

MRS. LING
Good morning Zihao!

Zihao does his best to put a smile on his face.

ZIHAO
Ah, yes... Good morning, how are you today?

MRS. LING
Great! I just stopped by to pick up my order.

Zihao's face drops slightly, noticeably. His eyes dart to the cellar door.

MRS. LING (CONT'D)
Is there a problem?

ZIHAO
Uh, no, no... Of course not. Let me grab it for you.

Slowly, Zihao grabs the ring of keys and heads for the thick wooden door. Nervously, he slides the first key into the upper lock and turns it. With a confirming CLICK, he withdraws the key and repeats the action on the lower lock. Again, it responds with a heavy CLICK. He snaps the key ring to a belt loop on his jeans.

Zihao reaches for the doorknob, pausing. He looks back to Mrs. Ling, still standing at the counter. She smiles at him. He does not return the gesture. He heaves a SIGH, summoning the strength to proceed. Slowly he turns the door knob and steps through.

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE, CELLAR -- DAY

Tentative steps, bending down as he descends the stairs into the cellar. The dim room is packed with utility. A worn wooden desk and a cot, the store's water heater in the corner, stocked shelving units line two walls. The stained walls show years of grime over dark green paint. The central florescent light flickers slightly, giving everything a sickly, greenish hue.

Zihao pauses on the steps as he spots the little girl.

Bai is sitting on the cot, her knees pulled to her chest. Still wearing the hood, her head twitches to his direction as she hears his footfalls on the stairs. She rocks back and forth, shivering with fear.

Zihao turns and looks back to the heavy door. He leans on his upper foot as if to leave, but stops. He pulls his inhaler from his pocket. With a quick shot, he takes another PUFF.

The sound spooks the girl even more. A WHIMPER, a SNIFFLE.

Zihao raises his hands as if trying to calm her down, despite the fact that she cannot see anything.

He puts his medicine back in his pocket and slowly, calmly goes to collect Mrs. Ling's things from the storage shelves. With her order in his hands, he hesitates as he returns past the girl. He notices that her hands and feet are bound with duct tape. A rope has been looped around her waist and affixed to the steel bed frame, preventing her from leaving the cot.

The mattress around her is stained, wet.

He heads up the stairs, pulling the door closed, but ajar.

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE -- DAY

At the counter, Mrs. Ling pays for her supplies.

MRS. LING

Thank you, Zihao, see you later.

Zihao smiles as the door CHIME echoes her exit.

ZIHAO

Yes, yes... bye now.

As soon as she has left. Zihao hurriedly rounds to corner of the counter, headed for the front door. He locks it from the inside and flips the 'OPEN' sign to 'CLOSED'.

He hesitates momentarily, then purposefully turns for the back of the store. He pulls a bottled drink from the cooler on the way. At the end of the row nearest to the cellar door, something catches his eye. He stops, staring at a collection of stuffed animals. Zihao plucks a small, stuffed Panda from the shelf. His frame stiffens with resolution and he continues toward the door.

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE, CELLAR -- DAY

Zihao pulls the door closed behind him and cautiously makes his way down the steps. He approaches the terrified girl. She WHIMPERS again.

ZIHAO

(softly)
It's okay...

Slowly he lowers himself, sitting on the edge of the cot in front of her. He puts the drink and toy on the mattress.

Turning on a small desk lamp. Its amber tinted light shade cuts the harsh dark green paint and grime, softening the wall behind around them. He reaches for her hood.

She jolts backward as she feels him touching her head, clutching her knees even further into her chest.

ZIHAO (CONT'D)

(calmly, soothing)
Hey... It's okay.

He lifts the hood to find the beautiful girl beneath. Fear flows from the depths of wide, dark almond eyes. The salt tracks of dried tears stain her cheeks.

Zihao drops the hood to the mattress.

Tenderly, he removes the cloth gag from her mouth. It falls, a loose loop around her neck. He smiles at her, opening and offering her the drink that he has brought. She hesitates, then snatches the drink. Her hands still bound, she awkwardly brings it to her lips and drinks gratefully. Her thirst quenched, she lowers the bottle. Zihao takes it from her, placing it on the desk behind him.

She looks around the cellar nervously, unsure of him and her predicament.

Zihao produces the small Panda, making it dance in the air before her, trying to allay her fears. Slowly she takes the toy from him, pulling it close.

The front door CHIMES.

Zihao's hand snaps to his belt loop. The key ring is still there. His face turns to dread.

ZIHAO (TO SELF)

Father!

Bai's eyes well up instantly as all of her fear returns. Quickly he picks up the girl's hood. She shakes her head 'no', trying to resist, but can't stop him from pulling it over her head.

ZIHAO

Shhhh...

He turns off the desk lamp and stands just as the cellar door swings open. Quickly, he grabs a couple of small boxes from the shelf as his Father appears with the two thugs. Soon, he is standing toe to toe with his disobedient son.

DA

(firmly)

What are you doing down here!?

Zihao looks sheepishly at the floor.

ZIHAO

Sorry Father... I... I needed to get these to restock the shelves.

His Father violently SLAPS him down to one knee. The girl's body flinches. The restocking supplies litter the floor. Da spots the stuffed Panda in Bai's hands. Zihao rights himself, looks embarrassed at the two smirking thugs. He hangs his head as he stands before his Father.

DA

(seething)

Did she see your face?

ZIHAO

No, Father.

His Father doesn't believe him.

DA (TO THUG#1)

Take him upstairs.

Thug #1 takes Zihao's shoulder and marches him up the stairs.

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE -- DAY

Thug #1 manhandles Zihao, aggressively pushing him behind the cashier counter. With an ominous look, the Thug saunters up to the front door, relocking it from the inside.

Sporting a smug grin, he helps himself to a bag of potato chips and leans against the customer side of the front counter. When he does, Zihao gets a clear view of the sidearm in the Thug's shoulder holster.

Zihao reaches into his pocket for his inhaler. Pulling it out, he fumbles the small canister. It drops to the floor. Thug #1 chuckles mockingly at his boss' pathetic son.

Zihao slowly reaches down to pick it up. His hand stops, hovering over the inhaler. His eyes fixate on the baseball bat behind the counter.

With a burst of speed, he wields the bat, cracking the Thug in the head. The man crumples to the ground. Zihao leaps over the counter and delivers a final blow. He pulls the Thug's gun from it's holster, keeping his eyes on the cellar door, waiting for any response from below. Nothing. He stays low, making his way along the aisle toward the cellar.

Zihao disappears through the door. Light flashes in the cellar doorway.

THREE GUNSHOTS IN QUICK SUCCESSION

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE -- DAY

A bloodied hand unlocks the front door of the store from the inside. A man drops to his knees, the girl in his arms stumbles as she finds her footing.

It is Zihao, mortally wounded. He motions for Bai to leave before collapsing to the floor. His final breath escapes him.

EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE -- DAY

Bai exits the store. Her sundress, soaked in Zihao's blood, sticks to her tiny frame. She steps into the bustling street in the late afternoon sun.

END CREDITS OVER:

Pedestrians go about their business until one good SAMARITAN notices her and stops, bending to her height to see if she is okay. Seeing that she is not, the Samaritan draws the attention of others to help.

In Bai's hand, the stuffed Panda.

FADE OUT