Covid Crime

A One Act Play
by Lionelle Hamanaka

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CHARACTERS

Six Actors, 3M, 3F

CHUNHUA: mother 65, white haired, frail and bony

MONA: nurse also does Stage Directions and VOICEOVER

KATHY: Leo’s girlfriend, a social worker, 30’s-40’s

LEO: son, 35, resident at Bellevue

ESTELLE: woman, 50’s who attacks mother on bus

HARVEY: detective, 40’s, who handles Leo’s case

CORKY LEE Photographer, early 70’s

SETTING

Chinatown, New York apartment. Bellevue Hospital

TIME

2020 pandemic

Scenario:

Act I

Scene One: Chunhua and Leo's apartment on Mott Street in Chinatown, New York City late one night.

Scene Two: Hospital Emergency Room, Leo takes Chunhua for an x-ray. He meets Corky Lee there.

Scene Three: Leo accompanies Chunhua to visit Great Grandpa Wei's ashes at the Columbarium before he goes to work.

Scene Four: Hospital cubbyhole, ER. Leo treats Estelle. He meets Detective Harvey, and asks him for a copy of Video in bus.

Scene Five: Detective comes back with photo of assailant. Leo recognizes her as Estelle, his patient.

Scene Six: Leo meets his girlfriend Kathy for lunch. She tells him she is giving self-defense lessons to seniors in her neighborhood and urges him to come to meetings.

Scene Seven: When Estelle is being discharged, Leo shows her the photo and asks if she recognizes it. He reveals his mother was on the same bus. The patient apologizes. Detective Harvey gives Estelle a desk ticket.

Scene Eight: Leo speaks out at community rally against Anti-Asian Hate in Columbus Park. Kathy MC's.

Act I

Scene 1

AT RISE: After midnight in late May, 2020. The apartment of LEO and his mother CHUNHUA. Leo stands in doorway, takes off plastic booties, face shield, folds his mask and puts it in bag, and strips gloves from his hands. The booties and gloves go into a plastic garbage bag that he puts in garbage can in Kitchen. His mother is asleep on couch in living room. He comes out of bathroom having showered.

LEO

It's just me, ma.

CHUNHUA grunts. He notices a bandage on her head and walks closer. HE puts mask and gloves on.

LEO

What's that? What happened?

CHUNHUA

Woman hit me with umbrella.

LEO

Where?

CHUNHUA

On a bus. She say, "I bring Chinese virus to New York, now everybody dying."

LEO

Ma. I have to take your temperature, okay?

CHUNHUA opens her mouth. He shakes his head.

LEO

This kind of thermometer, I just hold it next to your forehead. Hold still. Stupid ignorant people. Just one more thing, okay? Could you sit up please? Okay just breath normally. Now I have to listen to your back. Just a couple of deep breaths. Sounds okay. You can breathe?

CHUNHUA

Yah.

LEO

Very good so far. Do you have a headache?

CHUNHUA

No.

LEO

How about dizzy? You feel dizzy?

CHUNHUA

No.

LEO

How about blackout? You black out at all?

CHUNHUA

No.

LEO

We better go to the hospital anyway, for an x-ray. Sorry about that. Okay. Time to get dressed.

CHUNHUA

No, I want to sleep. Leave me.

LEO

(HE picks up the phone)

Hello, 911? Yes, I have a pick up for you. Female, 75.
Transport to ER. 19 Mott Street, Apt. 1. No elevator.
This is Dr. Leo Chan.

Lie back on the pillow. They should be here within 10 minutes.
Sorry about this, ma.

End of Scene 1

Scene Two

AT RISE: Emergency Room in City Hospital. LEO goes to DSR where there is a waiting Room. He turns on the TV. CORKY LEE enters with a camera strapped around his neck.

CORKY

Leo!

LEO

Corky! What are you doing here? Were you on a photoshoot nearby?

CORKY

I did three tonight. I heard you were here. Something happened to your mother?

LEO

She got assaulted by some woman. When I got home tonight, she was conscious, but bleeding from a head wound. To be on the safe side I brought her here for an x-ray.

CORKY

That's terrible. There's so many assaults against Asians now.

LEO

Is it a national crime wave? My head's been buried in the sand. Since the surge I've been working doubles.

CORKY

Doctors don't know about anything but medicine. That's the cliché. Since the pandemic we've been attacked over 9,000 times.

LEO

What did we do to deserve that?

CORKY

Can you think of anyone who deserves it?

LEO

People think we're Fresh Off the Boat. My great great grandpa came to New York in the 1870's. He was running away from Los Angeles—they lynched 18 Chinese.

CORKY
Yes, I know about that lynching. It's a very sad part of our history**.** So you're 5th generation?

LEO
That's right, bro. It ticks me off when people assume, you're a foreigner, because you're Asian.

CORKY
As ex-President Trump, the Inciter-in-Chief! He had the nerve to claim we brought Covid-19 from China. Good thing Asian Americans rose up to fight back. We even have a bill in Congress. But what's happening with your mother?

LEO
She's in X-ray. I hope I can take her home tonight.

CORKY
Do you mind if I get a photo of her?

LEO
For the evening news?

CORKY
I know a reporter who might want to do a story on the assault. I can send him the photo and ask. Do you like my new camera?

LEO
It looks great. How'd you find out about this?

CORKY
I was on my way home, going down the subway stairs. Somebody saw you come in here with your mom, and stopped me. He said, "Did you know?"

LEO
I don't know how long it'll be.

CORKY
Where's the candy machine?

LEO
Over there. You didn't eat yet?

CORKY walks US and comes back
with a chocolate bar.

CORKY
This will hold me for a minute. I'm going to have dinner soon.

LEO
It's almost midnight. When do you sleep, anyway?

CORKY
Been on my feet all day. Had a few meetings to cover tonight in the community. I want APA stories to be in the mainstream media.

LEO
My poor mother.

CORKY
Nice lady. Guess that's why you're bearable. I wish I had my mom back.

LEO
Can't even protect your mother.

CORKY
Did she call the police on the woman?

LEO
Nah. She just came home. Nobody helped her.

CORKY
Did anybody take a photo on the bus?

LEO
No. Hey, wait. Doesn't the MTA have videos on buses?

CORKY
Yeah. I'm pretty sure they do.

LEO
I'll go to the precinct tomorrow, and ask the Community person. Maybe they can get me a video.

CORKY
That would be great. Let me know right away, okay?

MONA-NURSE
Dr. Leo! You want to talk to the radiologist?

LEO
Yes, thanks.

MONA

He's waiting for you.

LEO

Do you think I can take her home?

MONA-NURSE

Ask him.

CORKY

I'll wait here and catch you later.

LEO

Okay.

NURSE and LEO exit.

End of Scene Two

Scene Three

AR RISE: Autumn, a week later. Chung Yeung month, and Ghost Day, when the deceased visit the living. LEO and CHUNHUA at the entrance to a columbarium where ashes of dead are kept off Canal Street.

CHUNHUA
Today is Ghost Day. I go pray for great great grandpa. You coming?

LEO
I'll walk you over there. I have to go back to work at the hospital.

CROSS FADE TO: The columbarium has a large arch that hangs over part of stage with drawers for cremation ashes. CHUNHUA looks at LEO.

CHUNHUA
This is for our ancestors. Great Great Grandpa Wei, you are my lamp in the darkness, my resting place when I am weary, my guide on the path. You are my tree of miracles. You endure like the sea and the sky, until all beings are freed of sorrow and we are all awakened.

(SHE bows. SHE murmurs a prayer, takes out paper money and incense and burns it)

LEO
Great Grandpa Wei!
(HE bows his head)
Ma, excuse me. Look, take a cab home.

CHUNHUA
What you mean? We live near.

LEO
Just for me, ma. So I don't have to worry when I'm at work.

CHUNUA
You crazy.

LEO
Please, ma.

CHUNHUA

Okay. Go to work.

LEO exits. The lights dim. CHUNHUA stays in prayer position on her knees, on a low velvet covered Prieu-dieu a prayer bench.

End of Scene Three

Scene Four

AT RISE: LEO, in PPE, stands in an empty cubicle at Bellevue Hospital. HE calls Italy to talk to another ER doctor.

LEO

Hey, Sergio! How's Italy? I'm not getting enough sleep, either. I see Covid particles in the air around me. People show up and they get worse while you admit them. Fever, cough, shortness of breath. We've treated so many, we've got a sixth sense who'll die and who might recover. Stay strong, okay? Doctors don't get sick days.

The NURSE comes in with a patient on a gurney, a middle aged woman who is breathing raspily.

LEO

Gotta go. Patient. Thanks, MONA. Chart, please?

MONA passes him the chart.

LEO

Thanks, MONA. Miss Estelle Williams. Good afternoon. You came in early this morning on your own?

ESTELLE

Yes.

LEO

You have a fever of 102. Are you having difficulty breathing?

ESTELLE

Yes.

(SHE coughs)

LEO

If you feel you can't, just shake your head or nod. I think they found a bed for you. I have to ask a couple of questions. Do you live alone?

ESTELLE

Yes.

LEO

Any children in the city? If so, are they grown?

ESTELLE

Yes, my kids are grown.

LEO

We need contact info for your next of kin. Hmm; you're only 55. Your mother or father still living?

ESTELLE

No.

LEO

One more minute.

(HIS phone rings)

Sorry for the questions, Estelle. We'll get you upstairs soon. Hello? You did, great! Good news! They found a bed. I'm going to listen to your lungs, okay? Then the Nurse will get you transported upstairs.

ESTELLE

I was so scared.

LEO

We're in a pre-holiday lull. We're not full up yet.

ESTELLE

The TV said you were full, I thought I'd die. Out there in the ER.

(SHE starts to cry)

LEO

We're all frightened these days. We're going to take good care of you. Don't cry. I'm going to listen to your back, okay?

ESTELLE

Okay.

LEO

(HE turns her gently).

Ah-hah. Thank you. MONA?!

MONA appears SL.

LEO

MONA, can you have the patient transported to the floor. Admitting found a bed for her. Thanks.

MONA

All right, Dr. Chan.

MONA pulls gurney out of room.
LEO takes out his lunchbox and
a voiceover pages him.

VOICEOVER

Dr. Leo Chan wanted on extension 101.

LEO

(HE gets on cell and calls the front desk)

A detective? Point my cubbyhole out to him, okay? I'm in 10. Thanks, Rene.

(HE bolts down a bite of food
and takes a sip from a can;
a Detective walks in.)

DETECTIVE HARVEY

You're Dr. Leo Chan? You came to the precinct yesterday and started a case for your mother, right?

LEO

Yes. Thanks so much for stopping by.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

I'm Detective Harvey. I figure since you're here on the front lines I'd drop by. This is my beat anyway.

LEO

I appreciate that a lot, Detective. By any chance, was there a video on the bus my mother took that might show her attacker?

DETECTIVE HARVEY

Yeah, all buses have a video. I'll ask the MTA and the union.

LEO

I want to prosecute. My mom's not getting any younger. I can't work if I'm worried about her getting mugged. She goes out during the day. She's not the stay at home type.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

Terrible, attacking an old lady. There's a rise in these assaults lately.

LEO

This pandemic brings out people with mental problems.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

Believe me, I know. We have to deal with them every day. Doctor, I'll do my best to dig up your tape. You take care of yourself. And thanks for what you're doing.

LEO

Nice to meet you, Detective Harvey.

DETECTIVE exits. LEO picks up his Lunchbox and exits to kitchen.

End of Scene Four

Scene Five

AT RISE: Same area in the ER of prior scene. Next week: Detective Harvey comes to see Leo.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

Hi, Doc.

LEO

Hey. Thanks for coming by.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

Got something for you.

(HE holds out a newspaper)

Is that your mom?

LEO

Yeah, that's her.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

This article was in the News today, with a photo by Corky Lee.
Here's another photo, a screen shot I got from the MTA video.

LEO

Yeah, he came by the hospital that night. So you got a video clip from the MTA too.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

Yeah, we've got the video too. Take a look at this other photo. It captures the assailant's face.

LEO

I think I recognize the woman from the MTA photo.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

You do?

LEO

She was one of my patients. She came in with Covid last week. She's better now.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

Isn't that something?

LEO

Life in New York. You never can tell.

VOICEOVER

Dr. Leo! Pick up on 6. Pick up on 6.

LEO

Hello? Mona? I'll be right there.

(HE hangs up the phone)

I have to see a new patient.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

Drop by the Precinct. Call first. We can watch the video together.

LEO

Thanks so much, Detective. You'll never know how much I appreciate this.

THEY shake hands. DET. HARVEY exits. LEO exits.

End of Scene Five

Scene Six

AT RISE: A restaurant around the corner. LEO and KATHY, his girlfriend, are having lunch.

LEO

Well, this place hasn't changed.

KATHY

It's kind of empty.

Their food has been served and they eat.

LEO

What do you expect? The ex-President makes announcements that Covid came from China. Chinatown's the last place they'll go.

KATHY

Hopefully it'll pick up. Thanks for asking me to lunch. I've missed you so much. It's been so long!

LEO

Yeah. I missed you too.

KATHY

Had a hard day? You seem agitated.

LEO

Who's agitated?!

KATHY

What's up, Leo?

LEO

I hate having to tell people this. Somebody hit my mother with an umbrella.

KATHY

What?! When?

LEO

A week ago.

KATHY

And you didn't tell me?

LEO

I'm not proud of it. I don't like that she's out there, minding her own business, on public transportation, and some nut assaults her. I'm supposed to protect her.

KATHY

Nobody's blaming you.

LEO

She had a cut on her forehead. I took her in for an x-ray.

KATHY

That's terrible. Just out of nowhere?

LEO

Yup. No concussion, thank God. You won't believe this. On Ghost Day, when ma went to pray at Great Grandpa Wei's columbarium, she burned incense, and saw his ghost!

KATHY

Your Great Grandpa?

LEO

Yes. He came here in the 1870's. To prospect gold! Then he came to New York, running away from the big Chinese lynching in LA. He and his friends worked their way east.

KATHY

Corky Lee has organized a pilgrimage for Chinese Americans for 20 years. Chinese helped build the Transcontinental Railroad. But we never get credit!

LEO

What else is new?

KATHY

It's not in any history books or in photos either. He found that out when he was 12, and it made him so mad he never forgot.

LEO

I'm glad he held on. I was studying and never had time to go on his trip. But why do most Americans think we're all Fresh Off the Boat?

KATHY

It's the eurocentric education system. The old timers did a lot of things we never heard about. They weren't important enough to write a book about.

LEO

They didn't have to write a book about it. How about a paragraph? Speaking of the past, you won't believe this! My mother said Great Great Grandpa Wei told her, "Tell your son, take good care of her." He doesn't know, I've tried to get her to retire since I graduated! Practically went down on my knees and begged her. Mom's a tough old bird. Since my dad died of a heart attack, she thinks we won't have food unless she buys it. I offered to get food for her, she got mad! I said, 'Are you chained to your sewing machine? 14 hour days are no good for your health.' She's a mule. I reported her assault. By the way, I started a case for her, and the Detective came with a photo, and says he has a video.

KATHY

From the bus?

LEO

And I recognized the woman in the photo. Would you believe--she's one of my patients?

KATHY

No. But if you say so--

LEO

She's an older woman who lives alone. Her kids didn't even call to see how she was doing.

KATHY

Pandemic brings out the best and worst in us.

LEO

It's a public hospital. Anybody can walk into the ER. She's about to be released. So I'm–

KATHY

Ratting her out?

LEO

I can't hire a babysitter to watch my mom, while I'm at work! I'd never hear the end of it. The detective came and I told him.

KATHY

They closed mental health hospitals from 1955-'94. Hundreds of thousands of Americans with severe mental illness are on the street. And our share's here in New York.

LEO

Thanks for informing me. I don't care if she's a nut! I want her to leave my mother alone!

KATHY

Of course, honey. My God, I don't know what I'd do if someone attacked my mom. I can't imagine it!

(SHE buries her face in her hands)

KATHY (cont)

Julie and I are giving self defense classes to seniors in the neighborhood. Because at least they'll have something! And now, they're giving out yellow whistles.

LEO

Good. They pick on us because they think they'll get away with it.

KATHY

We've been keeping our mouths shut too long. I guess this all means you and I will never live together.

LEO

I've been working doubles for six months! Getting lunch off today was a major event! I can't leave my mother now! Now I worry about her all the time!

KATHY

Sorry to bring it up. It was selfish.

LEO

It's not that I don't love you. But love can get you in trouble. It got my dad in trouble.

KATHY

Because your dad was rich, and your mom a broke immigrant?! That's a rotten thing to say about your mom!

LEO

So he got in trouble with his family. He was lucky, he never had to talk to them again!

KATHY

You must report that woman! A Filipino guy got slashed in the face the other day. None of us is safe.

LEO

My mother's an immigrant but my father's family goes back to the 1870's. 150 years later, they still treat us like outsiders.

KATHY

It was sad when your father had that heart attack.

LEO

He was working too hard at his restaurant. Grandpa had that laundry on Bayard Street. Great grandpa hung out there after he escaped the lynching. We swallowed a lot of bitterness.

KATHY

And we're tired of it. I keep telling you about the meetings we're having.

LEO

I'll go… soon as the pandemic blows over. Check, please.

(HE motions for the bill)

LEO (cont)

Don't be mad at me. Maybe we can buy a house.

KATHY

You mean it?!

LEO

Why not? Money's green. We can find something, somewhere. I'd have to convince my mom to quit her job, though.

End of Scene Six

Scene Seven

AT RISE: ESTELLE comes by, pushed by MONA in a wheelchair. DETECTIVE HARVEY is waiting DS. LEO comes forward.

ESTELLE

Doctor Leo!

LEO

Hi, Estelle.

ESTELLE

Thank you! You and this nurse, he's the best.

LEO

Mona's a great nurse, she's famous around here. Do you have someone picking you up?

ESTELLE

No.

LEO

You can't do stairs like that. Do you live in a walk up?

ESTELLE

Yes, I do.

LEO

Mona will get you an ambulance. Mona, would you order Estelle Williams an ambulance?

MONA, NURSE

Yes, doctor.

ESTELLE

Thanks so much, doctor!

LEO

(HE comes a bit closer and holds out the photo)

Do you recognize anyone in this photo?

ESTELLE

Why, that's me. That woman's a stranger. I was on a bus and she got in my way when I was trying to get off.

LEO

So you beat her on the head with your umbrella?

ESTELLE

How did you know?

LEO

They take videos on buses. In case they get sued. In case disputes arise that have to be settled later.

ESTELLE

You have to watch out for yourself.

LEO

Yup, that's what they do these days. By the way, that woman is my mother.

ESTELLE

What? I don't believe it!

(SHE backs up her wheelchair)

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt her.

LEO

She was bleeding when she got home. Scared me. We live in the same apartment. Good thing I'm a doctor. She had a headache. She told me that the woman said, "You brought the 'Chinese' virus to New York, now everybody's dying." Did you say that?

ESTELLE

I don't know what I said. I was sick, outta my head. I called my kids to help me but they were workin'. I was mad, that's why I hit her. I won't never do that again, I swear. You saved me from that Devil disease.

LEO

But it's not Chinese. Viruses don't have a nationality.

ESTELLE

I'm sorry. I don't even know your last name, but you saved my life. I don't trust doctors. I was scared to come to that ER. But I was burning up with fever and had chills. And that's how I felt on the bus. I just wanted her to get out my way!

LEO

I got this photo from the cops. I started a case and they're going to follow up on you.

DETECTIVE HARVEY steps forward,
With a desk ticket in his hand.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

Ms. Estelle Williams?

ESTELLE

Yes?

DETECTIVE HARVEY

My name is Detective Harvey. I gave Dr. Leo here the photo from the bus.

(HE hands her the ticket)

This is a desk ticket. You have to appear in Criminal Court on Center Street on this date—here's the address.

(HE points it out)

I know you had Covid-19, so I made the date a few months out.

ESTELLE

But I said sorry.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

You still have to appear in court on this date, understood?

ESTELLE

All right, all right.

DETECTIVE HARVEY

We got your address and phone number from the Hospital. So if you forget, we'll be in touch with you.

ESTELLE exits.

End of Scene Seven

Scene Eight

AT RISE: Columbus Park. Saturday afternoon, a few months later. KATHY and DR. LEO are facing the audience and CORKY is at the podium.

CORKY

Hi, I'm Corky Lee. We're here today because of the attacks against Asian Americans. That's been news in the pandemic, and the news is my business. My photos are proof that we exist, that we do a lot of things. Listen. These are our tragedies, these beatings, killings--they set fire to old people's hair! The only thing we can control is what we do about it. If you see an Anti-Asian Hate crime happening, say something, or do something by taking a photo or video**.** You don't have to be a professional photographer for your photo to be proof! Identification of a criminal! Evidence in court! America's denied us for 175 years. They deny our contribution. So we have to look out for each other, take care of each other. We belong here. This is our home—most of us have never known any other.

APPLAUSE

KATHY

And now here's a doctor who's worked on the front lines fighting Covid-19. Dr. Leo Chan.

APPLAUSE

DR. LEO

Good afternoon. I live around the corner. The pandemic has made life hard on all of us.

(HE holds up a can of pepper spray)

I bought pepper spray for my mother. Why do I have to do this?! Because criminals are setting old women on fire, slashing old men, and someone beat my mother with an umbrella. That's why. Like most of you, I've kept my head down, chasing the American dream. That was a big mistake. My mother and maybe yours wouldn't have to be hospitalized, today, tomorrow, whenever. We have a saying, "Swallow bitterness." Leave that behind. Won't work these days!

Whistles and claps.

DR. LEO

I hate to quote Rodney Dangerfield, but I want some respect! I wish it was funny. We Asians are supposed to be the model minority. That's a lie they use against us! For almost 80 years the government excluded Asian immigration, and those here could not become citizens. From 2013-17, in New York City reports, Asians have been the poorest minority. For 80 years the government excluded Asians from immigrating to the U.S. These lies separate us: Asians, black, Latinos and Native Americans are kept apart. It's called segregation. My great great grandfather came in the 1870's, because in LA they'd lynched 10% of the Chinese population! No reruns, please. I'm a doctor and I fight disease. But racism is a disease in people's minds. Help get rid of it! I'm working doubles on Covid-19. So if you see an attack on an Asian American, call the cops, take a picture, yell! I used to be too busy for politics. But it's either speak out or any of us is fair game! No more suffering in silence! Thank you.

APPLAUSE
CORKY takes flash photos.

End of Play