

KILLER: A MIRACLE ENCOUNTER

殺手，流燄繽紛的奇蹟

An untalented high school student gets to fulfill his dream of becoming a doctor by practicing surgery on people who don't want to be found. A boyfriend-girlfriend duo of assassins who come under his knife several times eventually drag him into their deadly dance with a powerful Indian crime syndicate.

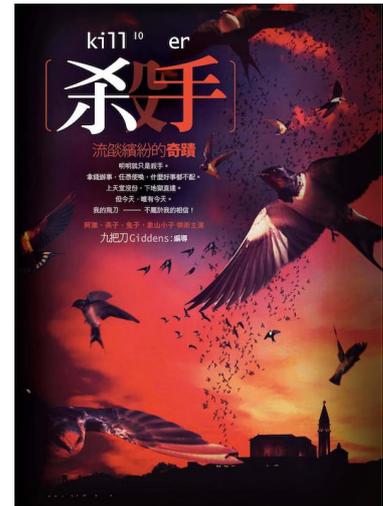
Li Yi-Chien's dream of becoming a doctor seems impossible with his horrible grades, until fortune visits him from an unlikely corner. His murderous landlord comes to him in need of immediate surgery, thereby becoming Yi-Chien's first practice patient. Yi-Chien teaches himself surgery on the bodies of criminals, yet never gets involved in their dealings – that is, until Happy and his girlfriend, Swallowtail, come under his knife.

Happy and Swallowtail are a boyfriend-girlfriend team of assassins. Hot-headed and impetuous, Swallowtail puts on a show of caprice as a way of earning Happy's attention, unaware of how deeply her taciturn boyfriend already loves her. One day, what seemed like an easy job puts Swallowtail in the crosshairs of a powerful Indian crime syndicate; as her enemies extend their reach in search of her, her immediate circle – Happy, Li Yi-Chien, and the hacker who helps them out – find themselves completely ensnared.

The newest thriller from Giddens Ko energizes a life-or-death plot line with the power of love. Brutality and self-sacrifice commingle in this tale of ever-deepening secrets.

Giddens Ko 九把刀

Since he began writing in 1999, Giddens Ko has authored well over a dozen novels, several of which have been adapted into TV series, movies, manga, and online games. In 2010 he self-directed the movie



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version of his best-seller *You Are the Apple of My Eye*, and he has since overseen the production of several documentaries and feature films connected to his work.

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By Giddens Ko

Translated by Mike Day

The Doctor

Like most stories, this one has a completely ordinary beginning, then takes some strange twists and turns.

But this story's beginning is three times more ordinary than any other, because I have three moms.

The fact that he can handle three wives says a lot about my dad. My dad is blind, and once worked in a traditional massage parlor staffed by blind masseurs. Yet the owner went into debt with shady characters, who one day smashed up the shop. So my dad rented a corner booth in the basement food court of a supermarket, where he gave simple twenty-minute massages, raking in more cash than ever.

My first mom sold silk quilts in the clearance section by the entrance to that same market. My second mom sold energy crystals and lucky stamps at the accessory shop beside the escalator, and my third mom sold almond tea by the checkout counter (she claimed it had no artificial almond extract in it, which wasn't true). Since they all worked in the same place, it was easy for the four of them to watch out for one another.

You didn't ask, but I might as well tell you I don't know which of these women is my actual mom. You can't tell by looking, because all three of my moms are so ugly they all look pretty much the same, while I'm the spitting image of my dad, the handsomest blind man you'll ever lay eyes on. Even with the ugly genes passed down by my moms, I have to say I came out at least as good-looking as Takeshi Kaneshiro.

Genes change, times change, and so does people's shopping behavior.

Over the past decade, convenience stores have thrived and countless mom and pop shops have gone under. Now, when people want to buy an electric fan or a fridge, they go to the supermarket instead of the appliance store on the street corner. When they need seafood or meat, they skip traditional markets in favor of vacuum-packed produce from refrigerated shelves. The supermarket is a one-stop shop.

While it's still the age of the supermarket, the times continue changing. Many young people now only shop online, having toilet paper, vegetables, fish, and eggs delivered directly to their doors. Unless the price of internet access increases drastically, in a few years, supermarkets will be a thing of the past.

My father's eyes might be blind, but his heart can see.

One day in my first year of junior high, as we sat playing mahjong after dinner, he said something that changed my life forever.

“Son, in all the world, there’s only one group of people whose jobs can’t be taken away by supermarkets or the internet: doctors.”

“So, son, you have to be a doctor. A doctor will always have a job!” My first mom slapped me on the back.

“I like the sound of that,” I said, eyeing my dad’s tiles.

“When you’re a doctor, don’t settle for making chump change at the hospital. Open your own clinic and get rich!” my second mom urged.

“That would be a smart move,” I said, fingering my father’s tiles.

“Don’t worry, your mothers and father are putting away savings! By the time you finish medical school, we’ll have enough for you to open a clinic!” my third mom encouraged me.

“You bet I’m worried! I’m shaking in my boots!” I took hold of a piece and made a play.

“Mahjong!” My first mom roared with laughter.

“Mahjong!” My second mom shouted.

“Mahjong!” My third mom shrieked.

The tile I’d discarded completed all their hands. I had lost my father the game.

Around the mahjong table, my first, second, and third moms launched into a lively debate over how much money was needed to open up a medical clinic, where it ought to be opened, and which specialty would make the most money.

To me, it didn’t matter. Anything was fine. I didn’t have any special requirements to be happy. If they wanted me to be a doctor, I’d give it a try.

It turned out trying was about all I accomplished. Three years later, when exam time rolled around, my wits proved insufficient to get me into a decent high school.

But my first mom gripped my hand excitedly and said, “No problem! I’d only be worried if you did too well! Like they say, a bright child doesn’t always grow up to be a success. And you know what else they say... get the chicken fat, then send it to the butcher. You did well, Son!”

“But mom, I don’t want to be a fat chicken.” I wiped away my tears.

“First learn to crawl, then learn to fly, just like your dad!” My second mom recounted the rags-to-riches tale I’d heard a million times already.

Back when my father could see, people had called him “Good-for-Nothing.” He was as handsome as Takeshi Kaneshiro, but unlike Takeshi Kaneshiro, he was dull-witted and broke. He had never had a girlfriend, and his abysmal academic record meant he could find only low-paying, unskilled temporary work. Simply put, he was a complete loser. A chemical accident at a paint factory took his vision, so he learned to give massages. At the massage parlor, not only did he manage to accumulate a small nest egg, he pleased three clients so well that they became my first, second, and third moms.

Hold on, don’t burn this book yet.

Before you assume this is a heartwarming family tale, let me assure you, the killer will soon make an appearance.

The one high school I was able to get into was total garbage. It will remain nameless to protect the innocent. Getting to school meant a twenty-seven-minute journey by bus, followed by

twenty-five minutes on the metro and an eight-minute walk, which meant I spent exactly an hour in transit — more, if you added the wait for the bus and the time it took to transfer to the metro. My third mom, the most practical of the three, rented me a small room a block from school. She urged me to focus on my studies, so I could show my true colors when college entrance exams rolled around.

My rented room on the roof was an add-on to the original structure. The public toilet and shower on the roof's opposite side had been part of the building since the beginning. Beside the bathroom sat an old coin-operated washing machine, and next to that were four tall, slender poles for drying clothes, along with seven or so rusty hangers we could use for free. The little room without a toilet or bath cost just NTD 5000 a month — about US \$160. The best part was having my own window; the worst was the sweltering heat in summer, which was no surprise, considering that the roof was made of asbestos tiles covered in iron sheeting.

The landlord was around fifty, with a belly that was smaller than my father's, but still bulged. He was in the habit of picking boogers and wiping them everywhere — on the walls, the bed's baseboard, the underside of the desk, the toilet paper rack, the legs of the chairs and even the handle of the fridge door. Fortunately, I had the same habit.

On moving day, my third mom went with me in the taxi, hung my clothes, made my bed, hugged and kissed me, and made an exit. On the way out, she slipped me \$2000, and told me not to worry about the family. On the weekends, she said, if I wasn't too busy at the cram school, I could come home for a good meal — oh yeah!

"I've never seen such an ugly woman in my life." The landlord let this comment slip as he watched my third mom step into the taxi.

"You haven't seen my other two moms."

"What do you mean, your two other moms?"

"Oh, my father might be blind, but he has a way with women."

"So which one is your real mom?"

"I've been pestering him to tell me for years, but his lips are sealed. He says if he lets it slip, I'll get too attached to one, and the others will get their feelings hurt, and give him a hard time."

"So not only is the man a sex machine, he's got a good head on his shoulders." The landlord clicked his tongue.

"Yep, I'm the product of my father's wisdom." I wasn't one to turn down a compliment.

"Oh yeah, I wasn't listening when your mom said your name. She's so ugly I couldn't stand to look at her."

"Not as ugly as you."

"Well, like they say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. So what's your name again?"

"People call me Tomohisa Yamashita, after the Japanese actor. They say I look like him."

"Listen up, Tomo-whatever: when you go the bathroom, take your own toothpaste, shampoo, soap, and toilet paper. Don't piss the neighbors off by using their stuff. Pay your rent on time, be a good tenant, and I'll be a good landlord, got it?" The landlord pulled out a set of two keys.

"That sounds fair." I cringed as I accepted the warm, wet keys.

The floor had been split up into three one-room apartments and a suite, all of them occupied.

To my left lived an aging former student who'd failed his college entrance exams for years. His schedule was like clockwork, and we'd nod to one another when we crossed paths in the hall. He seemed to miss his high school days. He was always wearing a ragged school uniform, as if clinging to fading shreds of high school glory here in this rooftop hovel.

The room across from mine was the only one in the building with an attached bath. I'd heard that though the bathroom was cramped, it had a small tub. Inside lived an old woman who liked to stay at home smoking cigarettes. She never left home — at least, I'd never seen her outside. I frequently eavesdropped on her foul-mouthed phone conversations. Fortunately, I didn't do much studying, or it would have been impossible to concentrate.

Next to the old woman lived a young man who sold phone screen protectors at a night market. He'd just gotten out of the military, and often brought his girlfriend back to spend the night, but they never made noise. Either he was lousy in bed, or his girlfriend was a mute. He knocked on my door once to introduce himself and offer me a free screen protector if I ever needed one, saying it was fate that we'd crossed paths. He was a decent guy.

Better not to even say a word about school. Everyone's grades were awful, and if you actually had your heart set on learning, you were screwed. Though I was still determined to become a doctor, I took care not to stand out in class, pretending it didn't matter to me what a joke this place was. I would look down at my desk and read the *Team Medical Dragon* comics I kept at the bottom of the drawer. I never gave up on becoming a doctor.

A little less than a month after school started, the old woman across the way did me a big favor.

"Just because her body melted doesn't mean she was murdered! How do you know she didn't die of natural causes? And anyway, she didn't die at my place. If word gets out and people start saying my place is haunted, I'll sue the crap out of the cops!" The landlord blustered away as he wrote out a statement for the police.

The other tenants and I went to the police station to submit statements. No doubt the police tore our rooms apart while we were gone in search of evidence.

I had no clue what had happened to the old woman, and the police let nothing slip. I looked through the paper later, but no story ever appeared. All I knew was that the old woman had vanished without a trace. Unable to reach her, her family had contacted the landlord, who opened the room for them. Then the police showed up.

The aging cram school student was the first to move out. He simply picked up and left, not because he had no time to empty the room, he was just too scared to come back. Looking through his dresser, I found more than ten high school uniforms, along with dozens of textbooks and workbooks. The next day, the screen protector guy disappeared too, leaving only me.

The landlord showed up with cans of green tea in both hands, and launched into a pep talk.

"You know, Tomo, one day we all die."

"Right, the key point is how."

“No matter how we die, when we do, we return to nature, transforming into the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. It’s all 100% natural.”

“So how did the old woman die? I heard her body melted, is that true?”

The landlord steered right around the elephant in the room, and continued, “These days, it’s popular to cremate people when they pass on, since there’s a land shortage and not enough room to bury people like before. Living people need the land to build houses, after all. So is cremation such a bad thing? If it’s wrong to burn bodies to ash and put them in urns, does that mean people these days are wrong? No! Cremation is the right thing to do! It’s even better for the environment! But since cremation is the right way these days, does that mean the people of the past were wrong to bury bodies? Of course not!”

“So her body melted in the bathtub? Sure doesn’t sound like a natural way to die.”

The landlord continued his monologue, seeming not to hear a word I’d said: “So everybody cremates these days, except for really rich people, who keep on burying bodies like before, just to be different from the poor. Is burying bodies wrong just because it isn’t popular anymore? In Tibet, they even have sky burial! Tell me, have you ever heard of that?”

“Nope.”

“Young people today are so ignorant! In Tibet, they let hundreds of vultures peck the bodies to bits. And in India, they toss the bodies right in the river and let the fish eat them! Is sky burial wrong? Are the eagles wrong? Are the fish wrong? No! They’re all right! The point is that, when people die, they return to nature in all sorts of ways! And every one of those ways should be respected!”

“You can kill yourself by hanging, or slitting your wrists, but nobody kills themselves by melting. If someone melts, it obviously wasn’t suicide, it was foul play. And getting killed in a tub isn’t ‘returning to nature’. If you wanted to return to nature, you’d at least melt under a tree. Or in a meadow, or a pond.”

“But a tub is full of water — it’s the same thing!”

“I want my rent reduced to a thousand a month.”

“Three thousand!”

“A thousand, not a penny more.”

“Two thousand, including water and electricity!”

“Well then, I’m going to run the air conditioner whenever I want. And you can’t tell my mom the rent changed.”

“Don’t you want to move into the room across the way with the bathroom? The bathtub has been scrubbed sparkling clean. I’ll only charge you 2500, including the electricity and water!”

“Sure, I’ll move in there if you pay me ten thousand a month.”

“You young people. Stay in the same room for two thousand. And fuck your mom!”

“If you’re man enough.”

And so I saved two thousand on my rent, and my pocket money went up by three thousand a month.