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Tell You
Something
About
That Night

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Let Me
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That Night

Strange Tales by
Cyril Wong

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“The way to read a fairy tale is to throw yourself in.”

- W.H. Auden

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“The Monster”, in its original version, was adapted as part of a short film for television channel, Arts Central.

The first line of “The Vigil” (commissioned by *The Straits Times*) is from an Ernest Hemingway story.

Contents

The Lake Children	11
The Blind Girl & The Talking Moon	19
The Kissing Devas	35
The Angel's Dream	47
The Gift	49
The Vigil	57
The Elf & The Knight	61
The Sleeping Prince	69
The Monster	79
The Queen & Her Eventual Knowledge Of Love	91
The Butterfly That Wanted To Be A Rabbit	97
The Boy With The Flower That Grew Out Of His Ass	103
The Turtle & The Hare	109
The Dragon Prince's Letter To His Father	113
The Cave	119
The Old Man With The Golden Voice	127
"Afterword" by Dr K. K. Seet	131
About The Author	137

The Lake Children

After their daughter, Lan, died from wandering out onto the frozen lake—the surface cracking under her hesitant, five-year-old pair of feet, the freezing lake swallowing her whole—Lin and Han stopped talking. They grieved in separate parts of the small hut where they lived. Lin would stand on the back porch, braving icy winds and gazing out into the sky at clouds that looked nothing like her daughter’s cherubic face, no matter how long she looked at them. (Lan used to enjoy distinguishing between clouds that looked like luminous bears or a herd of deer thundering across the cerulean plains.) Han would linger in the forest, even in winter, to hunt for extended periods of time, or to collect firewood; he would often pause for seconds at a time, memories going off like landmines inside his brain, such as one of Lan’s bright face waking up every morning, or another of Lan falling asleep in his arms.

Perhaps Lin and Han blamed each other for letting Lan play out in the lake in the first place, not knowing that the winters had been shrinking these past few years, and the air was no longer as cold as it used to be a decade ago.

Even at night, Lin and Han slept further apart on their bed, and always making sure they faced different directions. Lin would face the shuttered window and Han would stare at the cracked and peeling wall.

One morning, Lin decided that in order to properly mourn her daughter, she had to go out onto the lake. She wanted to be as close as possible to the spot where her daughter had drowned. Her husband was already on the porch when she stepped out of the hut. He looked up at her, his eyes as distant from the present moment as hers. It was ironic that they were both thinking about the same little girl, yet it was the memory of her that was driving them apart. Lin kept walking, not caring anymore if no more words were exchanged between them. In the past, he would have said “take care, my love” or “don’t get a chill, darling” in his gentle, bass voice.

The lake was quite a distance away. When she arrived at the edge of its frozen surface, she hesitated only for a second, before she pressed her soft boot onto the ice. She balanced on one foot, then placed the other foot onto the ice. Just as slowly, she walked further and further across the water, until she was certain she was as far as Lan must have gone before she fell. Already the huge hole that they believed to be the cause of Lan’s demise was no longer there. Lin hunkered down to touch the ice through her gloved fingers. “Lan...” she whispered, as if hoping her daughter’s face would appear in the whiteness below her hand. She nearly expected Lan to press her own hand against the ice from below. Lin was not a religious woman, but she prayed to the river god at that moment, “Please take care of my daughter, wherever she may be.”

After squatting on the ice for a few minutes, the cold was slowly seeping into her skin through her clothes. She had to go back. She felt better after the prayer and there was even a small desire within her to start a new conversation with her husband about Lan when she got home, to clear away the shadows that had come between them. When Lin stood up, she heard a loud crack and the ice beneath her feet gave way. Before she could cry out, her body plunged vertically into the ice. The water stung her face and eyes like a thousand fiery needles. She tried to call out for help but water jumped into her throat to fill her lungs in an instant. Her flailing hands only hit the ice above her head as she tried to kick herself back up. The coldness was a fire that burned her from the outside in. Then she felt nothing. Her entire body, including her open eyes and gaping mouth, was completely numb. She was dying; she knew this now. She looked up and her sky was now a layer of dazzlingly white ice, as if all the clouds had flattened to a single canopy. Her consciousness began to flicker out and she plummeted in slow motion to the bottom of the lake, pulled down by its invisible hands.

When she was conscious again, Lin realised she was still numb. The sky of ice above her looked as distant and hazy as a fading memory. She also realised that she did not even need to breathe anymore. She felt like a pure, floating mind, a disembodied thought that used to be wrapped in flesh and blood. She wondered if she was already dead, and if this was how the river god had decided to answer her prayer. Perhaps through death, she would be able to reunite with her child again. Looking around her, she saw piles of rocks and not a single fish. In the distance, she suddenly noticed a clump of shadows moving in her direction. As they got closer, Lin could not believe her eyes (eyes that were frozen open

and could no longer close), and she could only exclaim inside her head, "But they look like children..."

They *were* children. They looked the same age as Lan, but their skin was light grey, their heads shockingly bald, their bodies utterly naked. Lin noticed that she could not see their private parts; it was as if they were sexless. As they swam towards her, she saw how their little legs paddled effortlessly through the cold water, while their hands stayed by their sides. Then she noticed fins running down their backs, starting from the base of their necks. There were also smaller fins on their wrists and ankles. Their eyes were milky and their irises were larger than usual. There were at least ten of them swimming towards Lin, whose body was floating in a way which suggested that she might be getting ready to settle into a comfortable chair. The grey children swam right up to her and stopped to hover closely around Lin's limp body. Two of them—one on each side of her shoulders—looked straight into her eyes. Up close, Lin saw that the children had no facial expressions at all. Their lips were perfectly shaped and they never blinked. Yet as she watched them exchange looks with one another, Lin could not help suspecting that they were smiling furtively amongst themselves, as if they had stumbled upon a miraculous treasure together and were silently congratulating each other.

One of them lifted Lin's right foot abruptly. All eyes swung to the child that was raising and lowering Lin's foot as if having discovered a new kind of game. As Lin stared at her own leg in the child's tiny hand, she observed detachedly that her entire body was covered in a layer of ice. When she peered at the child, who was now gazing up at her to see what reaction Lin had to its innocuous play, Lin thought she

was looking into the very face of her missing daughter. But the longer she stared, the more she knew it could not be Lan. The face was slightly too wide. Moreover, Lan would not be bald and she would not sprout fins from her hands and neck. Yet, it could be Lan, couldn't it? Perhaps these children were what all children became after they had drowned in the lake. Lin used to hear stories as a child about how the lake was haunted by the spirits of drowned people who waited for more victims so that the spirits would not have to feel alone. These children looked like they belonged to another world, but she could not deny the possibility that they might have been human once. Would Lin end up like them too? A naked bald figure without genitalia, with fins growing all over her body?

All this time, Lin had been too numb to feel a sense of fear, but a tingle of it ran through her lifeless body now as more of the children started to play with her limbs, lifting them up, then letting them go again. The more they played, the thicker the layer of ice seemed to grow on her body. Were the children doing this to her? Were they turning her body into ice?

The fear passed when she realised that, in spite of their expressionless faces, the children seemed to be enjoying this. The fear did not return even when one of them suddenly put one of Lin's icicle fingers into her mouth and, without a single effort, broke it off with its teeth. Lin was oddly unfazed by this. Maybe because she felt nothing. It was also the first time Lin had seen the teeth of these children of the lake; they were tiny and yellowish, and for some reason, this reminded her of Lan again. Soon all the children were biting into her limbs. One child bit into her right shoulder, making soft crunching

noises that failed to bother Lin, even though she tried her best to muster a sense of horror and disgust. What if she was right and all of these beings had been human once? What if one of them *was* Lan, but in new form? What if all these children had to eat were the bodies of adults who had fallen into the lake, by accident or by their own free will? If their own parents knew that their children had become these grey inhabitants of the lake, would they not also crash through the ice to see their children one last time, and to sacrifice their own bodies in order to feed them? One of them looked up from eating her left arm and their eyes met for an instant. Lin was convinced she saw a look of gratitude, even love.

A long time passed. Lin looked down at her body again and saw that it was gone. Only her clothes were left, flapping uselessly in the water. The fact that she could still see meant that one of the children was holding her head (the only part of her body left uneaten) in its hands. Many pairs of engorged irises gazed at her. She imagined that the one floating furthest away from her was her daughter, the one that had its head cocked to one side, a hand to its face, the same way Lan would pose whenever she was bored while waiting for her mother at the market queue, or while waiting for her father to pick her up from school. Lin saw a pair of fingers reaching into her own skull to pierce her eyes, which spilled out as glittering dust of ice, and darkness engulfed her thoughts. In this moment, she no longer saw or heard anything. But the moment was brief. Vision flickered back on like a damaged television set coming into life. Then Lin could hear the waves again as they rubbed against rocks and the bottom of the lake. But she could not feel or touch anything. She realised she could also look in any direction that she liked—one of the benefits of not having to be

contained by a physical body any longer.

She sensed that she was still hovering at the spot where she had been eaten. She saw her own clothes settling uselessly on a few rocks. The lake children were still hovering close by. They were not aware that Lin was observing them. They were looking at each other, uncertain of what to do next. Lin looked around and saw no other floating bodies that they could devour. Still convinced that any of these lake children could be her own Lan, Lin shadowed them when they decided, at last, to take off like a school of languid fishes in a singular direction. Lin followed them as best as she could, but as a bodiless spirit, she found that she could not keep up. She did not know how. Instead she watched in sadness as the children sped up and swam away, leaving her far behind.

Alone in the lake, Lin looked up and wondered if she should try to return to the surface. She was a spirit now, she believed. As a spirit, she could go anywhere she pleased, couldn't she? So she focused her thoughts on home and found that she was moving steadily upwards into the ceiling of light above her. Just as easily as when she had first entered the ice, Lin found herself rising out of the lake, looking in all directions. The sky above her was black and punctured by a few stars. The next thought that came was of her husband, Han, who had to be worried sick at home, sitting by the dwindling fire with his face in his hands. Lin longed at that very instant to tell him, "I'm safe now. I'm happy now that I know that our daughter has friends in the lake to keep her company. And I want to tell you how much I love you. And you're still young, my darling. I want you to find another woman who will love you better than how I have loved you. You will have children again, and our daughter and I will live

always in your memory.” As she composed these words, Lin’s mind was travelling faster and faster across the icy floor. Trees flew past her as she sped towards her home. She saw that her back window was open as she passed through it like a cold, invisible breeze.

She saw Han on the living room, curled up by the fire (he looked so peaceful) on a mattress they had made together. The house looked different and there were pictures of her and Lan on the wall that nobody had bothered to put up before. She also saw that Han had aged at least ten years. His hair had gone a little silvery and the lines radiating from his eyes had deepened. Had she been under the water for that long? Did time speed up while she was being eaten by the children of the lake? If Lin could cry, she would have done so. She floated as close as possible to Han’s sleeping face and tried to speak, but no words issued from her that he could hear. Lin spoke them anyway, the words she had composed before flying back here too late. Maybe Han would hear them in a dream. As her last words—“...we’ll live always in your memory”—were completed, Lin realised that Han, and the house around him, were slowly fading away, taken over by a light that seemed to spill out from between the floor boards, from the glowing fireplace, and from the window behind her.

The light swallowed everything and she felt like she was drowning a second time. She realised her memories were now being eaten. In all that light, as Lin’s mind steadily vanished, the last memory that flickered out was one of the lake children swimming happily through the vast, icy water, forming a stark shadow against the bright, white backdrop of ice overhead. A shadow that shrank and became indistinct, before it finally disappeared altogether.

The Blind Girl & The Talking Moon

In a small town very far away, a little blind girl lived with her mother, Carrie, and her stepmother, Sandra. Her name was Julie, and she was Carrie’s daughter from a previous marriage (Julie’s father was a drunk whom Carrie walked out on and never saw again). After Carrie and Sandra fell in love, they decided to move in with each other. And they would take care of Julie together.

Julie was tiny, even for her age. Her big eyes resembled her late father’s eyes. Even though she was blind, she was always laughing and smiling. The way Julie’s pupils darted about in their sockets did not disturb anyone, as she was happy and smiling brightly all the time. She loved to ask questions, and touch her mothers’ hands and faces repeatedly. She loved to press her face against their bodies to breathe in their fragrances. She also enjoyed humming along with them to songs heard on the television. In her special school, the teacher told Julie’s mums that their daughter was very good at learning new things quickly, and Julie was easily the smartest person in her class.