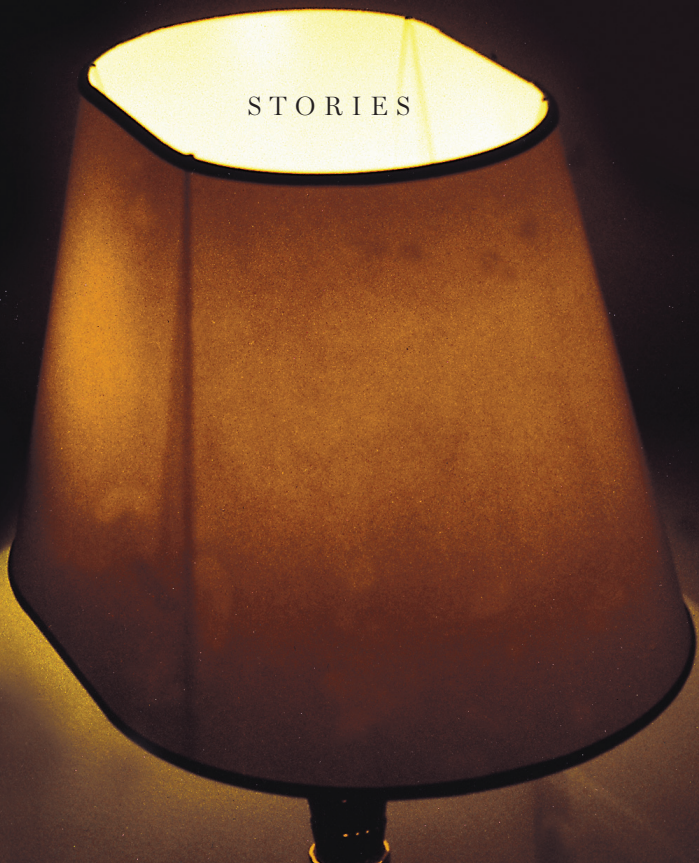


LEONORA LIOW

Moth

STORIES



LEONORA LIOW

Moth

STORIES

For Ju Seng
and
For Xiang and Mei

Contents

Falling Water.....	9
Blink.....	25
Jigsaw.....	45
Rich Man Country.....	75
Clara.....	93
Cufflinks.....	127
Moth.....	153
Tell Me.....	171
A Modern Girl's Quandary.....	191
Majulah Singapura.....	237
About the Author.....	299
About the Imprint.....	300

Falling Water

When they told me I could visit I almost spat at them. Now we sit across from each other, like any other couple married too long to make conversation. Who would have thought one year could bring so much change.

And when time's up and we gather our things and make believe we are relatives at a home, I am sure you feel it too, the collusion, that this is such a place of charity and good intention, with hospital orderlies disguised as guards.

I no longer wonder what you think of as you lie and stare at the ceiling or the underside of a bunk. I am too busy now with the day-to-day. My show carries on, you see, having an audience, even if neither is home. Even if they are, we are lodgers sharing accommodation, wordless and detached from one another's doings. I make a meal—rice, a soup. I pile my plate, go to my room. The rest is left to congeal in case someone gets hungry. If we are to talk about progress you might say we have made some: our son sometimes helps himself. This I know from the diminished remains. I look for forgiveness in such an act. I have not yet earned the right to ask our daughter to eat. Sometimes a wild hope springs: the possibility that we might be seated at the same time to a meal, even if like strangers at a food court randomly huddled at the last available table. I have not yet made the great leap

of inserting a conversation in that vision. That requires too much faith.

But I choose to think that progress is being made. Day before yesterday when I tidied up the bathroom, I just went about it, thinking no more than “people are so messy”. I did not feel the pent-up rage that would get me by the throat at such a time in my old life, or wish the things no mother could wish on her children. I didn’t even feel sick at the thought that this much vomit can only be possible from drugs or drink in the amount that gets people into serious trouble.

Sam is now at a supermarket. I know this because he gets into a uniform that has “Economart” on the breast pocket. Sometimes I see coupons scattered on his bedroom floor. I want to ask him, did they give you these or did you take them? Naturally I don’t. If he does not come home looking like a thundercloud, it’s a good day. It’s like this too with Sing. She has tattoos now all over her back. She has bags under her eyes the size of gunny sacks. When I wake up to go to the toilet and smell cigarette smoke and see the rim of light under her door, I know it’s one of those nights again. I lie still as a corpse willing that she stays home until dawn. Some mornings she will get up and put on her school uniform. I am careful not to allow tears to fall on such days. I have not broken my vow to never ask, what about those days when you disappear for days on end. Her principal called me in last week. The fact that she even calls me in is a concession to the fact that we once shared the same vocation. The common language we had is now alien and menacing. *Nancy, if this carries on, you understand*—she was kind enough not to finish the sentence. I want to cry but hold it all in.

It seems such a small thing to do, for all the things I could not.

* * *

When we sit across from each other I want to tell you all these things. I want to ask you, do you think about what's happening at home? The last visit I wanted to say, to that high blank wall of your face, you don't have to receive a visitor just because everyone else does. But I know that even getting this message to you is trying to shout across continents. So we sit there, you looking at some point over my shoulder, I looking at other families. Does it occur to you that *families* visit: that your friend, the one with the scar over one eye, the one who nods at me now, his children come with their husbands and wives; that the other one, the friendly-looking one with a beard, has a niece who comes with her children? Families. Does it give you a pang that your son and daughter do not come, that your wife and you sit in quiet desperation for visit's end? It's now the 15th week. Yes, I counted. That too I have to figure out. Why I count.

* * *

It was Ah Lui's daughter's wedding last week. When Ah Lui asked me, I don't know who was more shocked: Ah Lui, at my acceptance, or me, hearing myself say *Of course, I'd love to be there, congratulations!* Poor Ah Lui, as soon as the words left her mouth, I could hear her breath suspend, hear her desperation. *Thank you Ah Lui but I have another dinner that night.* Yes, that would have been the right answer in return for such an unspeakably kind and generous gesture from an utterly decent and duty-bound relative. What battles it must have cost her. (*How can you cut her off just because her husband's in jail?* I can hear her say.) But I could not help myself.

Clara

They always said, *Get Clara.*

They said this in the Blessed Saints' fellowship committee, they said it at the Heavenly Virtues Hospice, they said it at Outreach Volunteers. It was the instinctive response whenever things needed mending—an oversight in catering numbers, some names disastrously overlooked, a volunteer frigate floundering for lack of numbers.

This was as much owing to human nature as it was to Clara herself. The good-naturedness brimming in her brief *Sure*, the unobtrusive way she supplied any deficiency without word or fanfare, the way she blushed scarlet and shook her head, a hand going vigorously like a windscreen wiper, refusing the vote of thanks, all suggested a nature as generous as it was self-effacing.

Her appearance and manner underscored this. She might have been anyone's elderly maiden aunt, or a religious of one of the modernly attired orders, unvarying in her prim skirts and collared blouses, low-heeled ward nurse's shoes and neatly, if severely, bobbed grey hair. Her smile showed a slightly crooked front tooth and small, intelligent eyes behind spectacles of the over-exaggerated roundness of the '70s. They

were the one feature that hinted at a liveliness beyond her drab appearance, and would in a rare moment crinkle up on a tart remark, a wry observation, a sardonic aside made jokily: *Three days to organise a fellowship dinner? Why not an afternoon?* These remarks might be accompanied with an upward roll of her eyes. Before they knew her well, in the long-ago days of her fledgling volunteerism, such remarks were confusing and sometimes mistaken for rudeness. Further acquaintance with Clara showed them up for what they truly were: the odd quirks of a shy person unused to social exchange, the odd wrinkle that the smoothest fabric throws up.

Clara could always be counted on to pull her weight, which all knew could be measured in gold.

She was thus appreciated with a courtesy in which mingled respect and a teasing affection. Only in times of urgency or frantic activity—Christmas or New Year or Chinese New Year or Hari Raya or Deepavali—might it slip, betray a slight patronising note or a sudden peremptoriness. These were the times when responsibility needed to be assigned on short notice, and sometimes tempers wore thin. Fortunately these times came round only a few times a year, and even more fortunately, Clara could be counted on to take things in the right spirit.

At these times, amongst the abandoned, lonely or deserted, whether in church or ward or centre, the best in Clara glowed like the North Star. She never minded coming in earlier than anyone else, and staying after all had left, with the widow, the troubled teenager, the dying breathing their last.

Her true worth was discovered when Jessamine Lee of the Managerial Subcommittee of the Outreach Volunteers

resigned to care for her newborn grand-daughter and the panel found themselves short. Clara's name was put forth. The committee managed the calendar's events, decided the deployment of its volunteers, organised them into teams which ministered to the district: the ailing widow in need of food; the logistical arrangements for those aged fit enough to attend church or the doctor's or the community centre but without means to get there. Sofia Chong's name was also put forth, as was Lucy Tey's. Three women who were dependable, organised and could be counted on to bring the current state of meandering order into crisp efficiency. It was a coveted position, and Sofia and Lucy had wanted it for ages, now that Jessamine was leaving. At the meeting to decide how many would run, Clara, hearing her name, had stood up and said, *Please take my name down. Why*, asked the Treasurer, tasked with the nominations, restraining his impatience. He hated having to preside over such affairs involving office and squabbling women pretending not to squabble. He could not know of the subtle language that women speak, of their absence of vocabulary for retraction, apology, forgiveness. *No reason*, said Clara, smiling apologetically. *Thank you, but no.*

The same thing happened at the Blessed Saints, when they needed someone to take charge of the Jerusalem Centre, a shelter for the troubled youth of the parish. Fr. Albert had approached her, but Clara knew that Mary Teo would have hard feelings over it. And why would she not, Mary was a child psychologist with a clinic of her own. *No, no Fr. Albert, thank you. I think Mary would be the best person.*

By such signs was her worth confirmed in the eyes of many, from the decision-makers to the flock: it was Clara they wanted, having intuited in her the very qualities now so clearly demonstrated. Dependability, modesty, self-effacement,

Majulah Singapura

I

The flat was a mess.

Chairs, sofas, side tables were banked against the walls, against sideboards, against each other, the available space between them invaded by more cardboard beasts—Panasonic, Mitsubishi—in open-jawed and large-bellied readiness, the process already underway, of ingesting indeterminate quantities of household items: rubber mats, sheets, towels, curtains. Here and there piled at random were baskets of linen and black trash bags from which peeped obscure objects.

The room itself was lit with the hard stare of ceiling bulbs bereft of shades. Those had been sent over in the morning to the new place. The kitchen had been sacked by a rapacious predator. Drawers hung open and shelves stood bereft, their utensils and provisions disgorged into receptacles that constituted an obstacle course on a greasy floor. An unwashed wok lay submerged in a waterlogged sink murky with a suspension of floating globules and debris.

The family was huddled in a corner at one end of what looked like a landing stage for more objects—vases, box-fans, table lamps—but which was actually the dining table.

“Braised fish,” remarked Chee. He touched his singlet-clad stomach and pursed his lips. “Anything else?”

His wife Li Hwa looked up frowning at a bunch of keys she was trying to disentangle. “Sure.” She jerked her chin at the kitchen. “The other five courses are being prepared.”

Her husband’s querying look subsided but it could not be told if there was understanding or disappointment in its place. Anyway it was academic as his wife had gone back to her task, her brow furrowed in frustration. Somewhere amongst these were the storeroom keys that were destined for the new owner of their present flat. A scuffling broke out between the boys, aged thirteen and fifteen, passing now from sharp words to insults. The food on their plates had congealed and a scuffle broke out as the older boy jabbed a forefinger to his younger brother’s temple.

“Come on,” said Chee in exasperation, shooting out a hand to steady the soup, “how can I eat with all this going on?” Li Hwa set her futile bundle down with a crash. Her sons immediately disengaged and now applied themselves to their dinner, parade-square fashion, their eyes fixed on their plates. Her voice was arctically calm. “Do you want me to show you what will happen next time?” The sullen silence was almost tranquil.

Li Hwa frowned at the *satay*. “I bought 24. Why does it look—” She ticked the air above the sticks, her lips moving wordlessly. “I thought so. 23.”

Chong, her older boy cast a sidelong glance toward the kitchen. “I thought I saw her eating something just now.”

Chee’s gaze followed his son’s, and in a flash the resemblance between father and son leapt to life: the lowering of the lids, the elliptical slide of their eyes. “Was it *satay*?” said Chee, with dropped voice and minimal movement of his

lips. With his head lowered between his shoulders, the food reflected in his spectacles, he would have looked comical had he not been serious.

The boy shrugged.

“Ah, Jamilah,” called Li Hwa.

The girl appeared wiping her soapy hands against a T-shirt a little worse for wear.

“Where one more *satay*?”

Jamilah was a simple soul. Although her passport said she was 24, Li Hwa and Chee knew it was the same old story. The indigent family, the racking poverty, farms barely able to meet landlords’ rents. Jamilah had been deliberately chosen, following a string of predecessors of like ilk. Meek. Untutored. The sort that was always a better bet than those from better off countries. Chee and Li Hwa put her at the same age as their older boy, or a year or two more, tops. Young enough to be easily intimidated but old enough to understand—or be made to understand—that a contract of service was a contract of service.

This the girl did. She had arrived with hardly any English, apart from what they had been taught at the centre, together with cooking and cleaning lessons. *Good mo’neeng sir. T’ank you madam.* Being found unsatisfactory and returned to the agent was not an option. Her father got up before daybreak and never came home until the sky was inky, her mother sat several hours daily by the dirt track with rice cakes that might or might not be sold at day’s end. Even with this, they owed the landlord more than could be paid in the foreseeable future. The titans were invisible, but their presence was always felt. A squabble over boundaries could result in mysterious disappearances. On this scale, Jamilah’s family knew themselves cogs in a giant wheel of many spokes:

About The Author



Leonora Liow was born in Hong Kong. She studied Law at the National University of Singapore. Her interests are cooking, cultures and a good read.

About Ethos Books

Giving voice to emerging and exciting writers from diverse backgrounds, we help foster an environment in which literature and the arts not only survive, but thrive. In short, we nurture the growing literary community in Singapore.

That's why our authors and their ideas come first. By taking a collaborative approach to publishing, we bring each author's voice and vision to fruition. We are always open to new ideas: different ways of working and fresh ways of delivering the unparalleled satisfaction only a good book can bring.

Established in 1997, Ethos Books is an imprint of Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd, a publishing and agency.



Fresh • Different • Enduring

Creating books that capture the spirit of a people
and reflect the ethos of our changing times.

www.ethosbooks.com.sg

www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

*Y*OUNG GIRL'S AMBITIONS prompt dark stirrings in her nature. A father reckons with a lifetime of dysfunctional family relations. A foreign worker is cut adrift on a raft of shattered dreams. In the title story *Moth*, a condemned woman reclaims her broken dignity.

In a collection that resonates with life's poignance, humour and irony, Leonora Liow explores the private universe of individuals navigating the arcane waters of human existence and masterfully illuminates the extraordinary humanity that endures.

LEONORA LIOW is a Singapore-based writer. She won the Golden Point award in 2003 with her short story, "Pentimento". *Moth* is her first published collection.

ethos
books™
Singapore

ISBN: 978-981-09-3758-4



9 789810 937584

www.ethosbooks.com.sg