CATHERINE LIM

The Loving and The Dead

A collection of tales from Catherine Lim which readers are advised not to take too seriously but as "simply a product of a free-wheeling imagination".

Catherine Lim's free-wheeling imagination cheerfully dispenses with all constraints to tell stories of that other world. Written with an exaggerated sense of earnestness and caution, the eighteen tales in this collection elicit in the reader the very goosebumps of terror she had herself experienced as a child listening to such tales.

As an adult, these goosebumps persist for her. However, they no longer arise from fear, but from a sense of awe and mystery that she feels when she considers this large existential question: Despite our extensive scientific knowledge today, what do we know of the supernatural? What *can* we know of the supernatural?

Catherine's deep and abiding sense of mystery is reflected in the pronouncement by one of her characters in the last story in this collection: "I don't know, I don't know. I wish I did."

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CATHERINE LIM *The Loving and The Dead* Marshall Cavendish Editions

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The Loving and The Dead

Tales of the supernatural

A Note From The Author

For someone who doesn't believe in ghosts, I'm absurdly fascinated by them. For someone who proudly claims the modern scientific-rational-logical mode of thinking, I'm ridiculously drawn to the entire domain of supernatural beings.

And what an impressive pantheon they are! Ghosts powerful and lowly, ancient and modern, hostile and benign, contented and desolate, like the lonely ones released once a year during the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts to enable them to come to earth and enjoy the good food spread out for them by the thoughtful living. Probably hungry for more than just food, the ghosts have to leave by cockcrow, and wait for the next Festival to come round once again.

As a child, I absorbed the ghost stories told by an elderly maidservant who was a compulsive storyteller. The myths she remembered vividly from her childhood were much embellished by her very active imagination, so that a simple legend could end up as a horror tale of epic proportions. In the evenings, after her work was over, she would bring out a wooden stool and sit in the cool

night air, as we began gathering round her, a completely enraptured audience. Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, giggling as we compared the goose pimples appearing on our arms, we would huddle closer together. Too frightened to walk alone in the darkness, we would insist on going to the outhouse lavatory in a group.

I had thought the maturity and sobriety of adulthood would have left behind those horrid supernatural tales of childhood. But I was wrong. They remain as compelling as ever, making me generate ghost stories of my own, each more impossibly outrageous than the other. In the stories here, I have taken bold advantage of the literary licence that allows the creative writer to have full play of the imagination. That means, of course, that my tales of ghosts, hauntings and visitations are not at all based on factual reality, but are simply a product of a free-wheeling imagination.

Marriage

The marriage date had to be quickly decided on, as well as the entire matter of how the ceremony should be conducted, where it should take place, which temple priest would be most experienced to conduct all the necessary rituals, who should be present as witnesses, etc. It would have been an onerous enough task for the families on both sides to plan the wedding if the couple were still alive. But Ah Choo, aged eighteen, and Ah Bah, aged twenty-two, had died just a month back, in that awful trishaw accident along the little town's main road, trapped together inside the flimsy vehicle that had been crushed into a heap by a huge lorry carrying massive logs of wood. As soon as word got round about the accident, the townspeople rushed to see. Some were insensitive enough to make opportunistic use of the tragedy, trying to work out winning lottery numbers based on the date of its occurrence, the ages of the deceased, the number on the licence plate of the lorry. But everyone talked about the shocking event with grave faces for days afterwards, shaking their heads and exclaiming sombrely, "What a pity! Already engaged and soon to get married!"

The marriage would take place after all. It would be a ghost marriage, with all the appearance and appurtenances of a living one, to calm the spirits of the dead couple. Already both Ah Choo and Ah Bah had appeared several times to their families in dreams, with increasing urgency and distress. Ah Choo's mother reported how in one of the dreams, her daughter, wearing the same samfoo as on the day of the accident, had stood before her with tears in her eyes, wringing her hands, shaking her head, and rocking to and fro in a display of extreme anguish and despair. She had opened her mouth as if to ask something. "Please tell me what you want", her mother had pleaded in the dream, but never knew, because she had woken up then. It would continue to be like that – her waking up at the precise moment her dead daughter opened her mouth to speak.

Ah Bah's mother too had had a dream of her son, which she was sure was an apparition. She saw him approach her as she lay on the bed, kneel on the floor, take her hand in his and begin to sob silently, as from an overcharged heart. She had burst out crying, "Please tell me what you want, I'll do anything you wish", and watched him open his mouth to say something. And, as in the case of Ah Choo and her mother, it was at this exact moment that she had woken up. It would appear that the two parents were having strangely parallel dreams, of dead offspring desperate to ask for something but unable to do so.

Thrown into confusion and tumult, they got together to share their dreams and consult with each other as to what to do next. There was something both noticed. In every dream, Ah Choo and Ah Bah had appeared singly, never

together as a couple. Whereas in life they were inseparable as a betrothed pair, taking every excuse to ride together in a trishaw as the narrow seat allowed for the secret delight of close bodily contact, in death each was always a solitary, bewildered presence. Suddenly the message became clear: a betrothal, no matter how serious in this world, was not enough for true union in the next. It had to be ratified by marriage for total intimacy and companionship. Until the marriage took place, each would remain lost, seeking the other, wandering about in torment and despair.

So there was no choice but to arrange a ghost marriage. A temple medium confirmed its necessity. Without it, he warned, the souls of Ah Choo and Ah Bah would be condemned to cycle after cycle of painful solitude that would end with active vengeance against those who had never cared enough to help them.

So they had to be helped at once. But the trouble was that neither family knew how to go about preparing for a ghost marriage. Someone provided the useful information that a priest from the Ban Tok Kee Temple had had the experience of conducting a ghost marriage on two separate occasions. Apparently he had done his job well, for the spirits of the dead were satisfied enough with their new marital status to stop bothering the living. With much relief, Ah Choo's and Ah Bah's mothers sought out the priest to get his help to appease their children's spirits.

Their part in the ceremony of appeasement was simply to bring along an item of clothing of the deceased and to share the expenses for the large wedding feast of roast pig, steamed chicken, pink buns, fried noodles, oranges, an assortment of sweetmeats and a pot of the best rice wine,

laid out on a table covered with a red tablecloth, exactly as would be set out at a celebratory event for the living.

The priest had made two large effigies to represent the deceased. They were roughly constructed of bamboo, paper and cloth, the male effigy being made to look larger and taller than the female. (The priest's assistant had crudely drawn in two round breasts for the female, and a huge manly moustache for the male.) The items of clothing brought by the mothers were carefully inspected, then draped over the effigies; Ah Choo's mother had brought along her daughter's favourite pearl necklace for thoughtful enhancement.

Next the two women were invited by the priest to simulate the obligatory Bridal Feeding Ceremony by which bride and groom simultaneously fed each other to symbolise lasting support and care. Ah Choo's mother fed Ah Bah's effigy a small piece of steamed chicken on a fork, while Ah Bah's mother fed Ah Choo's effigy a small mouthful of noodles on a spoon, in a cross-referencing acknowledgment of the new family ties.

Then came the most important part of the ceremony, when the effigies were placed side by side, very close to each other in an upright position against the wall, on which was hung a large red banner with inscriptions for marital harmony and prosperity. For at this point, the priest pronounced them man and wife with loud, sonorous incantations made to the rhythmic sounds of a small bell held in his hand. Finally, the effigy couple were taken to the Ban Tok Kee Temple to be ceremonially burnt, and their ashes placed in small, equal-sized urns to be given to their respective families.

That night Ah Choo's mother had a dream in which she saw, for the first time, her now properly married daughter standing beside her husband. Both of them were smiling in perfect contentment. She quickly told her dream to Ah Bah's mother who, the very next night, had the same happy dream.

"You won't believe what I'm going to tell you." Some months later, it was Ah Bah's mother's turn to convey good news. The night before, in the most vivid dream in her life, she saw Ah Choo, now her daughter-in-law, standing beside Ah Bah with a special look of joy on her face. She was lifting her blouse slightly, just enough to reveal the small swell of belly below the belt of her trousers. She looked down at it in serene self-satisfaction, and began rubbing it slowly, lovingly. It had the unmistakable size and shape of a four-month pregnancy, hardly noticeable under her loose blouse, but soon to render it improperly tight. And Ah Bah was standing beside her, also holding up the gently lifted blouse, also looking affectionately at the growing child inside her.

Marriage, consummation and pregnancy in that other world. They were exactly like the sacred milestones in this one, underlain by the same biological needs that death could never vanquish.

Four months later, as if Ah Choo's mother was obligated to follow up Ah Bah's mother's dream with yet one more of her own, she saw her daughter with her belly now so big that it pulled up the front of her long loose dress by several inches, and made her walk comically with a duck's waddle. She was laughing as she once again caressed her belly, and pulled Ah Bah's hand to touch it too. Her mother said,

when she woke up, "She looked at me, smiled and said, 'Your grandchild is due soon.' "

Now a discordant note entered Ah Choo's mother's consciousness, and was similarly felt by Ah Bah's mother. While the announcement of a coming grandchild in the world of the living was cause for celebration, that of a ghost child born to ghost parents was a different matter. Both the mothers cast a nervous sideways glance at each other and, without saying they felt a sudden surge of goose pimples all over their arms, they were exactly experiencing that sensation.

Once again they consulted their temple priest who, since he had conducted the wedding ceremony of their dead children, could be brought into the confidence of subsequent events. Asked for his interpretation of their dreams, he said promptly, "Yes, a child will be born," adding with the sternness of authority, "You should rejoice because your dead children are now happily married and are enjoying the same conjugal rights and pleasures of the living. They share the same room, the same bed in that other world."

Exactly a month later, Ah Choo's mother woke very early, before anyone in the neighbourhood was up. She sat up in bed, listened intently, looked around anxiously and then went to open the front door. There, on the doorstep, in the pre-dawn darkness, she saw a newborn baby, still with its umbilical cord attached, wrapped in an old sarong. With a little gasp of shock, she picked it up and took it into the house. There she laid it on the seat of an armchair to take a closer look. It was a baby boy, a strange-looking baby, for it had almost paper-white skin, tiny tufts of soft

white hair, like cotton wool, scattered on its head and large pink eyes of an almost preternatural beauty.

But the strangest thing she noticed about the baby was that it made no sound, even though it had all the appearance of loud, frantic crying. Its mouth was stretched wide open, revealing a tongue that rolled and thrashed about with the futile energy of a small trapped creature; its little neck was taut and swollen, with the sheer effort of letting out a supreme cry for help; all of its four tiny limbs stuck out stiffly, as if to force the entire body into a final desperate reaching out to the rescuer.

Yet she heard not the smallest sound coming from the baby. It was most strange. She continued to stare at the eerily silent, wildly contorted face and struggling body, then bent down to put an ear close to its mouth, to detect even the slightest sound. But it was all silent, tortured crying which seemed to go on interminably. Completely unnerved, she ran upstairs to call a relative who happened to be staying with her. Together they watched the infant lying on the armchair, still crying with that horribly soundless anguish, still carrying an unspeakable sorrow that could not be heard by the world it had come into.

What should she do? The relative was positive that someone had dropped off the infant on the doorstep in the darkness before dawn, and then slipped away. It was probably a maidservant who had been made pregnant by the master in the household, or a poor woman who had given birth to a strange child, could not bear for it to be seen, could not bear to kill it, and finally decided to drop it off outside somebody's door.

The relative had once heard of a baby, even whiter than this one, completely hairless, found in a cardboard box near a bus stop, and on another occasion, of a baby with a flattened face as if all its features had been cruelly erased, left in a monsoon drain to die. The proper thing to do now, she suggested to Ah Choo's mother, was to take the infant to the police station. It would be up to them to put it in a home, an orphanage, to hunt down the mother.

"My God," cried Ah Choo's mother who wondered how she would react to having such an abnormal-looking grandchild, white as a ghost. "Look, it's stopped crying and it's looking at me. It's staring! I don't like its look. It's unnatural!" And indeed, the newborn baby had suddenly stopped crying to turn its small head to stare at Ah Choo's mother with a look of intense scrutiny that did not belong to any infant's face. With a little scream, she ran out of the room.

She called Ah Bah's mother, told her of the strange happening and asked for her help once more in accompanying her to see the temple priest who surely could explain things and advise her accordingly. The priest closed his eyes, muttered some prayers and remained very still while Ah Choo's mother watched him anxiously. Then he said to her: "The child is your grandchild."

"Oh no," she gasped. She began to count on the fingers of both hands, beginning from the month when her dead daughter and the dead fiancé were permitted to consummate their marriage and ending with the month of the baby's discovery on her doorstep. Nine. Exactly nine months. The pregnant dead experienced the same period of gestation as the expectant living.

She turned to Ah Bah's mother and said, "He's your grandson too. We're both his grandmothers." Ah Bah's mother said in an awe-stricken whisper, "But he's a ghost child. What should we do?"

The priest offered advice that brought a certain measure of relief. "Nothing," he said. "You cannot do anything. The parents of this child just want it to make the acquaintance of its grandmothers, both on the maternal and the paternal side. It is the child's right. After that, it will be satisfied and will return to its parents. But first, it wants to meet both grandmothers."

And the priest was right. In the days that followed the baby's visitation from that other world, the grandparents left it alone, knowing they could do nothing. They waited for its parents to take it back, tiptoeing around it with deep fear and caution, sometimes timidly wondering if they ought to feed it some milk, then quickly telling themselves that a ghost baby did not need milk. They took turns to recite the prayers and perform the rituals recommended by the priest for its well-being, always ending with a nervous expression of appreciation and goodwill, "Thank you for coming to be acquainted with your grandparents. We wish you a safe and peaceful journey back."

The infant died within a matter of days, as predicted by the priest who said it was already much missed by its loving parents. They had been most impatient, after discharging their duty of sending it to meet its grandparents, to have it back with them once more.

The Letters

In 1978, Michael Cheok, aged fifty-two, had been married for twenty-three years and divorced for five. The twenty-three years had been full of a selfish pursuit of pleasures, the five of consequent guilt and shame. Unhindered by a mild, uncomplaining wife, he had, from the very start of his marriage, launched on a regimen of pure self-indulgence leading to self-destruction – drinking, gambling, selling his wife's jewellery and mortgaging their house to pay off his gambling debts, slackening so badly at his job that he was eventually kicked out, falling into bad company and finally getting involved in sleazy affairs that left him in even greater debt. He had committed every crime in the marital felony book.

Then one day towards the end of 1978, Michael had a change of heart, mind and soul. It was one of those rare occasions when a sudden flash, as if Heaven-sent, caused a person to see things in a new light, to tear off the veil of ignorance or illusion hitherto blinding him. That epiphanic flash, in Michael's case, had been brought about by a simple awareness: in just five years of

business ventures, he had made such a turnaround in his fortunes, that he had not only paid off all his debts (as well as a woman who demanded a substantial sum to go away and give no more trouble) but also managed to buy an apartment in a condominium. Contemplating the incredibly marvellous change in his circumstances, he suddenly felt the urge to do something he had thought about for a long time: make reparation to his wife for all the years of misery he had caused her. He would stop at nothing to show his penitence, and he would start straightaway.

He thought, "I must go to see her instantly; I must waste no time," experiencing an urgency he could only feel, not explain. So he flew to Singapore, taking the next flight out of Thailand where he happened to be on one of his frequent business trips. At Singapore Airport, he jumped into a taxi and rode straight to the house of his brother-in-law, his wife's older brother and only sibling, with whom she was staying. He was prepared to tolerate, once more, the man's scornful, accusing looks that said, "So you've conveniently washed your hands off your wife, and dumped her on me. I can tell you she's not welcome. But at least I do the decent thing by providing a roof over her head!" His wife had been living with this surly sibling, and his equally surly wife, for years, always a quiet, uncomplaining, stoical presence.

As soon as Michael entered the house, he was told that his wife had just passed away. "What?" he gasped. "She's got a letter for you; it's in the cupboard over there, under her clothes. She said you are to read it as soon as you come." The brother delivered all the news and instructions

in a sullen, matter-of-fact manner. He did not think it necessary to ask any of the questions that the strangeness of the situation warranted: Why had he come at precisely this hour of her death? How did she know he would come? Did he know about the letter?

The brother, after delivering the necessary message, left the room abruptly, making clear he was not to be bothered by anyone for the rest of the day.

Michael, too intrigued by the message about his dead wife's letter, actually deferred paying his respects to the dead spouse on her bed, in order to find out immediately what that letter could be about.

He found it, contained in an envelope on which she had written his name, in her neat handwriting. All kinds of thoughts swirled about in his mind as his trembling fingers tore open the envelope. What last message did his wife want to give him? Was it a last reproach for his errant ways? A warning? An expression of forgiveness? A shocking revelation about their twenty-three years together that he could never have dreamt about?

Michael held the letter in both hands and recognised, with shock, that it was in his handwriting, a distinctively lazy scrawl that often slipped into illegibility. Then he recognised, with an even greater shock, that it was a letter that he himself had written many years ago to his wife, then a young girl he was ardently courting. He remembered the scene of the ardour vividly, when at the height of youth's flamboyance and vanity, he had promised her this and that, as she sat on the sofa looking up at him with a mixture of amusement and doubt. He had said, gesticulating wildly with both arms:

I will love you with all my heart
I will cherish you always
I will protect you against every harm
I will always be there for you

He would have gone on interminably with the promises if she had not stopped him.

She had said smiling, "Alright, that's enough. No woman could ask for more." Then she had said, "Write all those promises down; I want them in the form of a letter," and got up to give him pen and paper. And he had said, "Sure!" and written everything down with a flourish.

The recollection of that scene, so many years back, caused a flush to spread all over his neck and face. Embarrassment gave way to burning curiosity: Why on earth, so many years later, was she returning this love letter to him and moreover, requiring him to read it as she lay on her deathbed? Then he noticed that there was a small note attached to the letter, again in her neat, precise hand. It said: "You broke all your promises."

The five-word summary of his heinous behaviour over more than twenty years instantly opened the floodgates of his guilt and shame which now came crashing over him. Returning to the accusing corpse on the bed, her letter clutched in his hands, he fell on his knees and sobbed, "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

He knelt thus in this position of abject contrition before he raised his head and saw something that startled him. It was a white envelope clasped in her hands, again addressed to him in her neat hand: "To Michael." Another letter? The eagerness to read it precluded all wonderment

as to how it had got there. He pulled the envelope gently from under her hands. The second letter said: "I know you are genuinely sorry for your abominable behaviour to me. You will be forgiven if you do something for me now." The request from the dead woman was for him to go directly to her brother, and demand that she be buried, not cremated as he had planned. Not for her the indignity of a cremation and the quick consignment of her ashes to the sea! Only a burial would suit her. Moreover, the burial should be at the Frangipani Garden Cemetery which she had always loved. Thereafter, her grave should be always well tended and visited with respect and regard.

Once again, the mounting amazement about his dead wife issuing such precise instructions, as if her ghost were floating above him, sternly watching and monitoring his every move to see if he was following her instructions, had to be suspended to deal with the immediate task enjoined upon him. He hurried to his brother-in-law who was sitting on a chair quietly puffing on a cigarette. Before he was even halfway through the explanations and instructions, the man got up, threw his cigarette butt on the floor, crushed it under his shoe, and said nonchalantly, "You do as you like." He added, "After today, it's my turn to wash my hands off her." He was emigrating to Canada with his wife, and would never return to Singapore.

The ensuing frenzied activities following his promise to grant his wife's request for burial would be for Michael one dizzying blur in his memory, when events seemed to take on a life of their own, propelling him on, forcing him to clear one improbable obstacle after another. And they had all to do with letters. In life, his wife had never written

a single letter to him; within minutes of her being dead, she had written two. He had two ghost letters in his shirt pocket, sending him on one frantic errand after another.

Between 1978 and 1980, Michael was in Singapore, tending to various aspects of his business. He had not given much thought to the strange events surrounding his wife's death, for as he would later explain, "The more I think about them, the more confused I am." It was easier to follow instructions no matter how mysterious their origins, than to puzzle out these origins. Better to obey the dead than try to understand them.

He visited his wife's grave whenever he could, with the red carnations that he vaguely remembered she liked. He marked down in his diary the dates for obligatory visits – her birthday, the anniversary of her death, and All Souls' Day as well as its Chinese equivalent of Ching Ming. To commemorate the anniversary of her death, he placed a large ad in the memorial pages of the *Singapore National Times*, choosing a photograph which he vaguely remembered to be her favourite, using a caption from the Bible which he remembered she had scribbled down somewhere. Once she had said something about purple being a hideous colour. Well, he would make sure that nothing connected with her remembrance would be remotely purple. It was just amazing how hard he had to rack his memory to find out what his wife liked or disliked, in order to ensure proper respect and regard of her memory.

As a final duty, he went to see the cemetery caretaker, with instructions, backed by a handsome advance payment, to keep the grave and tombstone free of weeds

and bird droppings. His act of restitution was acquiring a magnitude and magnanimity that could not be expected of even the greatest sinner. It was supererogatory duty of the highest order.

In 1981, with this comforting thought in mind, Michael, aged fifty-five, felt free to leave Singapore permanently. He would continue with his business and travel widely, but make his home in the United States where he had many friends. Over the years, he would sometimes think of his wife lying in her grave in Singapore, glad to have been able to grant her wish, glad that her first letter of severe reproach had softened into the second one of urgent request and subsequent forgiveness. Sometimes he wondered if her grave was being well tended, giving a little shrug that said, "Well, it can't be helped", as the image of a desolate, unvisited cemetery, just one of many in societies where the living had little time for the dead, loomed in his mind.

One day, in 1998, well after Michael, now aged seventy-two, had gone into retirement to take care of certain minor health issues, he happened to be casually glancing at a copy of the *Singapore National Times*. He saw a government gazetted notice about the exhumation of Frangipani Garden Cemetery. He knew what that meant: those remains that were not claimed would be disposed of in a mass cremation, and the ashes scattered in the sea, as far away from land as possible. That would be the ultimate fate of his wife. Like thousands of others with no family, relatives or friends to come forward to claim their bones, she would be swallowed up in the vastness and darkness of sheer oblivion. There would be

no trace of her whatsoever on the living planet of which she had once been a part.

Michael thought, shaking his head and frowning, "No, no, I can't let that happen to her." He knew what he wanted to do – return to Singapore, attend the exhumation, and claim her remains. Then he would arrange for a proper cremation with the proper ceremonies of dignity, respect and closure, place her ashes in a graceful, well-designed urn, and finally give her a resting place in a columbarium near her beloved Frangipani Garden Cemetery. He would arrange for some loving words to be inscribed on the columbarium niche of her resting place, so that even if he never visited her again, others might pause, read the words: "A kinder, more loving, more patient, more forgiving woman would be difficult to find", and marvel at the kind of wife that would inspire such a paean of praise.

In August 1998, on a dark, cold morning, Michael, now bent and grey and shivering despite his thick coat, stood with several others in the Frangipani Garden Cemetery, around a trench, watching the gravediggers at work with their shovels. The trench was at least five feet deep, and the diggers, stern-faced as they went about their work, used their shovels to feel about for the coffins laid deep inside the earth, and then to dig the earth around them, before lifting them up and placing them on the ground for the claiming to be done. Many of the coffins had broken up, and spilt out their contents, which were mostly scatterings of bones rather than complete, intact skeletons.

Michael could identify his wife's coffin easily by the name plaque at its side. As the coffin was laid at his feet, it came apart and out fell a letter in an envelope, addressed to

him in the neat handwriting that was by now so familiar: "To Michael." He picked it up tremulously and opened it. It was a letter from his wife which had just two words: "Thank you."

The three letters from his wife would be Michael's greatest treasure in his declining years, up to the last moment on his deathbed: the first two when she was still warm as a fresh corpse, and the last when she had lain in the dark cold earth long enough to have become an indistinguishable part of it. All three letters, written by a ghostly hand, were clasped in the still living one until it too, surrendered its last strength and the letters fell finally to the ground.