

Angry Ghosts

Uma Anyar

I DO NOT steal for personal gain. I steal to create domestic havoc, to provoke confusion and emotional distress in those who offend or ignore me. I use no guns or violence.

I am never detected; indeed, rarely suspected. Most people blame themselves rather than imagine that I or anyone else would bother to take worthless things from them. I like observing their quandary, the frustration and confusion my actions cause.

Like an angry ghost, I am a teacher of morals and values; I set things right. You must admit such lessons are vital in our sad times when nothing much matters to anyone anymore. Personal troubles disturb their chronic malaise and teach humility.

I am a warrior. They think me benign: a plain-faced, chubby woman utterly unremarkable in every way. Most people forget they have already met me. They beam their grins in briefest greeting and forget fifteen minutes later that we have met. I overcame my annoyance as I learned to appreciate the art of anonymity.

Justice, fairness, retribution – hard to come by in Singapore when one is an ordinary woman. People are self-absorbed and seldom happy. They shop to fill the emptiness, or turn to religion and put the blame on others. I see it in their eyes. The teenagers are worst; so much energy and so little purpose.

My eldest son's girlfriend, Lin Fu, still wears short skirts. She has a career, drives a BMW, spends money like there is no tomorrow. I suspect Tommy has helped her out of some financial hole more than once.

Lin Fu looked right through me at my cousin's wedding. She likes my son's money much more than she likes him. Tommy is a good boy, but he's oblivious, standing there grinning from ear to ear as she paws him in public.

Tommy took me to the ladies' tennis tournament at the country club. He called it 'The Battle of the Babes', which his friends thought was very funny. He said he had money on 'his girl', as if she were a racehorse. He has his father's weakness for gambling.

On the way to the tournament we stopped at Lin Fu's apartment. He told me to wait in the car while he went to get her. I had need of her washroom, I said, and followed him into the elevator. I had no plan, no strategy. It just came to me. Passing her open bedroom, I saw her tennis shoes next to her sports bag at the base of her bed, her racket zipped in its own case. She was wearing a spandex outfit. It was embarrassing. Tennis used to be a game played by gentlemen who wore proper white attire and drank gin with tonic at sundown. The sport has been robbed of its gentility. Don't misunderstand me. I don't object to women playing competitive sports, but it should be about the top-spin on the ball, not the firmness of their buttocks.

I scooped up the left shoe, well shaped and pliable, and took it into the bathroom, locked the door and let a few minutes pass, then flushed the toilet, using the sound to mask my opening the small window, and tossed the shoe into the deep, narrow ventilation shaft shared with the adjacent buildings. In the kitchen Lin Fu was finishing her morning coffee. My son offered me a cup. Politely, I declined. She left to finish dressing and I waited for what I knew would be a distressed scream, followed by my son racing to her aid, then high-pitched squawks, shouts and cries of dismay. 'I can't play in new shoes, you idiot. It takes weeks to break them in.'

I listened to the ticking of the clock in the kitchen as they turned over cushions and armchairs and emptied closets. I tried to help but was pushed aside and told to not get in the way. I quite like watching commotion; it has a curious quality of pointlessness.

We arrived late. Lin Fu wore new blue and white Nikes that glistened on the clay court. She lost her opening match in straight sets – 4-6, 0-6.

Her image as a potential amateur tennis hotshot was shattered by tears and a broken racket. My son lost some money. Lin Fu had her suspicions about me, but she could prove nothing. A year later, my brother introduced Tommy to a nice girl from an old and respected family. Mai Su, my daughter-in-law, is pregnant with a boy. I will be a grandmother. It's funny how things work out in the end.

People rush too much. They are all so busy going somewhere they forget where they are. Last week, three young girls with orange hair and stylishly silly clothes shoved past me on the Cathay Pacific Plaza escalator. I nearly toppled over the side. They were giggling so hard they didn't notice. Something fell out of the taller girl's handbag. I picked it up. It was a bottle of *Passionate Nights* perfume. It smelled vile. I shoved it into my purse; I hate litter. Out on the street, more than a dozen taxis ignored me so I joined the queue at the bus stop and pondered a public awareness poster: 'Low crime/does not mean/No Crime!/Be vigilant!' I found this warning against street theft both vulgar and ridiculous. Some people deserve to have things stolen from them.

I don't like turning up at my weekly mah-jong game without a small gift for the host, but I just didn't have the strength to do the proper thing after the escalator incident and the taxi problem. My sciatica was acting up and I was cranky. I could hear Sue and Jin gossiping and giggling in the kitchen when I let myself in and set my purse on the hall table near the telephone. Helen doesn't have a cordless phone. Like me, she is set in her ways.

When I entered the kitchen they were startled, as if I were an intruder. 'Oh, It's you! We thought you weren't coming until later,' stammered Helen. Her face was flushed; her fingers darted to her neck and fiddled with the green silk scarf she had tied around her throat, though it was surely too hot for such affectations. I was early, but they had arrived even earlier. I didn't understand the awkward silence that lasted maybe three beats before they all began chattering at once. I let it go.

We took our places around the table and I noticed the bruise that Helen was trying to hide with the scarf. I laughed. 'Helen, are you being courted by a vampire?' Sue and Jin snickered but avoided eye contact. 'Oh, these are just nasty mosquito bites. They look worse than they are,' Helen said.

'They sure do. So that's what you were whispering about when I arrived. Okay, tell me, who is it? I don't want to be the only one in the dark.'

Helen's voice hardened and she looked directly at me. 'They are mosquito bites! Now let's play mah-jong.'

That night Jon became amorous when we were getting ready for bed. He crept up behind me, cupped my breasts and started sucking on my neck, which was something new for him. 'Jon! What's gotten into you? Why are you biting me? We're not teenagers. Stop it.' And right then I flashed on Helen's green scarf. Vampire revealed. I was more annoyed than offended – Helen didn't have to cook his meals and entertain his boring business associates. She just got to do kissy face and broaden Jon's horizons, which admittedly wasn't without its benefits. Still, there are boundaries.

Mah-jong was next at my house. I prepared my special dim sum buffet; double-boiled soup and kai-lan stir-fried with wine, shallots and fresh ginger. I even made my yam dumplings shaped like tiny songbirds, and yin-yong noodles. I put oolong in the blue and white porcelain teapot, fresh flowers on the dining-room table. Sue, Jin and Helen arrived together, from the nail salon. They are educated women but they also believe in the supernatural, like my mother and her mother before her. Jin said she wouldn't go near the 'Monkey God Tree' on Jurong West Avenue, but Helen and Sue mocked her; visitors who pray and offer incense to the deities in the tree's gnarled trunk get lucky lotto numbers and they had heard that Number 4309 recently made some small fortunes. 'There is, of course, the risk of becoming possessed by angry ghosts,' said Jin, 'like that poor woman who offered incense one night and started jumping in the air and writhing about on the ground. It was only good luck that a Chinese medium was near by and helped bring her back to her senses.'

'What would have happen if she couldn't be brought back?' asked Helen. 'Would she be here and in the other world at the same time? Maybe she'd be in a coma or something?'

I was quite familiar with the workings of angry ghosts.

Grandmother was always scolding me; telling me to stand up straight, comb my hair, not eat so many sweet cakes. One night I stole her dentures from the glass on her night table. She was convinced that angry ghosts had taken the teeth and bad things would happen to the family if they were not recovered. Finding granny's teeth became our priority.

Days later, my mother was preheating the oven when the smell of melting plastic and dental adhesive led her to pull open the door. Grandmother's

teeth gave her a lopsided grin from the broiler tray. Grandmother was so upset that she moved out the next day and went to live with Auntie May in Nanyang. She didn't speak to me for a year.

My mother was no fool. 'You are a born troublemaker!' she shouted. I was only eight years old but I was no helpless child. I had learned how to make things happen.

Talk of angry ghosts had Helen and the others headed towards nervous fits. Distraction was needed. 'Look what I prepared for you today!' I announced, a little louder than I'd intended, but it did the trick.

'Oh, I can't eat anything,' chirped Helen. 'I'm watching my weight.' She had lost a few kilos. And she had a new haircut that brought out her eyes. Next would be contact lenses to replace those out-of-style big-frame glasses.

Fiona arrived. She wasn't very good at mah-jong and pretended she wanted to watch to improve her own game, but really she just came for the gossip; a lively conversationalist, she could be counted on for laughs. She pulled bed sheets from a large plastic bag. 'Look, 450 thread count. Cream is better than white, I think, and only fifty dollars. I can't wait to sleep on these.' She let out a sigh. 'Now, if only I had someone to join me.' Fiona was between husbands.

'Guess what?' purred Sue. 'Helen has just discovered a plastic surgeon from Hong Kong and he's offering introductory specials.' She giggled like a naughty girl, and we laughed; like the rest of us, she's well into her fifties.

'Are you going to get a facelift, Helen?' I asked coyly, but didn't wait for her response. 'What a good idea!'

Sue and Jin started giggling. I set my dim sum on the buffet table and asked Helen to pour the tea. I had to make a phone call to my younger son in California, I explained, and would be with them shortly. I had the keys to Helen's Mercedes in my jacket pocket.

I went down the hall to the bedroom, got the cheap teenage perfume from my purse and went out, passing the tool shed to where Jon kept the stinky fruit. I picked out a ripe durian as big as a football, poked a small hole in its hard, spiny skin, and scooted out to the street. Helen's sedan was parked two houses down. There was no one about, not even the neighbour's friendly but rather dumb dog. I unlocked the car door and carefully splashed *Passionate Nights* all over the back seat. Then I placed the fart-smelling fruit on the driver's seat and let the door click closed. In

this Singaporean heat, the stench should be baked into the lovely leather upholstery in no time.

Back in the house, I smoothed my hair, loudly bade farewell to 'my darling', clunking down the phone, and returned to my guests.

I played well, winning several rounds. Helen was absent-minded, even distracted, but she hated losing. The others noticed how fidgety she had become of late. Jin said, 'You should see a doctor, Helen, or maybe go to a good herbalist. You need to relax.'

After beating her on the next play, I looked directly at Helen and said. 'It's only a game, Helen. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. Don't take it so seriously.' As they left, Jin paused at the front door to praise my seaweed rolls and ask if there were any left to take home to her mother. Jin is a good daughter and I had anticipated her request.

I said she could help herself to the covered plate in the refrigerator, and while she was gone I watched through the crack in the door, which I had deliberately left ajar, spying on Helen as she reached her car, enjoying the wince as she reflexively pulled back. I got the details later of the ensuing dialogue:

'My car ... it smells awful. Is that a durian?'

'Cheap perfume,' sniffed Jin.

'Just like a brothel,' said Fiona, who, having never quite got the knack of tact, could be counted on to say what everyone was thinking.

'It must be teenagers, some gang,' said a nasal Jin, who had pinched closed her nose with one hand while the other speed-dialled a taxi. She wouldn't need a lift, after all.

'What gangs?' said Fiona, who had also pulled out her phone to call a cab. 'This is a good neighbourhood.' Sue maintained a diplomatic silence.

Helen's car underwent fumigation at the authorised Mercedes shop for most of the next week. I called her to see how she was doing, but got voicemail and she didn't return my calls. She started seeing a psychologist, like the Americans do. Jin and Sue were worried about Helen's behaviour. Jin thought an angry ghost was haunting her. They shouldn't have gone to the Monkey God Tree, she said, wringing her hands. An angry ghost was difficult to get rid of, but it could be done with the proper ceremony and with the right practitioner. 'It will cost, plenty,' Jin said seriously.

'Angry ghosts may be easier to get rid of than angry wives,' said Sue.

I made no comment whatsoever.

Helen eventually sold the car, heavily marked down. She said driving it made her nervous. The perfume smell was still there, she said, though none of us noticed.

Over the following weeks Helen's wardrobe changed to match her new figure, and she regularly accessorised with neckerchiefs at the weekly mah-jong game. I smiled sweetly and served steamed sweet dumplings. I introduced the ladies to ice cold Thai tea with its sweet creamy milk flavouring. Helen liked it, but said she couldn't drink much because she didn't want to break her diet. She was scheduled for an eyelift and Botox. Sue and Jin pumped her for details and, like curious and overexcited adolescents, eagerly awaited the results.

Helen seemed to be back in good spirits, until she couldn't find her rose-coloured pearls, the only piece of jewellery about which she cared. It was a gift from her now-deceased first husband, whom she hadn't cared much for when he was alive, but she cherished the string of tacky fresh-water pearls he had given her during a trip to Bali. She had gotten a lot more from his estate, but she viewed the pearls as a sort of good-fortune talisman.

Let me be clear – I had nothing to do with the pearls. But they did give me an idea.

After the pearls incident, and fuelled by Jin's superstitions, she was starting to believe the angry ghost theory. She wasn't sleeping well, as her phone rang at all hours, but no one was there when she answered. She admitted she thought her car was haunted, and was afraid her home would be next.

I went to the kitchen to prepare the tea. As I swept past Helen's Prada purse I palmed her house keys and had pressed the master between blocks of microwaved wax before I had finished crossing the room. I paused at the kitchen and called Helen for help with the teacups, doubling back to return the keys to her bag while she busied herself with the crockery.

My winnings were modest that day.

That week, I had a key made and let myself into Helen's apartment. I sat in her chair, lay on her bed, made little disturbances to her neatness, used her bathroom. I made some green tea and left the cup in the sink. I filled the bath.

I like being invisible but capable; I find it stimulates the libido.

Jon seems to have a lot fewer evening business meetings these days. He compliments my cooking and is putting on weight. He likes to suck on my neck, and I let him; I have Helen's green neckerchief.

I never realised how much green becomes me.