

An Excerpt from The Latecomer

by Kao Kalia Yang

This is a true "ghost story" taken from this woman's biography. Kao is strong American. She grew up in St. Paul MN. Read, mark up, & write summary on back.

Characters:

Narrator = Kao (Ai)

Xue = brother

Dawb = sister

Sheelva = sister

Shoally = sister

[We had lived in the house for the entire summer. It was a small house with two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and two stairways, one leading up to a cedar attic, the other to a damp basement. Before we moved in, my mother and father had gone over to clean the house. Underneath the carpet of the stairs leading from the attic, they'd found a white envelope with a hundred-dollar bill inside. We'd used the money to buy pizzas, a small celebration of our new home. We figured it had been a secret hiding place, forgotten in a busy move. We'd learn later what it was really for. But that summer, there was no fear, no suspicion. Thailand and ghosts were far away, almost a decade in the past. In America, there was science and the church, no ghosts except at Halloween.]

The first time I saw the little boy I was rushing to my parents' room to get a diaper for Xue. They were both still working second shift so that they could take care of the children when we were at school. It was late and the lights in the bedroom weren't on. I saw a blur, a small figure in a striped shirt, running after me. I paused in the dark, looked behind me, saw the hallway light stream in. Was it Xue? No, Xue was smaller than that. It was my eyes. It was me. I grabbed a diaper and ran as fast as I could. I told Dawb and the children's eyes grew big. I shushed myself. A trick of the light, it must have been.

Dawb saw him next. Again, a figure running into the dark of our parents' room. Dawb, braver than I, chased after him. She saw him hurry into their closet. Without turning on the lights, she

followed with her hands, feeling the clothes, the slippery polyester and the dry cotton, taking in the smell of mothballs. Nothing. She mentioned it to the family as an aside, casual and calm. We didn't give it much thought.

At night, in our bedroom, with my eyes wide open, I heard sounds. A ball falling down the attic stairway. Then a noise like a child falling after. I wasn't the only one who heard this. My mother heard it. Dawb heard it. My father didn't say whether he did or not. He was the most critical. He didn't want to leave scared children behind every night.

He said, "There's nothing to be afraid of in this house. Your grandmother's shaman spirits will protect you. Your grandfather's spirit won't let a thing hurt you. We have a right to be in this house. We are not intruding. There's nothing to be afraid of."

One night our cousins, Uncle Chue's children, visited for a sleepover. We spread out plastic mats from Thailand (purchased at the local grocery stores) in a colorful array on the living room floor. We watched soap operas from China, dubbed in Thai, all night. My mother lingered with us; my father went to bed early. It was close to three in the morning when he walked into the room. His hair, thinning, was standing on end. His eyes were wrinkled, not from age, but from muscles worked too hard, too fast.

"Did you hear me call out?"

Everybody shook their heads.

Their bedroom door was open, the hallway light streaming in. He hadn't been fully asleep yet. He saw the little boy in a striped shirt standing in the doorway. He entered the room, merged into shadows along the wall, walked closer, approached the side of the bed, and grabbed my father's arm. The boy pulled, jerked, and twisted. Pain shot through my father's arm. He struggled, yelled, fought for us to hear. He could make out the sounds of dubbed Thai voices from the movie we were watching, but no one came to

help. His arm was breaking. He grabbed with his left hand, found a tiny arm, a wrist, fragile. He twisted: the breaking of bones. My father got up, the little boy danced in the shadows on quick feet, and made a dive for the closet. When the light flooded the room, there was nothing. A careful look in the closet: nothing.

And so we all came to believe in the haunting of the section-8 house. From the neighbors, we found out that a little boy about four years old had fallen down the stairs of the cedar attic chasing after his ball. He didn't survive. Money was placed at the foot of the stairs to appease his spirit. We spent this money for pizza. Grandma had visited, and her shaman's spirits had kept him at bay. In her absence, he'd appeared. My father was the last to believe. The question of what to do next was the hardest one of all.

We couldn't afford to buy a house, and we couldn't reapply for a new section-8 house either. There were no apartments that would take in seven people (at least not one we could afford). Most importantly, to speak of this to Americans would make our family look very primitive. There must be some explanation, only we couldn't think of one. My parents said that Grandfather's spirit would keep us safe. My father burned incense and joss paper. He explained the situation to Grandpa on the smoke of the scented incense.

"My family lives in this house now. We have the paperwork. The government said we could. We pay honest money to live here. Father, please protect my family. Nothing can hurt my children." I

¶ One night, in the dead of winter, when my mother and father were at work, the children and Dawb and I were sitting in the living room. Shoually's eyes started following something moving before her field of vision. I noticed and tried to divert her attention. Casually, I put my face right before her eyes and stuck out my tongue. Normally, she'd laugh. That night, she didn't. She waved my face away with her small fistful hands. Dawb noticed. Xue noticed. Sheelue noticed. A silence grew in the house, so thick the air felt choked. We all moved onto the same couch. A beating started, like a human heart, all around us. Dawb got up and looked out the window; the lights of the houses around us were off for the night. Should we call Uncle Chue? What would we say to him? It was already close to midnight. Mother and

Father got home at around twelve thirty in the morning. We could wait for forty minutes, couldn't we?

And then a panic started. Xue had just turned four. He had on shorts and a T-shirt: a little boy with round, intelligent eyes and a ready smile. His small lips quivered.

He said, "Ai [the children's nickname for me], I'll go with you to the kitchen and make a bottle for the baby. And then we'll come back here."

I figured that no matter what we did, Shoually would need a bottle soon. Sheelue and Dawb huddled on the couch while we went, his little hand in mine. I was so glad I had a brother. At the fridge, he stood guard while I bottled the milk. We ran back.

The breathing got harder. Dawb said that we had to leave. Without knowing to where or what to do exactly, we all made a move, the baby in Dawb's arms, to the door. I wore Mother's boots and an old jacket. Dawb wore Father's. Xue and Sheelue grabbed various shoes and put them on. Xue had on my jacket, all the way down to his knees, and Sheelue wore Dawb's. The baby cradled in Dawb's arms, underneath the coat, we tramped out of the house. We had nowhere to go. The snow was piled up to my thighs. The shoveled walk led to the dark garage. In a line, me at the end, Dawb at the beginning, we went into the garage. The cold seeped in between the thin plywood and bit into our exposed skin.

We stood shivering, looking back at a house that was surely looking out at us.

Just as we thought we were going to die of cold, a car came into the driveway. Our mother and father had come home from work a little early. They took us by the hands, and we went into the house. That night there was no rest. My father started an apartment search the next day, calling mostly Hmong apartment owners. All we could afford was something around \$450. We had to move before spring when the new baby would enter our lives.

It would be the last one, my mom and dad said. They were getting too old. One son was enough. There were already four daughters. Depending on this one, whichever way it went, no more babies from the clouds.

In a small flurry of desperation we moved out of the haunted section-8 house. No one wanted to look back. For my mother, it was the news of her mother's death. For us, it was the little boy in the striped shirt and the fear he brought to our world. The more people there were in a life, the faster it goes. Life was a fleeting thing. Our family had gone from four to eight. The whole Yang clan was growing; more and more older cousins were getting married and there were babies coming in from many directions. The babies were cute and funny, and all the time was getting eaten up by them. We could not deal with a lonely ghost boy haunting our lives. I

We tried to forget the haunted house. But we learned that leaving is not the same as forgetting. Memories live on, behind us, under our closed lids and in our dreams. They are just like the dragon that had come out to drink near my feet. Before I learned

about light particles and the color spectrum, I had believed in the dragon, and so it had lived and would always remain deep inside me. Like my grandma in Laos, and how she visits my mother in dreams. Like my grandmother in America, and how she used to walk free on the grass hills of Thailand, and how she had once reached high on the shelves of America to get me a cup, a spoon, a plate—the things that I needed to grow up. Once we are, we will always be.

Write a 5 sentence summary of this story here. Use the following outline.

This story is about

First,

Then,

Finally,

From it, we can learn