

# THE INNER VOICE SHOP

## 心聲販賣所

*After making a wish in her dreams at the Inner Voice Shop, a young girl gains the power to hear her family's innermost thoughts. But after the initial thrill, can she now keep her mind from drowning in the cacophony of thoughts surrounding her?*

Eleven-year-old Ching-jih's resentment over the attention her parents lavish on her younger brother makes her prone to angry tantrums. After retreating to her room following a particularly nasty outburst with her parents at dinner, her mind drifts to something a friend told her...that saying a certain prayer at bedtime would let you visit the Inner Voice Shop in your dreams. She tries it out and, along the shore of a magically beautiful pond, the shop's pixie-like proprietor grants her urgent wish to listen in on her family's thoughts.

At first, hearing her parents' unspoken worries and praises lifted Ching-jih's spirits. Even her brother seemed not as bad as she'd thought. But after a while, the smattering of critical thoughts and cynical takes floating in the minds of her outwardly amiable parents brings her argumentative nature once again to the fore. Even worse, she hears in the thoughts of her deceptively cherubic and innocent-looking younger brother a wish for her damnation to hell. It was then she realized even the closest of kin can think and say hurtful things to one another.

Ching-jih now wanted desperately to silence the voices in her head...to never hear those inner voices again. But she remembers her willing acceptance of the shop proprietor's offer to grant her four wishes. With no escape clause to fall back on, Ching-jih knew not only that she would visit the Inner Voice Shop another three times but that she would forever be vulnerable to the wayward thoughts of others.

This book explores the relationship that resides in the "mind's eye" between the self and others, with Misa capturing perfectly her protagonist's psychological journey. Although most at some point have



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ached to read the thoughts of others, Ching-jih's story raises a subtle reminder – When probing others' innermost thoughts, never lose sight of your own inner voice.

## Misa

Misa is a bestselling author working in the genres of romance, horror, and fantasy whose work has been enthusiastically embraced by young adult readers. Her books have sold over 420,000 copies in Taiwan. Her novel *My Best Friend's Breakfast*, based on a true love story posted on an online forum, was made into a movie released in Taiwan in 2022. Rights to her other works have also been sold in multiple countries.

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By Misa

Translated by Helen Wang

## Chapter 1: The Secret Garden

The first time I heard this urban legend was on a very rainy afternoon.

A typhoon-like storm had blown up out of nowhere and, as almost none of us in the class had an umbrella, the teacher told us to wait in the classroom either until the rain had stopped or our parents came to collect us.

I was a latchkey kid. Both my parents worked, and my grandparents lived in another city, so I knew no one would be coming to bring me an umbrella. My only option was to wait in the classroom with the other latchkey kids until the rain stopped.

This may sound a bit sad and lonely now, but I was quite happy with my status as a latchkey kid. I mean, it sounded good, right? Like I was independent and cool! I was among a select few in my class with keys to their house.

Although it could be annoying at times (like when you forgot something, and there was no one who could bring it to school for you, and you were waiting to be told off), I've always thought of it as an important stage in training myself to be more independent.

Anyway, it had already gone five, and the rain was showing no sign of stopping. More than half the class had been picked up by their tender loving parents, and we latchkey kids were the only ones still at school.

"It looks dark outside," said Kong Yu by the window. He was frowning as he looked out.

"That's because it's raining. The sky often looks dark when it rains," said Lu Sunyi. It wasn't completely true, but no one tried to correct her.

"It's so boring, how much longer do we have to wait?" said Lai Hsiao-ping, pursing her lips. She had already finished her homework, and reviewed all the work we'd done in class that day, but the rain *still* hadn't stopped.

I reminded everyone what the teacher had told us ten minutes earlier. "Didn't the teacher just come and say that if it gets to six o'clock and it's still raining, she'll take us all home herself?"

"But it's ages until six o'clock." Kong Yu looked at the clock on the blackboard, "I wanted to watch a cartoon at five."

"*The Adventures of Toby*, right? It'll be on again later, you can watch it then," said Lu Sunyi.

"Hmm, my dad will want to watch the news then," sighed Kong Yu. "I'll have to wait for the repeat on Saturday," he sighed again.

"We could tell each other ghost stories while we wait!" said Lai Hsiao-ping, her eyes suddenly lighting up. "A dark classroom on a stormy night...Perfect for telling ghost stories, right?"

"Sure is," said Kong Yu, who was also looking at us excitedly.

"Count me in, I'm not scared," I said. I was certainly brave enough to watch ghost movies on my own at home.

Lu Sunyi nervously checked the corridor, then scanned the classroom, "Are we all agreed, then? There's just one thing: there are only four of us, and I once heard that if there are fewer than five people left in a classroom, it's quite likely a ghost will come out; and if we're telling ghost stories, it's even more likely one will join us to listen in. Perhaps it's not such a good idea..."

The three of us looked at each other for a second, then burst out laughing: "Thanks for starting us off with the first story, Lu Sunyi!"

"What? That wasn't a ghost story! I was just trying to warn everyone! It wasn't a ghost story at all!" Lu Sunyi leapt to her feet and kept turning around, protesting to whoever happened to be in front of her.

"I've also heard that if you go to the girls' toilets on the fourth floor and knock on the seventh cubicle, a ghost will answer," Kong Yu said earnestly. The three of us, all girls, just rolled our eyes at him.

"There are only six cubicles in the girls' toilets on the fourth floor. There isn't a seventh one."

"And the ghost-in-the-toilet, Hanako-san, is Japanese."

"Try thinking before you speak."

Under fire from all three of us, he turned red and complained, "How would I know? I'm not a girl!"

"Then don't tell ghost stories targeting girls," Lu Sunyi told him off.

"But that's the point of ghost stories, isn't it? Boys aren't scared of ghosts," he said, rolling his eyes at us.

"I know a legend that has nothing to do with ghosts..." said Lai Hsiao-ping, peering round at us. A sudden clap of thunder outside added to the mystery of what she was about to say. "Do you know about The Inner Voice?"

"The Invoice?" said Kong Yu.

"The Inner Voids?" said Lu Sunyi.

Lai Hsiao-ping tsked at their suggestions.

I shook my head...I didn't know about it either. "But I think Lai Hsiao-ping said *The Inner Voice*?"

"I thought you said you'd never heard of it." Lai Hsiao-ping asked, surprised that I'd shaken my head.

"Is there a reason I should know about it?" I asked.

"No, but at least you got the name right. You're smart, Ching-jih, that's why you get good grades." Lai Hsiao-ping was so insulting.

"That's outrageous! We get good grades too."

"That's true, we do."

"Okay...okay...so what is it?" I wanted them to be quiet so we could hear what Lai Hsiao-

ping had to say about The Inner Voice.

“Well, I heard there’s a special shop called The Inner Voice.”

Her explanation was as clear as mud. The three of us glanced at each other and shrugged.

“I overheard my sister and her friend talking about it one day. They said if you pray before you go to sleep for the ability to hear what someone is really thinking, you can enter the Inner Voice Shop. Then, when you wake up, you’ll be able to hear that person’s inner voice.”

“Do you mean it’s a kind of superpower, like mind reading?” I didn’t believe it for one minute.

“That’s impossible!”

“It sounds like something out of a cartoon!” agreed Kong Yu.

“Or perhaps your sister was taking you for a ride.”

Rebuffed by all three of us at once, Lai Hsiao-ping’s face flushed red, “I told you...*I was eavesdropping!* How could they have tricked me if they didn’t know I was listening?! They said someone had actually visited the shop, and that their prayer had been answered. Afterwards, they could really hear that other person’s thoughts!”

“As if! It’s impossible! And where is that shop? In their dreams?” Kong Yu said loudly and with a dismissive wave of his hand that matched the disbelief on his face. That simply infuriated Lai Hsiao-ping even more.

She raised her voice: “Like I said, you have to pray before you go to sleep if you want to go to the shop!”

“So it really is in your dreams!” Kong Yu replied, raising his voice in return.

“No, it’s not in a dream! It’s in the world of magic!”

The ongoing downpour had made the humidity of that summer afternoon feel even clammy, which, together with the slightly overheated argument, had made everyone a bit irritable.

“Okay, calm down.... Let’s get back to telling ghost stories,” said Lu Sunyi, “I’ll go first. I heard this one from a boy in the next classroom. One day, when everyone had gone home and only he was left in his classroom, he heard the sound of footsteps in the hallway heading in his direction. They stopped suddenly outside the classroom door, but when he looked out, no one was there. He went out into the hallway to check, but there was no one there either. Then, he heard those footsteps coming up close behind him, and someone whispered in his ear: ‘Are you looking for me?’ That’s it! The End.”

This short and uninspired ghost story was Lu Sunyi’s attempt at defusing the situation...and it had worked! Kong Yu and Lai Hsiao-ping had stopped fighting. Looking at Lu Sunyi, Kong Yu blurted out, “Well, that was bor...”

But before Kong Yu could finish, we all heard footsteps in the hallway coming towards us. Kong Yu abandoned his critique mid-sentence, and the four of us looked at each other.

“Did you hear that?” asked Lu Sunyi, her face white.

“Shh!” I held my index finger against my lips and listened carefully.

The sound of the rain was so loud it was possible we had misheard. But then again, if the

rain was so loud, wouldn't it have drowned out the sound of those footsteps?

We had all heard it very clearly...the sound of footsteps in the hallway...the sound of shoes clacking on the floor.

"It must be the teacher, coming to take us home..." said Lu Sunyi, grabbing my arm.

"The teacher said six o'clock. It's only five." Lai Hsiao-ping tried to speak with authority, but the wobble in her voice betrayed her.

"I'll go and take a look, then we'll know for sure!" said Kong Yu. As the only boy there, he was keen to look brave.

"Don't! Wait a bit first. If you go out now and there's no one there, it'll be even scarier, won't it?" said Lu Sunyi. Her words gave us even bigger goosebumps, and in an instant we moved closer to each other, almost huddling up as we listened to the sound of shoes coming nearer.

Just as they were about to reach our classroom, the footsteps stopped. But there was no one there. By this time, we were on the verge of tears, almost unable to breathe.

"Now then..." As the teacher's head suddenly peered round the door, all four of us screamed.

"Aagh!"

"It's a..."

"It's a ghost!"

The teacher was shocked to find us in such a state. "What on earth's going on? Calm down! I'm a teacher, not a ghost!"

I was the first to regain my senses. I realized our reaction was over the top, and quickly stroked Lu Sunyi's head. Her eyes were squeezed tight, and she was clinging to me, wailing. I also nudged Kong Yu, who had curled over in a squatting position and was covering his head with his arms. Once Lai Hsiao-ping realized I had stopped screaming, she stopped too.

"*It's the teacher,*" I said.

The teacher watched, stunned, and waited for everyone to calm down. Then, she asked: "Have you been telling ghost stories?"

We nodded, embarrassed. She shook her head: "Don't talk about creepy supernatural things. They're not true, and you'll only frighten yourselves."

"Yes, Miss. We're sorry." We were still in primary school, so it was quite natural to apologize like that.

"Miss, are you here to take us home?" Lai Hsiao-ping asked, wondering why the teacher had come back so soon, when she'd originally said six o'clock.

"I still have some things to finish up. I came to tell Ching-jih... your mother phoned just now."

"My mother phoned? Is she going to pick me up?" For a moment, this latchkey kid couldn't have been happier.

"No, she said you're to go and get your brother, so that you can wait together. She's coming to collect you, but she'll be a bit late."

Hearing that made me instantly annoyed, and the smile slipped from my face. "But

wouldn't it be better if Chaoyang stays in his classroom? With his friends?"

"Your mother would like the two of you to wait together." I could tell from the irritated expression on her face that she was just passing on the message from Mum, and that I had to do as I was told, though I wasn't happy about it at all!

At home, generally speaking, I always had to put my little brother first and go along with whatever he wanted. At school, I cherished having my own time and my own friends. Now, he was going to deprive me of my time and occupy my space here as well.

"Your family must love sunny days!" said Kong Yu sarcastically. He was making fun of my name meaning "Bright Sun" and my brother's meaning "Sunrise". I had no intention of answering.

"I get it," I said to our teacher and, although no less annoyed, I thanked her.

"Shall I go with you?" Lai Hsiao-ping volunteered.

"Okay. But don't be surprised if I'm not all smiles with him."

"I understand. I have no patience with my brother either."

Lai Hsiao-ping had a little brother too, and it seemed she really did understand how difficult it could be.

The two of us left the classroom, went down two flights of stairs and turned left.

"What year is your brother in?"

"Um, second grade."

"I'm so jealous. Mine's in fourth grade."

"Why are you jealous?" I was puzzled by what she'd just said.

"You only have to stick it out through primary, then you'll never be at the same school as him again! My brother's just a year younger than me so, when he gets to middle school, we'll probably be at the same school again."

I opened my eyes wider than usual. "You're clever, I never thought about it like that. Now that you've put it that way, I feel so much better."

"And... somehow...I feel so much worse," said Lai Hsiao-ping, finishing off with a couple of laughs.

As we approached my brother's classroom, I was surprised the room was dark. "That's strange," I said, "why haven't they turned the lights on?"

When we reached the classroom, I peered in through the corridor window, and was alarmed to see Chaoyang sitting in his seat, all on his own.

"Why didn't you turn the lights on?" I asked as I pushed the door open. Chaoyang almost jumped out of his skin. One minute he was reading quietly; the next he was shaking like a leaf.

"Hi, Ching-jih." He smiled when he saw me, and immediately put the book into his bag. "Have you come to take me home?"

"No, I don't have an umbrella. Mum wants me to take you to my classroom and wait for her there. She's coming to collect us, but she'll be a bit late."

"That's great, I was really scared on my own." Chaoyang beamed a smile worthy of his name. It looked bright enough to drive away all the rain.

"Come on then, let's go!" I pursed my lips and turned to leave.

“Oh, hi, I’m your sister’s classmate, Lai Hsiao-ping. You can call me Ping, if you like.” She reached out to shake Chaoyang’s hand.

“Hello, Ping.” Chaoyang took her hand nice and politely.

If you didn’t know better, you might have mistaken them for brother and sister.

Chaoyang was like that – both annoying and nice. Of course, he was only ever annoying with me. Everyone else adored him within five seconds of meeting him, as though they had never met such a nice child with such lovely manners.

“Ching-jih, your brother’s lovely. He’s so different from my little brother.”

Less than five minutes later, Lai Hsiao-ping, the one I could commiserate with over little brothers, left.

I led Chaoyang back to my classroom where, contrary to expectation, Kong Yu and Lu Sunyi, were immediately captivated by his sweet facial features and enchanting personality, and started showering him with compliments and playing with him.

Even when I suggested we continue telling ghost stories, they declined, concerned that Chaoyang might be scared.

That’s exactly how it’s always been. To this day, when Chaoyang is there, I can never be number one.

Can’t people see that he’s just a boring little kid? Honestly, I can’t understand why everyone likes him so much.

After that, waiting in the classroom became truly boring. Everyone was chatting with Chaoyang, amazed by his intelligence and wisdom. I just ignored them, and read my novel.

By the time Mum finally came to collect us, it had more or less stopped raining. Kong Yu and the others had already left to go home on their own but, because Mum had said she was coming, Chaoyang and I had to hang around at school for another five minutes.

It was only five minutes, but I didn’t want to be with Chaoyang even for a second.

In the car, I was already tetchy, and when Mum kept asking Chaoyang questions like “How was school today?” or “Were you scared being all alone?”, I couldn’t help snorting.

“Oh puh-leeze, when I was in second grade at primary school I was already walking home on my own. What’s the big deal about Chaoyang being on his own in the classroom?”

I must have shown too much attitude in my response, because Mum suddenly glared at me in the rear-view mirror, “What are you talking about, Ching-jih? Are you comparing yourself to Chaoyang?”

What was that about? What did she mean about comparing myself to Chaoyang?

Was Chaoyang somehow more precious than me? Was I not so important? Was I not good enough ?

Although I was annoyed, I could see the expression on Mum’s face and didn’t dare answer back. I felt aggrieved, but all I could do was hold in my anger, stare out of the car window and swallow my tears.

When we got home, Mum told us to go and shower while she made dinner. The rain had made my hair go floppy, and my skin was horribly sticky, so I bagged the shower first.

I went to my room, and immediately took off my book bag and school uniform. I noticed the comic book I was reading the day before was still on the table. I'd read half of it and there were fewer than ten pages to go. I knew I could finish it quickly.

I squatted on the floor, flipped through the comic book, and discovered the last page tied up some loose ends from a few pages earlier, so I flipped back to reread the relevant parts.

That done, I put the comic book back on the table, grabbed my towel and went to the bathroom, only to hear the sound of running water.

I was furious, and hammered on the bathroom door, "Chaoyang! I said I wanted to shower first! Why didn't you wait?!"

He seemed shocked, and immediately turned off the shower and answered: "Because you took ages in your bedroom, I knocked on the door and you didn't respond, so..."

"So what? Didn't I *just* say I wanted to go first?!" I pounded angrily on the door again, then turned the handle. "Get out, Chaoyang! Now!"

"What are you doing, Ching-jih?" Mum yelled at me. She had heard the noise and come running out of the kitchen.

"I said very clearly that I wanted to have the first shower! But Chaoyang's already in there!" I clarified the situation as quickly as I could.

"I told him to go first," said Mum. "You said you wanted to shower, and then what? You spent ten minutes in your room, and now it's time to eat and you don't have time to shower before dinner."

"But..."

"But what?! Come here right now!" Mum could make a soldier quake in his boots; there was no way I could refuse.

But at the same time, I felt I'd been wronged. I hadn't spent ten minutes in my room and, even so, they could have knocked on my door and asked. I had prepared it all in my mind: I would shower first and then eat...

I had just burst into tears at the unfairness of it all when the bathroom door opened and Chaoyang appeared. He looked at me with wet hair and an appeasing expression.

"I'm sorry..."

"Oh, shut up!" I glared at him.

Everything was Chaoyang's fault. If only he'd never been born!

The atmosphere at the dinner table was awkward. Chaoyang was watching me, and I didn't dare say a word. I was furious, but couldn't let it show, or Mum would explode; so I watched her closely. She was pretending what had just happened hadn't happened, that Chaoyang and I were getting along well, and that we were all happily enjoying a meal together. To that end, she kept placing morsels of food in our bowls, asking us if anything interesting had happened at school that day.