

THEY ALL HAD A SECRET

夜觀神

Twenty years after dying in the midst of playing a paranormal game with his classmates, letters signed in his name are received by the four remaining friends, inviting them to a reunion. In deciding to attend, none could have imagined the dangers awaiting them that stormy night.

Shao Ying-chieh meets up with four of his middle school classmates in the middle of the night to play “Broom Spirit”. But after Fang Chih-hua, the most easygoing of the bunch, actually becomes inspirited while standing knee-deep in a stream, his friends callously abandon him. Hearing the next morning that Chih-hua had drowned, the four make a pact to keep the whole affair a secret. Through the intervening years, they gradually fall out of touch.

Twenty years later, Ying-chieh, now co-host with his girlfriend of a paranormal livestream show, is a regular interloper at haunted houses and folk-religious ceremonies. One day, he receives a letter threatening to reveal his “secret” should he fail to return to his old family home in Lukang at an appointed time and date. After learning his other co-conspirators had received the same invitation, all four agree to see if their friend Chih-hua had indeed returned from the dead for revenge.

Ying-chieh’s girlfriend, eager to explore the folk-legend landscape of Lukang, and his horror comic illustrator sister tag along as well, bringing props and paranormal game equipment in expectation of filming another livestream episode of their show. But that night, with a storm raging outside, little goes according to plan. The planned livestream falls through, one of Ying-chieh’s classmates unabashedly harasses his sister, and another seems unable to stop abusing his own teenage son. The whole affair collapses into chaos and, by the time dawn finally breaks, not all are lucky enough to leave the house alive.



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Blending elements of folklore and paranormal horror, Zuiliuli's standalone mystery novel shines light on the fractures that threaten the very foundations of asymmetrical interpersonal relationships and vindicate, albeit with anguish, their ultimate disposition.

Zuiliuli 醉琉璃

Zuiliuli is a best-selling author of light novels that often incorporate elements of Eastern myths and legends. A gifted writer of supernatural thrillers, she writes in a broad range of styles, including lighthearted, humorous fantasy-adventure stories set on school campuses. Her representative works include the popular series *Agents to the Gods*, *Night Whispers*, and *I, the Elf King, Need Cash!* *Scarecrow*, one of the books in her *Night Whispers* series, is currently being developed into a TV series by Eightgeman Ltd., a Taiwanese company co-founded by award-winning directors.

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By Zuiliuli

Translated by Alex Woodend

Prologue

The sleeping girl frowned as a buzzing sound passed by her ear.

It didn't let up, and her frown deepened.

Annoyed, Shao Hsin-hsin snapped her eyes open, reached out, and swatted, but hit nothing but air in the darkness.

The sleep-interrupting mosquito had long since flown off to who knew where.

"Stupid..." Hsin-hsin muttered. "Stupid mosquito...Next time you come, I'll kill you..."

She felt an itch on her neck and found a small bump. Her little face fell as she realized she'd been bitten.

She pressed her fingernail into the bite twice, making a cross-shaped mark, then grabbed the alarm clock on her nightstand: It was already almost three o'clock in the morning.

If it weren't for the stupid mosquito, she'd still be sound asleep.

Hsin-hsin wanted to settle back into her blankets. But knowing the mosquito could return at any moment dissipated the wave of sleepiness.

She got out of bed and turned on the light, revealing a simple, sparsely decorated girl's room.

Petite Hsin-hsin stood on the middle of the bed, eyes open wide, searching in all directions for any sign of the mosquito. She looked until her eyes were sore, but found no trace of the annoying insect.

Hsin-hsin let out a dejected sigh, turned off the light, and gave up.

"Or...do I sneak the bug zapper up from the living room?" she wondered.

The bug zapper was kept in the living room on the first floor. Mrs. Shao didn't like anyone moving it, so they all resorted to using mosquito coils on the second floor.

Hsin-hsin didn't like the smell of those coils – actually she hated it – so she never lit them in her room no matter what.

After hesitating a while, she decided to sneak downstairs, bring the bug zapper up, then set an alarm so she could return it before her mother woke up and avoid getting caught.

That's it!

Hsin-hsin jumped out of bed and ran barefoot to the door of her bedroom, which she always kept locked.

She had opened it just a crack when the door next to hers opened too: her brother's room.

Did he get up to use the bathroom?

The hallway lights were off, but the one in the stairwell was on. In its faint glow, she saw her brother, who was five years older, leaning halfway out and looking to his right.

That's where their mother's bedroom was.

Ying-chieh then stepped out of his room, closed the door behind him, and hurried down the stairs.

The whole time he never noticed his little sister peeking through the crack in her doorway, watching his every move.

She was shocked. The way he was dressed meant he was up for more than just going downstairs to use the bathroom!

And so late...Where could he be going?

A thought flashed through her mind, and she completely forgot about the mosquito and the bug zapper. Hsin-hsin hurried back to her room and came out with a jacket on, its pockets bulging.

The Shao house had both front and back doors, and everyone mostly used the one in the back.

Hsin-hsin rushed out the back door and saw Ying-chieh had just removed the heavy lock on his bike and was about to swing his leg over the seat.

He didn't notice the back door opening until Hsin-hsin herself called softly:

"Bro."

Ying-chieh's body jolted, and he turned his head, wide eyes reflecting the image of his little sister, who he often teased for looking like a bamboo pole.

At first he thought his mind was playing tricks on him. But after blinking hard, Hsin-hsin was still standing in the doorway, canvas sneakers on her feet, hair somehow tied up in two ponytails.

"Why aren't you asleep in your room?!" Ying-chieh hissed. "You know you have school tomorrow."

"You do too!" Hsin-hsin shot back. "Where are you going? I want to go too!"

"Why? Go back to your room and get some sleep!" Ying-chieh had no intention of bringing the little brat along. "It's men's business. Little kids have to stay out of it."

"You're not a man, you're only in middle school," Hsin-hsin corrected her brother in a hushed tone, "and...you said 'men'...So it's not just you? Who else is going? And why so late? I want to go too!"

"Why do you have to be such a nosy brat? Anyway, hurry up and go back to bed. I'll buy you a soda tomorrow."

"No, I want to go too. Take me with you!"

"You're so annoying...Then just go tell Mom, if you dare to knock on her door this late," Ying-chieh threatened. "Who was she scolding yesterday for having messy handwriting?"

Hsin-hsin flinched.

They were a single-parent family, and Mrs. Shao was pretty strict. Hsin-hsin in particular was afraid of her stern, impatient looks.

Knowing his sister wouldn't dare disturb her this late, Ying-chieh grinned smugly, pressed a sneaker onto his pedal, and left her behind, riding alone into the dark of night.

Thanks to his sister holding him up at the back door, by the time he really got going down the street, it was already after three in the morning.

"Damn, it's all her fault..." Ying-chieh muttered, glancing at his watch. He pedaled harder, afraid he would get to the meet-up point too late.

He had indeed arranged to meet a few friends.

They were going to Old Port Creek, usually called "Stinky Ditch," for an adventure.

That late at night, cars passed only occasionally through the streets of Lukang before vanishing in the distance. The pale glow of the streetlights in the darkness created an atmosphere of desolation. It was silent all around. The houses along the road were locked up tight, their windows pitch black.

Ying-chieh pedaled as hard as he could. He had just turned from Gongyuansan Road onto Fuxingnan Road when he caught a foul odor wafting on the night breeze.

It was Old Port Creek.

The creek ran along Fuxingnan Road, its banks overgrown with vegetation. People say that many years ago it had been a clear stream.

Later, as the channel narrowed and residential wastewater was increasingly piped in its direction, its flow became so polluted that it reeked year-round. Now, pretty much everybody avoided it when they could.

Ying-chieh had heard all that from the adults. As long as he could remember, Old Port Creek had been a big, smelly drainage ditch and had always been called Stinky Ditch.

He never went there if he could avoid it. It was pure torture on his nose.

That made it a place with very few people around during the day and even fewer in the middle of the night, making it the ideal spot for getting up to no good.

A bell suddenly rang out behind him, and someone called, "Hey, Ying-chieh!"

He turned and saw a friend approaching on his bike.

Fang Chih-hua, a fair-skinned boy who seemed like and was in fact a model student, grinned as he panted.

"Knew it was you from your silhouette...Think Ho-tien and Yu-ting are there already?"

"No idea." Knowing Chih-hua had less stamina, Ying-chieh slowed down a little so their bikes could travel side by side. "Anyway, we'll find out when we get there...By the way, you said you were going to hide some treasure at my house."

"Already did, when you weren't looking, somewhere even you won't find it," Chih-hua said with pride. "I'll go dig it up later."

Dig? So, it's buried... Ying-chieh didn't want to tell his friend about this accidentally revealed clue. He didn't plan to go looking for it anyway.

Ying-chieh suddenly glanced at the back of Chih-hua's bike. "Weren't you supposed to bring the broom?"

"Ours is plastic. Yu-ting said his family has a bamboo broom he'll bring."

"Hope he doesn't forget it, or this will all be a waste." Thinking of his awkward exit, he couldn't help but complain: "My sister caught me leaving."

"What? It's so late. Why wasn't she asleep?" Chih-hua asked.

"How should I know?" Ying-chieh also wanted to know why she was up in the middle of the night. "She even whined about wanting to come along. No way! We're doing serious stuff here. Can't let some brat come. Having someone else around would be a headache."

Chih-hua smiled. "If you *had* let her come, I would have given her a ride."

"Come on! I'd never let that crybaby tag along." Ying-chieh said with exaggerated flourish.

"It's fine. She's quiet and cute." Chih-hua had been to the Shao house to play, and his impression of Hsin-hsin was of a sweet, well-behaved girl.

"If you think she's so cute, go ahead and take her – free of charge." Ying-chieh patted his chest with confidence as he steered the bike with one hand.

Chih-hua laughed. "No worries, I already have a sister."

"Right." Ying-chieh said, remembering this.

Chih-hua was in a single-parent household too. By the time Ying-chieh had met him, Chih-hua's parents had been divorced for a long time. His mother had left with his sister, leaving him behind.

Ying-chieh had never met Chih-hua's sister, only heard she lived in Taipei and was about the same age as Hsin-hsin.

"If your sister had stayed in Lukang, she could have played with my sister, and she wouldn't always be trying to tag along," Ying-chieh said, emphasizing the last phrase.

"Hsiao-hua's nice. She definitely would've gotten along with Hsin-hsin," Chih-hua said with a touch of regret.

Ying-chieh understood Chih-hua missed his mother and sister very much. That's why he studied hard...to try to win awards so he could visit them in Taipei during summer vacation.

Over the course of their chat, the two got closer and closer to the meeting place.

The buildings lining the street had changed from houses to sheet metal factories, their pale green panels, under the interplay of streetlight and shadow, taking on the appearance of steel monsters lying in wait.

In the distance, they saw three bikes parked on the bank of Old Port Creek. Across the back of one lay a bamboo broom.

The three figures standing beside the bikes recognized them and waved.

Ying-chieh and Chih-hua braked and hopped off. They didn't greet their friends, just shouted in unison: "It stinks!"

"Please! You knew it stinks and *still* made us wait this long. Are you trying to kill us?" Liang Yu-ting, who had the sturdiest build, looked very upset, his wide eyes fierce. "We said three. You're ten minutes late!"

"Big Liang here thought you were going to stand him up," Yuan Ho-tien, Yu-ting's scrawny lackey, said. He always flattered him by calling him "big," indulging his desire to be the boss.

"I didn't mean to. It's not *my* fault my sister was up so late," Ying-chieh explained. "You chose this place anyway, Yu-ting. It's not like you didn't know how much it stinks."

"Oh, so *you're* complaining now?" Yu-ting raised his voice, glared even more fiercely, and raised his fist.

"Enough, enough. We wanted a place that stinks so no one would come," Chung Ming-liang piped in. His face was riddled with glistening acne that made his glasses slide down his nose. "That's why Yu-ting chose it. We all agreed, right?"

Agreed? ... Yu-ting forced everyone to agree, Ying-chieh silently fumed.

They hung out a lot as a group, but Yu-ting, with his dominating personality backed up by his family's wealth, always ignored everyone when it came time to make decisions.

Chih-hua sensed Ying-chieh's irritation and nudged him with his elbow to keep him from starting a fight.

Since his mother worked at Yu-ting's family's factory, Ying-chieh didn't dare push things too far.

And apart from having a short fuse and acting like he wanted to fight everyone when he got mad, Yu-ting was usually very loyal. He often spent his allowance money buying everyone sodas.

The thought made Ying-chieh's simmering anger cool.

Sensing the tension ease, Ming-liang took the opportunity to remind everyone of the purpose of their outing by asking who would invoke the broom spirit first.

They'd previously agreed that everyone would take turns and that whoever didn't was a wimp.

"Rock-paper-scissors is fast. The four of you play one round, and whoever loses goes first," Yu-ting said, raising his chin.

"Wait, what about you?" Ying-chieh said. "Shouldn't all five of us play?"

"I'm going to hold the incense first. I brought the broom, so it's only fair," Yu-ting said in a matter-of-fact way that left no room for argument.

"Big Liang should hold the incense first," Ho-tien chimed in. "His big arms can grip them steadily." Then, he held out a closed fist.

Ying-chieh frowned but followed along, holding his fist out too.

They'd better hurry up if they were to be finished before dawn. If his mom finds out he wasn't asleep in bed, he'd be done for.

"Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!"

Chih-hua lost after two rounds.

Ming-liang took a large handful of incense from a red-and-white, floral-patterned bag. "My family has a whole box full of this," he said proudly. "They won't notice some missing and, if everyone's going to do it, we need a lot." The others' mouths dropped in amazement. "So we have the incense and the broom, now we need the stool. Who brought the stool?"

Ho-tien turned pale. "I-I was in such a rush, I forgot."

"You idiot!" Yu-ting started raising his fist again.

"It's okay, we don't need a stool. We can use a rock instead. Everyone's going to invoke the broom spirit, so I'll go sit over there." Chih-hua went ahead, walked to a round stone on the bank and plopped down.

"I'll get the broom!" In an attempt to make up for his mistake, Ho-tien hurried to untie the broom from the back of Yu-ting's bike before handing it to Chih-hua.

Chih-hua pressed the bristles against his forehead and closed his eyes.

Seeing Chih-hua was ready, Ming-liang lit the incense (three for each of them) and set the rest aside.

The four gathered around Chih-hua. Yu-ting was first to raise his incense stick, bow to the moon in the night sky, and place the incense in the bristles of the bamboo broom.

Ying-chieh and the rest waved their incense in the air and chanted in unison:

"Broom spirit of the grinding wheel, we summon thee from the mountaintop to uproot the vines. The vines shall become the broom. The broom is truly divine."

The chant began disjointed, their voices out of sync.

Ming-liang's Hokkien was weak, so he mispronounced several words.

Even Chih-hua, dutifully holding the broom steady, couldn't keep his shoulders from shaking with laughter.

"Ming-liang," Yu-ting said, losing his patience, "if you mess it up one more time, I'll beat the crap out of you! Are you stupid?"

That threat seemed to work, and Ming-liang finally recited the incantation correctly.

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No longer uncoordinated, the chanting was now much more in sync.

They repeated the words so many times that Ying-chieh's mouth began to ache. He glanced at Chih-hua – sitting on the stone completely motionless, head lowered, forehead against the broom's bristles – unsure if he was peeking.

Ying-chieh noticed Ho-tien and Ming-liang were getting antsy, but no one dared call a stop before Yu-ting said so.

The stench of Old Port Creek mixed with the scent of the incense formed an uncanny odor. Ying-chieh prayed it wouldn't cling to his clothes.

If his mother detected it, there would be no avoiding an interrogation.

Before they knew it, they'd chanted themselves hoarse. Ying-chieh suddenly felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up and goosebumps prickles his arms.

It was as if an otherworldly chill had suddenly blown across the muggy bank.

"What's going on?" Ying-chieh's heart leapt. Before he could look around to check their surroundings, Ming-liang, standing to his right, suddenly cried out: "Look!"

The incantation was interrupted, but not even Yu-ting complained.

Their eyes all widened as they saw Chih-hua, who had been perfectly still, begin to sway back and forth and left to right, his forehead still pressed against the broom bristles.

“Did...did we really summon it?” Ho-tien swallowed. “Or is Chih-hua messing with us?”