

Goodbye, Peter Pan

Star/Nestlé

Short Story
A · W · A · R · D · S

Consolation prize winner



MAY YIN felt weary to the bones. As she ticked off the last name on the guest list and placed the invitation card on the huge stack, she glanced at the clock: 1.30am.

"No wonder," she thought. "Gosh, how time flies!"

Ten months ago, May Yin had dreaded looking at clocks, at calendars, at anything that reminded her of the inevitable passage of time.

"Five months," Dr Ramesh had told her. "Perhaps six..." He had tried to sound optimistic, he had wanted to be kind...

But May Yin had felt trapped, as if in quicksand, gradually but surely sinking, with death creeping nearer as the days dragged by... until she met Christopher. Dear, lovable Christopher who needed her as much as she needed him, perhaps more.

Christopher and May Yin would have preferred a small, simple wedding. But there were so many people with whom they wished to share this joy-

ous occasion; so many to whom they owed so much — neighbours, friends, well-wishers, doctors, nurses... and especially the children in Ward 2.

Before May Yin nestled beneath her soft, quilted blanket, she prayed softly as she had done every night since her return from the hospital: "Thank you, God, for the miracle."

She lay in bed expecting to doze off any minute. But sleep eluded her. Every time she stayed up past her usual bed-time at eleven, she found it difficult to sleep. "My biological clock needs re-tuning again," she concluded.

Her thoughts began to wander... how very fortunate she had been, she smiled.

At thirty-eight, May Yin had been blessed with a youthful complexion and a trim figure; she did not look a day beyond thirty. She had no lack of admirers, but no steady relationship with any of her dates. Her mother and grandmother had advised her not to be too fussy.

"You'd better make up your mind quickly," they

AS A little girl growing up, May Yin sought refuge in books, in the fantasy worlds created by authors. In her world princes and princesses fell in love and lived happily ever after... she knew the characters intimately. They became her bosom pals. Her favourite was Peter Pan.

had warned her when she was approaching thirty. "You're not getting any younger. All your friends have married. Look at your friends, Alice and Solomon — successful husbands, big houses, beautiful children..."

May Yin had decided years ago, even when she was a schoolgirl, that she would not rush into any relationship. If she ever got married, it would be a lasting one, a happy one.

She had known the pain of a broken family. Her mother had raised her on her own after her father left home when May Yin was only seven. Irreconcilable differences, the relatives had whispered among themselves. May Yin had been bewildered... how could love have been so cruel... so heart-breaking?

As a little girl growing up, she sought refuge in books, in the fantasy worlds created by authors. In her world princes and princesses fell in love and lived happily ever after. She read and re-read the small collection of story books (given to her by kind relatives) until she felt she knew the char-

acters intimately; they became her bosom pals. Her favourite was Peter Pan.

"A regular bookworm," her mother sometimes grumbled. But she was

very proud of her daughter's scholastic achievement and good looks. She had ambitions, high ambitions for her only child. She had secretly hoped May Yin would be a successful lawyer, or perhaps a doctor, or...

May Yin had other plans. After completing her sixth form education, she received a scholarship to study librarianship in Britain. She had planned to work in a children's library.

On completing her course, she returned to her hometown to help set up a children's library. Her work there had been very rewarding. May Yin loved the children and they in turn had adored her. The parents were grateful. May Yin felt fulfilled.

Determined to make the pioneer project a success, May Yin thoroughly immersed herself in her work. There were catalogues and new books to order, endless correspon-

dence with the Ministry, and secondhand books to be bound. The children loved her story-telling sessions, puppet shows, art classes and toy-making sessions.

Although she had three assistants, May Yin did most of the work herself. "Workaholic," she shrugged, whenever anybody wondered how she could spare so many hours at the library.

It was not all work. Whenever she could spare the time, May Yin would personally greet the children. It was sheer delight to watch them troop into the library, eyes wide with wonder, as if entering fantasy land.

She had made sure that there were always new posters and books on display near the front counter. The children who were new to the library would stand in awe of the shelves and shelves of books. Sometimes, feeling lost, they would return to the front desk and appeal for help. "Please help me get a book on rabbits, birds, gardening, etc."

Sometimes May Yin would pretend to hunt high and low for a particular book and her success would be greeted by squeals of delight.

She felt useful and fulfilled.

The years rolled by. One evening, while May Yin was waiting at the bus-stop, a car stopped and the young woman behind the wheel waved to her to get in. Sensing her hesitancy, the driver grinned broadly and said, "Hi, Auntie May Yin, don't you remember me?"

Rokiah Hussein, your assistant puppeteer at your service.

"Goodness!" May Yin gasped, "little Rokiah." She remembered her, the mischievous 10-year old imp: a bundle of energy, the terror of libraryville until May Yin found that she had a natural talent for puppetry. Together, they had made quite a team.

During the ride home, Rokiah had told her about her job as an engineer. She had moved to Kuala Lumpur where she and her architect husband lived. Her parents had also moved to the city. Now she had come back to her hometown to visit some old friends.

"We must get together for lunch tomorrow," she said as she stopped at May Yin's gate.

"I'd love to. One o'clock?"

"Great. See you then."

That evening, as May Yin was preparing dinner, she suddenly felt very weary and then suddenly very dizzy. "I must be getting old," she mused.

Indeed, the meeting with Rokiah had quite shaken her. She had not quite realised the passage of time. Her world of books and children

seemed perpetually unchanging.

No doubt, when the children reached twelve, they no longer enjoyed membership of the children's library. But there were always children, cute adorable, innocent beings, except Rokiah Hussein, no, even Rokiah Hussein.

But Rokiah had left behind her fantasy world of puppetry. She had the real world to deal with and she seemed to be managing very well.

"What about you, May Yin? Are you still afraid of life?" an inner voice reprimanded her.

"You're going to be thirty-nine next month. Soon, you'll reach the fourth decade of your life. How much longer are you going to hide in your cocoon of books and children?"

That night, she felt tormented. For the first time in many years, she did not have a restful sleep. The next morning she woke up with an awful headache. "It must be the nightmare."

At lunch, Rokiah noticed that May Yin was a bit off-colour. After lunch, she was so sick that the waiter had to help Rokiah support her to the car.

By the time they reached the hospital, May Yin was feeling better. All the same, Dr Tang insisted on doing some tests. "Just routine stuff, don't worry."

May Yin was to come back a fortnight later for the results of the tests. Thus began the nightmare for May Yin and her mother. Inconclusive results. Come back again — have to be doubly sure. See Dr Ramesh. Consult Professor Wilkins. Make appointment with Dr Andisamy. Diagnosis unfirmed.

WHAT about you, May Yin? Are you still afraid of life? How much longer are you going to hide in your cocoon of books and children?

The doctors seemed to have exhausted their arsenal of diagnostic tests. The wait for the results was sheer agony.

"Poor Mother," thought May Yin, "She must be suffering more than I am."

Myelogenous leukaemia. May Yin was stunned when Dr Ramesh finally told her.

"No reliable cure has yet been found, but we'll start the drug treatment. We'll try to make it as comfortable for you as possible."

May Yin didn't hear the rest.

"It's impossible! No... God... Not now! Please give me more time," May Yin prayed silently, desperately.

During the weeks that followed, May Yin found herself slowly sinking into despair. The children came with their parents bearing flowers, hand-drawn cards and hand-made gifts to cheer her up. They reminded her of the world of fantasy she had indulged in, the world she had felt safe in.

But this was reality. Myelogenous leukaemia. "And no sign of any fairy godmother to come to my

rescue," May Yin thought sadly.

"Hi," said a voice brightly. "I've come to personally invite you to my birthday party."

Startled, May Yin looked up from her book to see a child in a wheelchair grinning at her.

"I know you," said the little girl. "You work at the library. I enjoy your stories very much. Do come and tell us more. Please," she implored.

The cloud of despair lifted momentarily. May Yin felt like her old self again. "When is your party, dear?"

"Right now. I've just decided this morning to have a party. Sister Margaret says it's O.K."

Ward 2B was gaily decorated

with balloons and crepe paper. The children were quite a sight. There were those in slings, crutches and in wheelchairs. Soon, May Yin forgot about her illness. Together with the children of Ward 2B, she traversed the continents, toured the jungles, conquered the galaxies.

"Well, that was quite a story, Indiana Jones, eat your heart out!" May Yin turned round. A very good-looking man in a wheelchair was at the door.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help overhearing the story as I was passing by. I was simply fascinated."

He stretched out his hand: "Christopher Tay."

They had something in common — myelogenous leukaemia. Christopher had only six months to live but death was the last thing on his mind. He talked about what he planned to do, his ambitions, his dreams to be a renowned architect.

The weeks flew by.

Both May Yin and Christopher found in each other strength and comfort... and love. They savoured every minute together. For the first time in May Yin's life, she learnt to accept the pains and joys that were part of life.

May Yin had absolutely no idea until the day Dr

Ramesh told her, "Your white cells are down. You're on the road to recovery. Don't ask us how or why. It's a miracle!"

Much as May Yin was filled with excitement, it was excitement tinged with sadness. How was she going to break the news to Christopher? Dear Christopher would be happy for her, of this she was sure, but would it not only heighten his own sense of misfortune?

But Dr Ramesh had not finished. He continued, his words stumbling as they gushed ahead of his thoughts. "It's not just a miracle. It's a double miracle, no less! It's unbelievable — impossible — but your friend, Christopher has also made an inexplicable recovery!"

Dr Ramesh shook his head as if to emphasise the point.

It was 1.50am. At last, May Yin was overcome by Nature's way of soothing the weary. But she knew that she now looked forward to waking up to a brand new day. She was no longer afraid.