

WRITING THAILAND: A CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF THAI CULTURAL
IDENTITY IN THE FORM OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SHORT FICTION AND
NON-FICTION

by

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of a creative and critical component. The creative component is a collection of short stories and non-fiction vignettes centred around Thai identity named *Thai Myths and Other True Stories*. It performs the fragmented nature of identity by juxtaposing short stories that belong to very different genres of writing, including several retellings of Thai myths, and by blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction. Many of the pieces are written in response to either the official government vision of Thai identity, or to the tourist expectations about Thailand.

The critical component includes a critical essay and commentary. The critical essay delineates the theoretical frameworks centred around the writing of non-native English speakers and exploring aspects of Thai culture. It also offers an analysis of the themes and narrative strategies of selected texts by a range of writers – namely S.P. Somtow, Rattawaut Lapcharoensap, Salman Rushdie and Nathan Englander – whose projects resemble that of this thesis. The commentary details the process of writing the short story collection and investigates the implications of the choices made by the author regarding the form and thematic, and the styles and approaches influenced by the four writers mentioned in the critical essay.

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Writing Thailand: A Creative Exploration of Thai Cultural Identity in the Form of English-Language Short Fiction and Non-Fiction

Introduction

The aim of my project is to write short stories in English in a variety of genres, including non-fiction fragments, and to assemble them into a collection which, as a whole, says something significant and unique about Thai cultural identity. The creative component of my PhD thesis is thus comprised of a collection of stories named *Thai Myths and Other True Stories*, each depicting aspects of Thai cultural identity through a range of themes, perspectives and genres. Each story shifts in its approach. Some present fresh ‘geographic’ positions, moving between expatriate Thais and Thais who have never left Thailand, Western perspectives regarding Thailand and Thai views of the West, as well as Thai encounters with their own culture. The collection’s narrators and protagonists also represent different generations and genders. This strategy of shifting the approach also extends to the stories’ genre; some are best classed as realist tales, while others draw on ghost stories, myths, or the detective mystery genre. The collection, accordingly, is a fragmented account of Thailand and its people, creating a complex portrait of a Thailand that is difficult to summarise.

Additionally, the short stories are interspersed with non-fiction pieces depicting the author’s return trips to Thailand, providing a further miscellany of the Thai cultural experience. Initially, these non-fiction pieces were intended to function as memoir fragments, before they expanded to include a sociocultural commentary on and response to political events happening in Thailand. Other than their positioning within the collection, little indication is given to denote which pieces are non-fiction and which are fiction, since first-person narrators are common in the latter. One of the questions that might arise when two forms of writing collide in this manner

concerns the authenticity of the form/genre: is the non-fiction any more real or more accessible than fiction?

The variety of forms and themes and play between what is ‘true’ and what is ‘made-up’ reflect the complexity of what it means to represent a culture in writing. In order to engage with this complexity, the critical component will be split into two parts: the first, positioned at the beginning of the thesis, is rooted primarily in theory, and aims to establish a theoretical framework for the collection and discuss other short story collections which have attempted a similar undertaking. The second part of the critical component is a commentary about the stories contained in the creative component and will allow for an analysis of some of the issues and concepts featured therein. Together, these two portions of the critical component will illuminate the creative component and open it up to critical discussion.

The main questions explored in the critical component revolve around the issues of culture and Thai identity. These questions include (but are not limited to): What is the significance of Thai cultural identity and why does it need to be explored? Why is the exploration of Thai national identity best achieved via an amalgamated collection of short fiction/non-fiction experiences? What are the advantages of this approach? Why is the creative component written in English? What are challenges and opportunities arise as a result of doing so? These questions will be discussed in section one, which will be divided into two parts. Part one offers definitions which delineate the theoretical frameworks that are used to talk about the writing of non-native English speakers. It also explores aspects of Thai culture that are vital for any understanding of Thai society. Part two offers an analysis of the themes and narrative strategies of selected texts by a range of writers – namely S.P. Somtow, Rattawaut Lapcharoensap, Salman Rushdie and Nathan Englander – whose projects resemble that of this thesis. Section two of the critical component overviews the creative component of the thesis.

This commentary details the process of writing the short story collection and investigates the implications of the choices made by the author regarding the form and thematic variety throughout the compilation. This section is presented to the reader *after* the creative portion so as to allow the stories of Thailand and Thai identity to first be experienced without any social context or artistic explanation. The fulfilment and frustration experienced by an Anglophone reader¹ when reading stories from another culture is one of the thesis's key issues and placing the commentary before the text would necessitate a change in the reader's expectations.

1 Part One

1.1 Frameworks and Theories

Writing in English is understandably a challenge for a non-native speaker, and even more so when she is writing creatively. The challenges are not limited to the linguistic aspects. Representing a culture – Thai culture, in this case – is a complex endeavour, and using English as the tool for this representation requires constant negotiations, since the words and the cultural portrayals do not immediately align.

The challenge of writing in a language other than one's mother tongue is familiar to writers around the world who have adopted English as their second language. These writers and their works are of interest to academics in various fields, from postcolonial studies to translation studies to linguistics, and have been discussed using different labels, such as 'Postcolonial writing,' 'contact literature' and 'exophonic writing.' These labels share certain similarities and

¹ As a side note, the term 'Anglophone reader' is a simplification and that many types of readers exist, with varying levels of insight into Thailand. However, it is one of the most flexible terms to identify readers of the English language.

differences and will be discussed in greater detail below in an effort to demonstrate the complexity of the writing process with regard to the creative component and highlight the implications of specific choices made by the author.

1.1.1 Postcolonial Writing

To engage postcolonial writing with that of Thailand is, in one way, to examine the relationship between Thailand and the English language. English is not popularly used in creative writing by Thai-English bilingual authors. The reasons for that are, as proposed by Pimyupa Watkhaolarm, that English is not ‘infused in the Thai identity,’ that it is not ‘associated with the experience of colonialism,’ and that it is therefore considered by Thai people as ‘the language of “the others”’¹ (Watkhaolarm 155). Even so, there are Thai writers who choose to write fiction in English, two of whom will be discussed later in the analysis section.

It is important to note, however, that Thailand has never been colonised by any English-speaking country (or indeed, any other), which is why English is not Thailand’s official language. In addition, some of the binary notions of ‘indigenous’ versus ‘imperialist’ and of ‘coloniser’ versus ‘colonised’ found in postcolonial literature might not be directly applicable to the English writing in Thailand since Thailand’s familiarity with the English language is not through colonisation but, instead, through globalisation. As a result, unlike Malaysian or Singaporean English, Thailand’s use of English has developed more slowly and without enough influential local variants to be called Thai-English (Bennui and Hashim ‘English in Thailand: Development of English in a Non-Postcolonial Context’).² Even so, globalisation has required

¹ ‘British, American, and Australian people or “Farang,” to use the Thai term, meaning anything associated with Caucasians’ (Watkhaolarm 155)

² For more details on the development and the current situation of English in Thailand, see Bennui and Watkhaolarm.

Thai people to adapt and learn English if they hope to be socially mobile. English is thus, de facto, one of the languages spoken by Thailand's social elite. The relationship of Thais with the English language can thus be viewed as a by-product of colonialism, albeit not a direct result of colonisation, and of the asymmetrical economic relationships that shape the modern world.

Engaging with the scholarship surrounding postcolonial writing helps to answer some of the questions surrounding cultural access: does writing in English grant total access to one's culture? If not, how does the gap between a writer and a reader from different cultures reflect power struggles between the 'colonised' and the 'coloniser,' or 'east' and 'west'? In other words, what happens to the language itself as it is reshaped from a tool of rule to a tool of resistance?

The ways in which postcolonial writers reshape their coloniser's language through textual strategies are complicated and varied, but the process of these writers' appropriations has been well-described by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. As Ashcroft writes:

The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. There are two distinct processes by which it does this. The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege. (38)

The abrogation and appropriation of English by postcolonial writers are two of the defining features of postcolonial writing, according to Ashcroft. They help explain the approaches used by the four writers whose work will be analysed towards the end of the first portion of the critical component.

One of the postcolonial writing strategies used in the thesis is metonymic gap, which helps to explain the phenomenon that occurs when a text creates a gap between the reader and the writer because of a difference in cultural interpretation.

1.1.2 Metonymic Gap

A hallmark of postcolonial writing, the so-called metonymic gap creates an interpretation barrier between the reader and the text. Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg define the term:

By stressing the distance between the participating writers and readers, the text prevents itself from being so transparent that it is absorbed into the dominant milieu of the reader of English. Such writing, while it provides a path for cultural understanding that overcomes the exclusionary effect of anthropological explanation, also questions easy assumptions about meaning and its transmissibility, and actively reinstalls the reality of its own cultural difference in quite explicit ways. (130)

Ghosh and Kleinberg also analyse the metonymic gap's function in the text, and the implications for both reader and writer:

This is the cultural gap formed when writers transform English according to the needs of their source culture: by inserting unglossed words phrases or passages from a first language; by using concepts, allusions, or references that may be unknown to the reader; by code switching; or by transforming literary language with vernacular syntax or rhythms. Such variations become synecdochic of the writer's culture – the part that stands for the whole – rather than representations of the world, as the colonial language might. Thus the inserted language 'stands for' the colonized culture in a metonymic way, and its very resistance to interpretation constructs a 'gap' between the writer's culture and the colonial culture. The local writer is thus able to represent his or her world to the colonizer (and others) in the metropolitan language, and at the same time to signal and emphasise a difference from it. The reader exposed to such language is unequivocally in the presence of a culture that is 'Other' to his or her own. (130)

The purpose of language appropriation in postcolonial writing is not only to use the language of the coloniser to articulate the experience of the colonised, but also to transform the language of colonisation into something that can express the local culture. The metonymic gap

created by variants of the English language signposts the differences between cultures – the coloniser and the colonised in the case of postcolonial writing – as Ashcroft suggests:

The use of English inserts itself as a political discourse in post-colonial writing, and the use of English variants of all kinds captures that metonymic moment between the cultural affirmed on the one hand as ‘indigenous’ or ‘national,’ and that characterized on the other as ‘imperialist,’ ‘metropolitan,’ etc. (53)

The next framework might be better suited to scaffold the creative project contained herein because it does not define itself through its relationship with the language and influence of colonising countries. Instead, contact literature focuses on the expression of cultures using different variants of English.

1.1.3 Contact and Exophonic Literature

1.1.3.1 Contact Literature

According to Braj B. Kachru, ‘Contact Literature’ is a term that refers to ‘the literature in English written by the users of English as a second language to delineate contexts which generally do not form part of what may be labelled the traditions of English literature [African, Malaysian, Indian and so on]’ (Kachru 127). The contact literature framework is different to the postcolonial framework: having close ties to the field of applied linguistics and English language teaching, it focuses more on the special characteristics of language(s) in non-native literature written in English, rather than analysing stylistic markers in terms of the politics of resistance. The literature produced by multilingual writers around the world has demonstrated the way that the English language is distinctly shaped in different regions, races, and cultures. The result, as Michael Spooner’s report ‘Contact Literature in English’ in the ERIC Digest suggests, is that ‘the English produced in new contexts naturally takes on the flavour of its

surroundings, delivering a blend of native and Western linguistic features, semantic and pragmatic qualities, literary heritages, and the like' (2).

Nevertheless, there is a limit to how one's non-English culture can be expressed via English to the reader. After all, it is understandable that standardised English cannot capture every aspect of non-English cultures. Even so, writers of contact literature do not think that non-English cultures are 'inexpressible', but rather that the 'cultural material in contact literature will stretch or reshape the expressive qualities of English' (Spooner 3).

Although Spooner's report focuses on the impact of contact literature on education, the students' responses and reactions when reading works from the non-English culture are useful in understanding how Anglophone readers might react to the short story collection contained in this thesis. The report's insight into possible prior biases that may be held by Anglophone readers with respect to another culture and language inform the writing strategies and have helped with anticipating their effects on the reader: as the writer's native culture bends the formal conventions of Western English, it also requires readers to bend their expectations of both what is tolerable formally and what is predictable culturally in English (Spooner 4). The writers are responsible, then, for deciding how their narration will guide the readers of another culture, linguistically and culturally, through the cultural experience; as well as to decide where to withhold guidance.

Contact literature does not specify how many changes these writers of non-English culture need to apply to their works, nor does it delve into the details of the linguistic changes they may use in order to best achieve the balance of cultural expressions that the writers are endeavouring to portray.

1.1.3.2 Exophonic Literature

Another conceptual framework related to the creative project is translation scholar Chantal Wright's theorisation of 'exophony,' i.e. the phenomenon that occurs when a writer 'adopts a new language' and 'moulds the new language until it becomes suitable for their new purposes' ('Exophony and Literary Translation: What It Means for the Translator When a Writer Adopts a New Language' 22). The advantage of applying the term to the work of writers who adopt new languages is that the term describes 'a linguistic state of being rather than prescribing any theme(s)' and that 'it does not imply anything about a writer's background, even if, in the German context, exophonic writers are typically also first-generation migrants' (Wright 'Writing in the "Grey Zone": Exophonic Literature in Contemporary Germany' 40).

Although the term 'exophony' and its adjective derivative 'exophonic' were used by Wright to explore the exophonic literature in contemporary Germany, the language adoption and transformation process of the diasporic writers could also be used as a theoretical framework for fiction written in English.

The migrant backgrounds of the writers of exophonic literature, although not a compulsory element, are one of the key factors that set up the environment for the moulding of language between the writers' native languages and the adopted ones. One of the writers whose works would be categorised as exophonic according to Chantal Wright's theory is Yoko Tawada. She is a Japanese writer who migrated to Germany. Her essays and short stories in German highlight the exophonic experience of writing in a non-native language, particularly in regard to her play with words, with a linguistic and translational awareness presented to the reader.

To look at the creative project contained herein through this theoretical lens means being aware of a state in which migrating to a new country necessitates the adoption of a language

other than one's mother tongue. The thesis's collection of stories was written during a period of study abroad, thus understanding how the exophonic writers translate their experiences through their adopted languages helps to formulate the collection's voices and writing styles.

To conclude, the three areas of studies – Postcolonialism, Contact Literature, and Exophony – have their uses and limitations in defining a writing situation where a writer produces fiction written in a language other than her mother tongue. There are various, useful writing techniques, including metonymic gap, in fiction that explores postcolonialism. However, postcolonial study's historical context and the political nature of using English as a tool to fight back colonialism are the two aspects that make the term less likely to be applied to Thailand's English writing circumstance. Contact literature, on the other hand, focuses less on colonial politics of English and more on the English-as-a-second-language aspect of the fiction by non-native English writers. The narrower scope of the term helps to limit the scope of the research topics. There is a trade-off in getting, though, in using the term that is related more to the fields of applied linguistics and English language teaching: the methodology surrounding the literature have less to do with narrative strategies and more to do with applied linguistics and language teaching methods. As for the third term, exophony, it adds other aspects apart from writing in non-native languages to the discussion, which is migration and the moulding of a new language to the mother tongue. The research on the notion of exophony and the exophonic writers has given new perspectives in writing the non-fiction pieces, particularly the foreign experiences of living in another country and using its language.

1.2 Cultural Representation and Thai Identity

Thailand is predominantly occupied by Thais who share the same ethnicity and history. Thus, its cultural portrayal and national identity can be perceived as centralised and coherent.

However, the notion of national identity, including that of Thai, is complex. Following the idea that nation is an ‘imagined political community’, as defined by Benedict Anderson, it can be surmised that nationhood is an imagined construct in the way that ‘the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’(Anderson 6). Anderson’s quote portrays the image of an abstract notion, shared among citizens, that takes hold in real life. The fraternal aspect of the ‘imagined community’ is what stops millions of people from killing each other and encourages protection of each other instead (Anderson 7).

This line of thought leads to the question of how Thai national and cultural identities becomes an imagined construct. After all, being born in Thailand only constitutes a small part of the Thai identity, which is why representing Thai identities through writing is not an easy task. The level of complexity increases when using a non-native language. In *National Identities and its Defenders: Thailand Today*, Craig J. Reynolds articulates the circumstances informing the notion of Thai identity:

There is something hegemonic about Thai identity in Thai consciousness. In other words, the meanings of Thai identity are given to consciousness by those in power, by ruling elites, and by state managers. To attribute the construction of Thai identity entirely to cultural programs of the Thai state is to subscribe to the theory of false consciousness. In other words, what Thai nationals believe about Thai identity, what they feel in their heart-of-hearts about their food, their language, their kinfolk, their religion, their monarchy, and so on has been planted there by state institutions to cultivate a sense of belonging that will make governing those fifty-five million people easier and more peaceable. (26)

What Reynolds suggests is that if you ask Thai people about Thai identity, the common themes that are likely to emerge would be the traditional images – Thai food, Thai dance, Thai temples, and so on – that they have been taught in school. These images are constantly repeated, either through the touristic propaganda or for national holidays, and mostly have cultural implications attached to them. As such, it is necessary to explore precisely what Thai culture or

Thai identity means to an individual person, so that one can find the definition that is best suited to his/her belief system and way of living. Reynolds also suggests that it is important to accept aspects of Thai identity outside of those approved of and promoted by the National Identity Board, and that asking questions is a necessary step in the exploration and discovery of deeper meanings associated with Thai identity. These questions include:

Under what circumstances and at whose prompting do Thai speakers find Thai identity natural and meaningful in their personal experience? How does the Thai-speaking audience, however specified in terms of class, region, or gender, mediate Thai identity and its discursive practices? (26)

To understand how the country's central idea of Thai identity is constituted requires one to look no further than the education system and its textbooks. From elementary school, content about Thai culture is taught using the same mandatory textbooks which are used all over the country. Nithi Īaosīwong suggests in his book, *Chāt Thai , mūrāng Thai , bāep rīan lāe 'anusāwarī : wādūai watthanatham , rat lāe rūpkān* čhītsamnuk, that these textbooks offer a ready-made conceptualisation of Thai experiences using the official narrative of Thai culture based on the central region of Thailand (62).

In addition, there are cliché conceptions of Thailand that stem from Western narratives of Thailand that this thesis tries to work against. Thai people do not frequent businesses like elephant trekking, Muay Thai training camps, or the transvestite cabaret shows, to name a few. These are conceptualisations of Thailand based on an outsider's perspective, made real to accommodate tourists' desire to see and experience the exotic. According to Īaosīwong, there is a push to turn Thai culture into a marketable product for tourists and that changing some aspects of traditions, celebrations, arts, or relationship patterns within the society is required to satisfy the need of the tourists (67). He also says that when the manifestations of Thai culture are changed to accommodate the outsiders instead of the locals, they lose their original meanings and the soul that binds the local people together (67).

2 Part Two

Analysis of the Themes and Narrative Strategies of Selected Writers

This section aims to analyse the themes and narrative strategies of a group of selected texts written by S.P. Somtow, Salman Rushdie, Rattawut Lapcharoensap and Nathan Englander. These projects bear a ‘family resemblance’ to my own.¹

2.1 S.P. Somtow’s *Jasmine Nights*

S.P. Somtow, born Somtow Papinian Sucharitkul, is a Thai-American composer and novelist. The clash of ideas between his Western perspective and his Thai upbringing is evident in his semi-autobiographical novel *Jasmine Nights* published in 1994. The book is a coming-of-age story about the protagonist’s journey to discover his Thai identity, written in the form of a memoir of a twelve-year-old boy who, despite being Thai, refuses to speak Thai and considers himself a product of Western civilisation. This image is reinforced by the character’s referencing of lines from Hollywood movies, such as *Quo Vadis*, and from classical literature such as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Homer’s *The Odyssey* (Somtow 1). Set in Bangkok in the 1960s, *Jasmine Nights* is a re-imagination of the author’s childhood experiences in Thailand. It features his three aunts whom he calls the Three Fates, and other relatives, including his great-grandmother, who is a source of great wisdom to him. His family gives him the nickname Little Frog, but he always refers to himself as Justin. He also has a pet chameleon called Homer that dies at the beginning of the story but comes back in his dreams to guide him. With his friend,

¹ The term ‘family resemblance’ is associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein. This ‘complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing’ are categorised by Wittgenstein as ‘family resemblances’ because ‘resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way’ (Wittgenstein 136).

Virgil, a black American boy, Justin embarks on an adventure that teaches him about friendship, social class, cultural difference, fantasy and reality.

The novel opens with a glossary of ‘Siamese Words,’ followed by a list of characters under ‘Dramatis Personae,’ before the story begins in chapter one. The inclusion of both sections aims to help the Anglophone readers of the novel to access Thai culture at a linguistic level, through the glossary, and at a sociological level, through the list of characters, which parses the complicated relationships within the Thai extended-family system. The implication of such mediated access is that readers from a culture other than the one presented in the novel need a certain amount of guidance so that they will not feel lost when they encounter the unfamiliar cultural quirks in the novel either in terms of the language or cultural representations.

Languages and dictions play a role in the way the novel is presented to the reader. Stylistically, the prose is written in standardised English, except for the US southern, African-American dialect used by Virgil; Thai words are transliterated and printed in italics which prompts the reader to return to the Glossary at the start of the book which, along with an English translation, also offers a guide to the pronunciation to each word. The use of Thai words, transliterated in the text using the Roman alphabet, enhances the sense of ‘exotic’ places and people while also convincing the reader of the authenticity of the world the novel has created. The use of transliteration and the glossary of ‘Siamese’ words also affect how the book is read. The readers have a choice to either flip through the pages to the glossary for definitions when they encounter foreign words or to continue reading using the surrounding context as a guideline. To some degree, then, the reader has a choice about how immersed or lost he or she becomes in the cultural world of the novel, though guidance is always at hand when needed.

The way the novel’s viewpoint is used also affects how Thai culture is depicted. The author describes the cultural context of the year 1963 in Bangkok through the specific viewpoint

of a twelve-year-old boy who sees himself as ‘a creature of two worlds’ (Somtow 1). However, the narrator later turns out to be the boy’s older-self recounting the tale of his childhood. At times, this older self inserts his thoughts and observations into the narration. On one occasion, the narrator’s voice shifts from a child narrating what happens to him into the perspective of the the adult, offering a lesson about life: ‘When you are twelve years old, life is not a movie that unreels relentlessly towards its dénouement, but a slide show: a compendium of perpetually frozen images, smells, sounds’ (Somtow 14). Written in a pseudo-memoir format, there is an author’s presence in the text, which is the author’s older-self who interrupts the narration. When the presence of the older author appears, the voice is not the only thing that changes, but also its perspective and its awareness of the reader’s existence. The novel’s semi-autobiographical elements and the memoir format establish Justin as a compelling character because of his cultural in-betweenness. His Western upbringing allows him to see something special or strange in what Thais might consider normal and mundane, such as a street-opera like Likay.

The perspective shifting between the author’s past and present selves is a common technique in memoirs and biographies. However, there is a disadvantage: some lines in the dialogue and some parts of the descriptive narration, there are moments where the narrator’s presence is not clearly foregrounded. Also, the language used in these moments could be considered too verbose and too complex to have been made by a thirteen-year-old boy. Examples of the verbose and complex vocabularies and clauses that are contributed by the adult narrator are: ‘It is not to be surmised that,’ ‘cataclysm,’ ‘rapprochement,’ ‘a plagiarizing poetaster,’ and ‘embryonic Shakespeare’(Somtow 332). The result of this is that the reader’s attention is taken away from the story, and the reader’s ability to judge and evaluate the characters is clouded.

Nevertheless, these shifts in perspective help the reader understand more of Thai culture. For example, when Justin says a swear word at his aunts' party, he anticipates the grave situation he has put himself in:

One might suppose that, your humble narrator having uttered those unthinkable words, all hell would break loose. That the very sky would be riven asunder, that the thunderbolts of Zeus himself would burst forth from the clouds and strike the hapless miscreant dead on the spot. One might suppose that the utterance of these scandalous words would cause so sensational a reaction that the guests would start leaving in a huff, my aunts would start advancing upon me with rods of chastisement in their hands and the music would sputter to a stop. In truth, however, nothing of the sort occurs at all. (Somtow 176)

Here, the narrator pulls himself out of the narration and addresses the reader directly. Judging from the narrative voice, one might reasonably assume that the voice comes from someone older with a more refined and sophisticated grasp of English and life than a twelve-year-old boy. In addition, the theme of Justin's journey to discover his identity in the story is framed by a beginning-middle-end narrative arc. As a result, Justin's core identity is portrayed as a whole: it does not change whenever something happens to him, rather, each new experience adds another layer to his personality. So, the reader can relate to the Justin that exists at the beginning of the novel to the Justin who has grown a little older and wiser, but is still the same person, at the end of the novel.

Another example of a shift in the narrative perspective is when Justin witnesses a sexual act between Aunt Noi-noi and Dr Richardson:

Time will gelatinize these five minutes into a slow motion replay in which I can eidetically recall every sigh and moan, every one of those fragrances so headily comingled – the raw fish, the noxious gases, the formalin, the sweat, the faint taint of carbolic acid – and freeze-frame each split second of the scene and relish every nuance as though I were once again that priggish and inquisitive child. (Somtow 121)

One of the primary functions of the narrator's ongoing interventions is to help the reader understand the cultural background against which the narrative unfolds and the cultural

implications of the characters' actions. Again, Somtow's narrative choices put him in a position to mediate or directly address cultural differences.

Another way in which Thai culture is foregrounded is the novel's thematic focus on questions of identity. The novel is not just a coming-of-age story – Justin's life is also a search for meaning, both creative and spiritual, and he faces the coalescing of identities in himself and also in his friends. Justin's upbringing abroad requires him to adapt to Thai language and culture, something he struggles with at first: 'Why can't I bring myself to speak these words, my own mother tongue? Am I afraid I will forget the other words, the windswept words of ancient poets, the words of the other kingdom?' (Somtow 23). The knowledge of his mother tongue is there, but he is afraid to use it because he believes that embracing one language means abandoning the other and that, for a creature of two worlds such as him, cultural identities are products of compromised conflicts within oneself, each identity in constant battle with the other, especially when it comes to his innermost feelings: "'Samlee," I whisper. Names are the same in every language. To say a name surely does not betray my loyalty to English' (Somtow 23). Choosing Thai as his language of communication is even harder for Justin because he sees it as the language of the real world and as something that belongs to the adults, which is in stark contrast to the English language contained within his treasured, imaginative world of Greek Mythology and Classical Hollywood cinema:

In my other world I am not a child. I am what I choose to be. I speak the language of the wind. I have synthesized this world out of images in history books and story books and books of poetry and from half-remembered scenes of England. It is cool in this world. A balustrade can be a stepladder to Olympus where I stand and look into the eyes of Zeus, who bears a remarkable resemblance to Finlay Currie, the white-maned St Peter from *Quo Vadis*. (Somtow 1)

It is only after his pet chameleon's death that he wishes to 'honour the spirit of [his] dead chameleon Homer by becoming more like him' (Somtow 54). After seeing the transformation of his old nanny from a servant to his uncle's mistress, he decides that he also

needs to change and starts with the language: 'To effect this metamorphosis, my first step must be to master the Thai language'(Somtow 55). However, the process of accepting his native language does not come easily. When he gets drunk at his aunts' party, Justin has a row with his boy servant, Piak, who ends up punching him and who, along with his father, gets evicted for it (Somtow 174). Justin tries to rectify the situation, but his family's decision is final. The frustration and helplessness trigger something in him:

I have no words to express my helplessness, my fury. It is at that moment, thrust downward to the very nadir of my existence, that something cracks inside my mind ... the crystal vase that holds the key to the language of the heart. I suddenly find myself able to speak Thai. (Somtow 175)

The passage shows the inner struggle of a child endeavouring to express himself in a language he is not familiar with. It is the moment when he crosses the barrier within himself. Justin's first public Thai words are the swear words 'Yed Mae,' a phrase which is translated in the novel's glossary as 'fuck your mother' and is accompanied by the added explanation that it constitutes 'an unspeakable obscenity' (Somtow xiv). The words shock the party guests because it's a taboo expression for the gentry. This detail is also explained in the novel, with the narrator noting that these are words 'which no person of breeding, education or refinement could utter' (Somtow 175).

His action has little impact on Piak's and his father's circumstances, but it affects Justin's family's perspective and treatment of him, Justin, in significant ways:

It takes me a moment to realize that Aunt Nit-nit is now addressing me in Thai. So they did know what I said! But rather than reproving me, my aunts have simply refashioned the cosmos. I can understand Thai. I have always understood Thai. I have always been able to speak it. So my utterance of those words has been pretty earth-shattering after all. It has actually changed the past and irrevocably altered the present. (Somtow 176)

Linguistic awakening is Justin's first step towards accepting that his Thai heritage and the Thai culture can coexist with his Western education. The next step comes when he

encounters other cultures with his newly acquired cross-cultural perspective. Virgil, an African-American boy whose family rents a house within Justin's estate, is the first black-skinned person that Justin encounters. Justin's preconceptions of black people are based on the films where 'they are always wild men of the forest, imploring Tarzan for aid, or sleek, oiled Nubian gladiators propounding noble sentiments in mid-Atlantic accents' (Somtow 30). Virgil's Georgian accent fascinates Justin even more, 'How can I express my joy at what I'm hearing, the exotic music of it, the poetry?' (Somtow 31). At the same time, Justin also learns what a person from another culture might think of him, i.e. something about how he may appear from a cultural perspective other than his own: Virgil calls him 'a dink that talk like a English lord.'

After meeting Virgil and other students from the Scola Britannica, the British school in Bangkok, Justin's world becomes more complex. His cross-cultural upbringing and sensibilities provide Justin with the ability to observe the racial and social prejudices among his friends. He is shocked when his white-skinned friends, Wilbur and Piet, beat Virgil and when Virgil refuses Justin's help. He tries to understand the reasons behind their actions and to intervene, but his helplessness is replaced by the realisation that the problem cannot easily be fixed because it is embedded in history/culture: '[Wilbur] too is the victim of a self-perpetuating cycle of injustice. It's not him. It's not Piet, it's not Virgil. It's the whole forsaken universe, locked in a maze without doors, all of us, each one of us an island, each one of us alone' (Somtow 313).

Later, even after he has acknowledged that the differences between cultures divide his friends and has found a way to befriend both parties, there remains a cultural gap he cannot close. When the news of John F. Kennedy's assassination reaches the boys, Wilbur and Virgil (who are both American), are most affected by it. It is during this moment that Justin feels alienated, saying 'I can never share what they are feeling, because I don't share their history, their past, not even their past enmity. I'm envious of their grief' (Somtow 348). To bridge the

gap between himself and his friends, Justin's solution is to write a play; a 'grand synthesis of East and West,' in which 'the white people will play Negroes and the Negroes white people' so that 'each will achieve an understanding of the other by acting out the other's role' (Somtow 315). The novel ends as the play's curtain rises, but not before Justin foretells future events and reflects on the importance of living the dream, however short it is, of spending time with his friends without class, racial, or cultural boundaries. The textual strategies that mediate the reader's encounter with Thai culture are thus neatly complemented by a thematic emphasis on overcoming cultural divisions.

As discussed above, the circumstances of Justin's upbringing, namely that it occurred in-between cultures, influence the narrative's viewpoint and how Thai culture is depicted. For example, the fantasy elements in the novel's narration, especially in the dream scenes, convey the normality of supernatural beliefs in Thai culture. Despite his Western education, Justin accepts the peculiar changes, some with supernatural elements, without hesitation. Justin is surrounded by people who believe in the supernatural, his nursemaid Samlee in particular, so Justin associates his experiences with the peculiar events in the stories he has been told and which he believes to be true.

2.2 Rattawut Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing*

Rattawut Lapcharoensap is a Thai-American writer who was born in Chicago, but raised in Bangkok, before his further education endeavours brought him back to the US. He is one of the few successful Thai writers whose works are written and published in English. The seven stories in his collection, *Sightseeing*, are all set in Thailand and the protagonists, with the exception of an old American man in 'Don't Let Me Die in This Place,' are all young Thais. The seven stories are told using a first-person narrative and draw the reader into the narration without any

explanation of the historical or cultural context or a glossary of Thai words. The collection keeps the Thai-English language style to a minimum, making the book easily accessible for an Anglophone reader.

In addition, a question arose in a *Granta* magazine interview with Lapcharoensap about Thailand's romanticised image (Thai beaches, Thai brides, etc.) in Western literature (Lapcharoensap *Interview: Rattawut Lapcharoensap*). The question delved into whether the author held any 'responsibility towards showing a side of a country that is often exoticised and romanticised in the popular imagination.' In response, Lapcharoensap comments:

I feel no responsibility for anything outside of the stories themselves. Though I am driven to anger and distraction by neo-Orientalist work about Asia or the so-called 'Third World' in which entire countries, populations and even continents are merely lifeless devices through which a writer seeks to resolve his or her own privileged problems. Which is a funny thing to say, I now realise, because one might reasonably levy that very accusation against 'The Captain' as well. So I am a hypocrite. (Lapcharoensap *Interview: Rattawut Lapcharoensap*)

Although Lapcharoensap claims that his focus is on the characters and stories instead of the social discourses found in some postcolonial writing, the first story in his collection titled 'Farangs' reverses the roles between the tourists and the locals; the locals become the observers instead of the observed. The story opens up with a description of the tourist season on an island:

This is how we count the days. June: the Germans come to the Island – football cleats, big T-shirts, thick tongues – speaking like spitting. July: the Italians, the French, the British, the Americans. The Italians like pad thai, its affinity with spaghetti. They like light fabrics, sunglasses, leather sandals. The French like plump girls, rambutans, disco music, baring their breasts. The British are here to work on their pasty complexions, their penchant for hashish. Americans are the fattest, the stingiest of the bunch. They may pretend to like pad thai or grilled prawns or the occasional curry, but twice a week they need their culinary comforts, their hamburgers and their pizzas. They're also the worst drunks. Never get too close to a drunk American. August brings the Japanese. Stay close to them. Never underestimate the power of the yen. Everything's cheap with imperial monies in hand and they're too polite to bargain. By the end of August, when the monsoon starts to blow, they're all consorting, slapping each other's backs, slipping each other drugs, sleeping with each other, sipping their liquor under the pink lights of the Island's bars. By September they've all deserted,

leaving the Island to the Aussies and the Chinese, who are so omnipresent one need not mention them at all. (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 1)

The national stereotypes in the above description are articulated by a young narrator, who is the mixed-race son of a motel owner. These general impressions of foreigners visiting the island set up the protagonist, whose livelihood depends on the comings and goings of the tourists, as being observant and resourceful. Despite the unflattering portrayal of foreigners at the beginning of the story, the narrator shows his interest in an American girl and in American films, such as *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, which he likes so much that he names his pet pig Clint Eastwood (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 2-3). On the other hand, his mother had her heart broken by an American soldier called Sergeant Marshall Anderson, who promised to send for her but never did, and was left to raise the boy alone. Since he left, her attitude towards foreigners had soured, and she refused to speak English and forbade the protagonist to speak ‘the Sergeant’s language,’ except to communicate with the guests in the motel (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 7). Their differing attitudes towards the English language and Western people stem from their individual experiences with Westerners.

Also, the perspectives of the local business owners towards the tourists show that the exotic portrayal of Thailand can be used to conform to the idealistic viewpoint promoted by the tourist industry. For instance, the notion that the population of a third-world country, like Thailand, is likely to exhibit a poor grasp on the English language is reinforced by a misspelling of the elephant-trekking camp:

I’d informed Uncle Mongkhon once that his sign was grammatically incorrect and that I’d lend him my expertise for a small fee, but he just laughed and said farangs preferred it just the way it was, thank you very much, they thought it was charming... (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 8)

The use of incorrect English is echoed in another short story, ‘Don’t Let Me Die in This Place,’ in which the narrator, an old American in a wheelchair, moves to Bangkok to live

with his son, his Thai daughter-in-law and his grandchildren who look nothing like him and can speak only a little English. The pidgin English that the daughter-in-law uses (such as 'I no want nothing' and 'I no mean to make you upset') is employed here to emphasise the cultural differences between her and the narrator (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 129). Such colloquial use of English, Pairote Bennui explains, occurs when 'Thai characters with lower English proficiency employ certain lexical and grammatical patterns considered "improper English" or "Tinglish" while talking to those with higher proficiency' (Bennui and Hashim 'Stylistic Creativity in Thai English Fiction' 92).

'Sightseeing,' the title story of the collection, also depicts certain aspects of the Thai cultural identity by pitting Thai ideology and the linguistic system against those elements in other cultures. The narrator, a man who is leaving for college shortly, takes one last trip with his mother before she becomes completely blind. They go to an island in the south of Thailand. The narrator's mother used to think that Thailand was 'a paradise for fools and farangs, for criminals and foreigners,' but she changes her mind after her diagnosis and wants to go sightseeing, buying the train tickets and telling the narrator that 'We'll be farangs. We'll be just like the tourists' (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 72). It is possible to conclude, based on the narration, that, as locals, some Thai people are ideologically more sceptical than other Thais about the international portrayal of their country. The passage also implies the coexistence of a 'dark' and a 'bright' side of the tourist industry, where criminals and tourists walk side by side in this place they call paradise.

The next passage not only implies the double standards of the Thai vendors' pricing between the locals and the tourists, but also illustrates the use of colloquial English in an effort to characterise Thai language in the English written text: 'C'mon. Give an old woman a break.' The girl smiled. She said eleven hundred. Ma yelled again. 'I'm not a farang, na? We're all

Thai here. Give me the Thai price' (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 83). The addition of 'na' is added to the sentence to imitate Thai speech. The use of transliteration here highlights the cultural barrier presented in the text, namely that a reader from any culture other than Thai could only assume that 'na' is a word that Thai people use at the end of a question. The advantage of using transliteration is that it creates a more realistic portrayal of Thai culture in the text, i.e. the way Thai people speak in real life. For Anglophone readers who are more accustomed to Thai culture, the phrase and its meaning could be familiar, which in turn does not require any particular attentions. That said, it does restrict non-Thai readers to taking the word's meaning at face value. For example, the word could mean something other than a vague question tag by a disgruntled customer, the particle 'na' could instead mean 'right,' in the context of being used at the end of a statement to invite agreement (Bennui and Hashim 'Stylistic Creativity in Thai English Fiction' 93).

'Don't Let Me Die in This Place' is the only story in the collection where the narrator is not Thai, and yet the depiction of Thai culture is as convincing and insightful as the other stories. Furthermore, handing the storytelling role to a foreigner helps the author to reveal certain elements of Thai culture which would otherwise remain invisible to Thai natives. For example, while his son and daughter-in-law dance together at the temple's carnival, the narrator notices the reactions of the Thai audience:

[I] see some of the men under the tent snickering in Jack's direction. I notice, too, that the women are talking to one another sternly, peering at Jack and his wife. I can tell by the way they look at her that they think Tida's some kind of prostitute and suddenly I'm proud of them both for being out there dancing, proud of my boy Jack for holding his wife so close, because their love suddenly seems for the first time like something courageous and worthwhile... (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 152)

From the narrator's point of view, other Thais who are gazing at the couple are prejudiced, assuming that most Thai women accompanying foreign men are prostitutes.

However, the narrator does not explain how or why this notion exists in Thai culture. It can be seen as the writer's strategic choice to plunge the reader right into the situation without explanation or context.

The next story in *Sightseeing* encapsulates Thai perspectives on foreigners. 'Priscilla the Cambodian' is about a friendship between two Thai boys and a gold-toothed, Cambodian refugee girl named Priscilla. The friendship ends when Priscilla's camp is destroyed by a fire which was set by the boys' fathers, and she is forced to move somewhere else. The boys' relationship also ends when their attitudes towards the refugees change and they clash. While the narrator appreciates the friendship that he has with Priscilla and the Cambodian refugees and disagrees with his father's negative views towards the refugees, his friend Dong sides with his father and is convinced that the refugees deserve what happens to them.

One notable aspect of the story's rehearsal of stereotypes about Cambodians that are commonly held by Thai people is its use of imagery and phrases that associates Cambodians with animals, rats especially. Thus, the rising number of shanties inhabited by Cambodians is likened to the rat outbreak in the narrator's housing development. The boys' fathers complain: 'Those people shit and piss wherever they please. You can't have people shitting and pissing wherever they please and not expect to have rats'; 'Cambodians probably think rats are a delicacy'; and 'They're the real rats, if you ask me' (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 116). In comparison to the negative attitude held by Thais about Westerners in 'Farangs,' the foreigners from neighbouring countries, including Cambodia, are viewed with disdain and are treated much worse; for all the prejudice, the Westerners are considered equal while the Cambodians are scorned as inferior.

In addition to their focus on cultural differences, Lapcharoensap's stories also deal with themes like poverty and the economic differences that shape the Thai experience. 'At the Café

Lovely' portrays the life of two brothers growing up in a slum in Bangkok. The narrator's first exposure to Western culture is when his brother takes him to an American fast-food restaurant at a mall. The seemingly ordinary setting is elevated to something extraordinary by the narrator's expectation, as he evidently considers the place to be special. Being poor, he can rarely afford a burger, and he feels obliged to wear his best clothes for the occasion. The imagery of the American dream is prominent as the narrator idealises the happiness he hopes to find at the restaurant:

We would look like those university students I had seen through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the ones who laughed and sipped at their sodas. Afterwards, we would walk into the summer sun with soft-serve sundaes, my brother's arm around my shoulder. (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 28)

Socio-economic difference, corruption and injustice play important roles in Lapcharoensap's 'Draft Day' and 'Cockfighter.' 'Draft Day' tells the story of a friendship between the narrator and his friend on the day that they go through the military drafting process via the conscription lottery. The story acts as a commentary about Thai society by setting up two boys that are the same age, but from different family backgrounds, and the double standards that occur when the narrator's family chooses to use bribery to obtain their desired result. The informal system of bribery behind Thailand's conscription lottery – a system that operates through work and family connections – is described in 'Draft Day' as follows:

I didn't tell him that my father's boss's older brother – a retired navy lieutenant – had recently received two crates of Johnny Walker Blue and a certificate for his wife to a famous goldsmith in Pomprapsattruphai District. I didn't tell Wichu that the lieutenant, in turn, had called my father to thank him. He told my father that he'd recommended me to the draft board as an upstanding young citizen, so upstanding I didn't need the benefits of marching drills and mess hall duty and combat training to improve my character in any way. I was a fully-formed patriot, he'd told the draft board. A resplendent example for the nation's youth. A true son of Siam. Which means there's nothing to worry about, the lieutenant told my father. Everything has been arranged. Just have your son show up at the lottery. (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 56)

The passage makes it clear that certain rules and laws in Thailand can be bent if the person learns to approach the right authority figure and persuade them through connections and money. It is also implied that powerful people who are willing to bend the rules are the norm in Thailand, and that even when other people are suspicious of the act, they merely gossip and curse instead of reporting the crime to the authorities. This is illustrated by the spectators' reaction at the draft site when they witness a small number of boys being taken away from the queues waiting for the lottery and brought back near the end: 'Fucking corruption, somebody says. Cowards, says another. Just another day in the Kingdom of Thailand' (Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing* 66).

The portrayal of the passive attitude towards law enforcement that is prevalent amongst Thais is portrayed in similar terms in 'Cockfighter,' the longest story in the collection. 'Cockfighter' tells the story of a family wherein the father raises cocks for cockfights and the mother sews clothes in a factory. Their adolescent daughter is the narrator who watches her father's descent into a frenzy and then depression during his fight against the son of a local thug. The story's contemporary subject, realistic tone, and novella length create an opportunity for Lapcharoensap to portray the daily struggle experienced by many typical Thai families in rich detail. Like other stories in the collection, Lapcharoensap's narrative strategies do not challenge the reader on a linguistic level. Instead, the story reads as naturally to an English reader as any other slice-of-life story.

2.3 Salman Rushdie's *East, West*

Salman Rushdie is a British-Indian novelist who was born in Mumbai, India, but was educated and worked in the UK. His short story collection *East, West* depicts a meeting between the cultures of the 'East' and 'West.' Being an immigrant from India and one of the world's most

studied postcolonial writers and critics, Rushdie is of course well aware of the problematic orientalist implications of the terms 'East' and 'West.' At the same time, it is important for Rushdie to acknowledge and accept the differences between Eastern and Western cultures:

[those of us who emigrated] are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. (Rushdie *Imaginary Homelands : Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* 15)

Rushdie clearly states that the meeting place of East and West makes for a fertile territory for writing—a territory that is not fixed and that should be explored. Thus, *East, West* is a creative response to the clichés of a monolithic East and monolithic West. The book's title and its structure – stories that are arranged in three sections: 'East,' 'West,' and 'East, West' – exposes Rushdie's intention to engage with the reader's perceptions and expectations about Eastern and Western tales, on the level of both form and of content.

Each of the sections 'East,' 'West,' and 'East, West' contains three stories. The first two stories in the 'East' section are realist tales while the third is an allegory with fantastical elements. 'Good Advice Is Rarer Than Rubies' presents a young Indian woman who goes to the British consulate in an unspecified Indian city to obtain a permit to travel to the UK to be with her much older fiancé, who she will wed as part of an arranged marriage. At the consulate she meets a sly old man who offers her advice on how to secure the necessary documents that will get her to Bradford, England. Even though Miss Rehana fails to get her permit, she is happy to go back to Lahore and be a nanny to three boys. The second story, 'The Free Radio,' is told from the perspective of an old Indian man recounting a tale of a rickshaw driver in an Indian village who is married to a widow with five children and is tricked into partaking in the government's sterilisation process with the false promise of free radio. The third story, 'The Prophet's Hair,' is inspired by real events in the 1960s wherein a relic was stolen from one of

the mosques in Kashmir and later retrieved. The story is narrated by a third-person storyteller and includes aspects of fantasy, particularly when describing the ominous effects that the relic 'the Prophet's Hair' had on a secular moneylender - turning him into a fundamentalist Muslim. The sudden change in him brings terror upon his son Atta, who almost dies at the beginning of the story trying to hire a thief to steal the relic from his mad father; his daughter Huma who manages to hire the master thief who succeeds but at the cost of her life; and his wife, who turns mad after seeing her daughter killed and her husband commit suicide. The relic finds its way back to the mosque after the arrest of the master thief but not before it performs miracles on the thief's blind wife and their four crippled children.

Most of Rushdie's novels about India have strong narratorial presences that provide both voice and commentary. Stylistically, these novels are marked by baroque sentences and vocabulary. However, the first two stories in the 'East' section adopted a more realist manner, one that would not be out of place in the Anglo-American short story tradition. Despite the thematic exploration of Indian identities in 'Good Advice Is Rarer Than Rubies' and 'The Free Radio,' there is a sense that the stories refuse to be exotic. The 'East' section shows that Rushdie's purpose is not to romanticise India using oriental stereotypes. There is a contrast between the first two stories and 'The Prophet's Hair' in terms of its use of fantastical elements which might be associated with stories about 'Eastern' culture. The strong narratorial presence and the portrayal of the miracles of the relic in 'The Prophet's Hair' might seem like Rushdie is following an Indian trope in his storytelling. However, the modern setting, 'Early in the year 19 --,' the fast-paced narrative, and the sceptical tone at the end suggest that Rushdie is subverting the categorisation of 'Eastern' and 'Western' stories. For example, the reader might be surprised that while the following narration is about a miracle, its cynical tone makes the passage less convincing: 'They were, all four of them, very properly furious, because the

miracle had reduced their earning powers by 75 per cent, at the most conservative estimate; so they were ruined men' (Rushdie *East, West* 58).

The 'West' section contains three stories that are highly diverse in terms of their genres, themes, and styles. Each story features some well-known points of Western cultural references: *Hamlet*, *The Wizard of Oz* and Christopher Columbus. The first story, 'Yorick,' is a satirical piece about Yorick, Hamlet's jester, written in Shakespearean English. The wordiness and non-linear narration contrast sharply with the more accessible prose of the 'East' section. The prose is simpler in the second story of the 'West' section, 'At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers,' which provides details of an imaginary futuristic setting in an unknown dystopian country, where everything can be auctioned, even nature and human emotions. Christopher Columbus, a familiar figure in the Western world, is re-imagined in 'Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship (*Santa Fé*, AD 1492)': A tale wherein he fantasises about a relationship with Queen Isabella.

To sum up, the assortment of vastly differing themes and styles in the 'West' section is Rushdie's strategy to defy the reader's expectations, based on their interpretation of the title, of reading present-day, realist short stories about Western culture. This section teases the reader with the notion of a 'West' and transforms the 'West' into a series of myths via the mimicry of Shakespearean English, and the adoption of popular Western themes, namely dystopian fantasy and postmodern historical fiction.

The stories in the 'East, West' section explore the space where Eastern and Western cultures meet. It is not insignificant that the title of the section is also used as the title for the collection. Rushdie has directly associated himself with the stories in the 'East, West' section: 'When I started thinking of calling the stories *East, West* the most important part of the title was the comma. Because it seems to me that I am that comma – or at least that I live in the

comma' (Rushdie 'Interview: Homelessness Is Where the Art Is' 49). Rushdie's statement shows that there is an element of autobiography in the 'East, West' stories, including a focus on hybridity and the intersection between Western and Eastern cultures. Narrative-wise, the assimilation between Eastern and Western culture occurs not only at the plot level, wherein Indian characters migrate West, but also at conceptual and thematic levels. The protagonist of 'The Harmony of the Spheres,' for example, is an Indian graduate from Cambridge University who has befriended Eliot Crane, an obsessive writer who later develops paranoid schizophrenia. Khan, the narrator, considers Eliot, who teaches him about magic and mysticism, to be his guru, not the other way around. Eliot also plays an important role in reconciling the fractured identities of the Indian-born and Western-educated narrator:

But in Eliot's enormous, generously shared mental storehouse of the varieties of 'forbidden knowledge' I thought I'd found another way of making a bridge between here-and-there, between my two othernesses, my double unbelonging. In that world of magic and power there seemed to exist the kind of fusion of world-views, Europeans Amerindian Oriental Levantine, in which I desperately wanted to believe (Rushdie *East, West* 141).

Save for the Western influence evident in the reference made to Star Trek, the characters of the second story, 'Chekov and Zulu,' are ethnically Indian and the narrative is Indian-focused, though the setting is England. The story revolves around a relationship between an Indian working as Acting Deputy High Commissioner of the Indian Embassy in London, nicknamed Chekov, and a Sikh intelligence officer, nicknamed Zulu, and the fallout between them over the political turmoil that divides the Sikh and the Hindu people following Indira Gandhi's assassination. The ending of the story suggests that, although the two characters are bonded by a common interest in Star Trek and are situated in a place that values diversity and cultural tolerance, their historical and cultural conflicts still have a major impact on who they are and how they live their lives.

The last story contained in the 'East, West' section, 'The Courter,' portrays the geographic and mental crossing between East and West. On one hand, the story is about the relationship between the narrator's ayah (nanny), nicknamed 'Certainly-Mary' because of the peculiar way she speaks English, and an Eastern European porter working at the London flat that the narrator and his family live in. Their relationship develops through their playing chess together, which is their language of love and which cuts across the linguistic barrier that separates them. The hybridity of Eastern and Western cultures is embodied in the narrator himself, an Indian-born teenager waiting for his UK citizenship which (he believes) will set him free from his Indian family and allow him to pursue his education and career as a British person. At the end of the story, though, Certainly-Mary's relationship with the porter is not enough to connect her to the UK when she mysteriously develops a heart problem and decides to go back to India. Her heart never troubles her again. It is the narrator's belief that 'it was England that was breaking her heart, breaking it by not being India. Or was it that her heart, roped by two different loves, was being pulled both East and West ... and she knew that to live she would have to choose?' (Rushdie *East, West* 209).

The narrator himself wishes to be part of the West. His wish is granted when he becomes a British citizen and gets a British passport which he believes will set him free, but instead he still feels the burden of living between two cultures: 'I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, *choose, choose* ... I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose' (Rushdie *East, West* 211). This is an example of the clash between the identity that the narrator and his family were born with and the one they may choose to adopt in their new country. Anjali Ram of Roger Williams University suggests in his review of *East, West*, that

regardless of whether they are British citizens or not, they still need to ‘negotiate their identities and rethink their location in the world’ (Ram 1).

What Rushdie does through the structure of the collection is to test the boundaries of how the East and the West are perceived. The various writing styles, changing from realist tales and a ‘modern’ fable in the East section to magical realism in the section dedicated to the West, and once more back to a realist tone in the East/West, highlight the interchangeable nature of cultures which one might otherwise associate with either the East or the West, i.e. the slippages in the binary oppositions between coloniser/colonised, the familiar/the Exotic, logic/emotions, and realism/magical realism. While the first two sections play with stereotypes of East and West, the final section of ‘East, West’ showcases the hybridity of cultures by portraying characters who are caught between their Eastern and Western identities and who choose different paths to reconcile the two.

In addition to the discussion above of Rushdie’s strategic choices in how the stories in *East, West* are arranged, the role of the Indian English that Rushdie inherited and of his being a postcolonial writer will also be discussed in this section. Unlike the English that exists in India, the English language of Thailand was not introduced through colonialism. Nevertheless, English plays a significant role when it comes to accessing wealth and resources, and social status within Thailand (Teverson 38), just as it does in India. Although Indian or Thai writers who choose to write in English might miss out on their domestic market share, they gain reputation and influence within the global reading market instead. Inevitably, these writers also become representatives of their cultures and countries, which can lead to criticism when certain things become ‘misrepresented.’ Rushdie, for example, is routinely accused of a number of failings, including those he describes in *The Vintage book of Indian writing, 1947-1997*: of being ‘too upper-middle-class;’ of lacking ‘diversity in [his] choice of themes;’ of enjoying an inflated

reputation ‘on account of the international power of the English language and of the ability of Western critics and publishers to impose their cultural standards on the East;’ and of being ‘deracinated to the point that [his] work lacks the spiritual dimension essential for a “true” understanding of the soul of India’ (Rushdie and West 164). Rushdie’s response to the accusations of “deracination” and “Westernisation” is that ‘as an individual, being Hindi-Urdu, the “Hindustani” of north India, remains an essential aspect of my sense of self; as a writer, I have been partly formed by the presence, in my head, of that other music, the rhythms, patterns and habits of thought and metaphor of my Indian tongues. Whatever language we write in, we drink from the same well. India, that inexhaustible horn of plenty, nourishes us all’ (*Step across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002* 166-67).

Indeed, there is in Rushdie’s work, including *East, West*, a sense of ‘resistance’ that prevents his work from being too easily accessible by the Anglophone reader. It can be argued that Rushdie’s Indian readership could be less intrigued by and less susceptible to the ‘resistance’ aspect of his work. However, Rushdie’s focus is on the merging of his Indian heritage with the English-prose expression. Thus, there are layers of communication and understanding into which some of the Anglophone reader may have to delve. Nevertheless, the vernacular languages and contextual knowledge are not included to purposefully make the stories exotic for the Anglophone reader. Andrew Teverson supports Rushdie’s method of using Indian materials yet not relying solely on the ‘Eastern’ traditions of storytelling, but instead asserts that:

Rushdie is seeking, wilfully and self-consciously, to place elements of the Euro-American novelistic tradition in new conjunctions with elements of the Indian (or Arabic) storytelling tradition in order, firstly, to see how one tradition might productively transform the other and, secondly, to show how fictions have been brought into new hybrid relations in his own experience, as a migrant intellectual working in increasingly globalised, post-colonial arenas. (47)

Although one cannot deny the power and influence that attaches itself to fiction written in English (because of the global market), the focus here is on how non-native and polylingual writers of English find creative ways to incorporate their native cultures into fiction written in English in terms of the themes, style and language contained therein. With this collection, Rushdie has shown what it means to represent India through different writing techniques and structures. The Indian stories in the East section are not made exotic by way of dialogues, dictions, or writing techniques designed to represent 'Indian English.' The West undermines the orientalist perception that the fiction of the West is more rational and less prone to fabulation than that of the East. The last section focuses on the issues associated with migration and identity, showing how Indian characters deal with their relationships with Western people and how their identities are tested and shaped by the West.

2.4 Nathan Englander's *What We Talk About When We Talk about Anne Frank*

Nathan Englander is a Jewish-American author raised in an Orthodox Jewish community in New York. *What We Talk About When We Talk about Anne Frank* is his third book and his second collection of short stories. While the stories included in the collection employ a variety of styles, tonalities and settings, they have a clear thematic coherence: the collection's overarching questions all concern Jewish identity, specifically, Jewish moral dilemmas. Unlike Rushdie, Englander does not portray the Jewish identity as being in opposition to Westerners' perspectives of Jews. This is because Jews in the Western diaspora can hardly be classified as non-Western, even if they have not entirely assimilated into the dominant Western culture. Englander also does not make use of Yiddish or Hebrew in the English prose. In this sense, Englander is writing as an American for Americans. What makes his collection relevant to this thesis is precisely its heterogenous approach (in terms of narrative technique, point of view and

tone) to a unified cultural theme. This analysis will focus on how Englander explores Jewish ideas via these heterogeneous stories and also on the reactions to this approach as told by critics and readers.

The title story of the collection is an homage to Raymond Carver's famous story 'What We Talk About When We Talk about Love,' an homage also expressed by the writing style. Englander substitutes the subject of love with Anne Frank or, more broadly, with Jewishness, and Carver's two American couples who sit around a table discussing love, with a secular Jewish couple in South Florida and an Orthodox Jewish couple visiting them from Jerusalem. Tensions rise when the conversation takes an unexpected turn and they play a game in which they guess which one of their Christian friends would hide them if there were ever a holocaust in America. The story shows the two couples' competitiveness in being more Jewish than the other; the ultimate proof of Jewishness resides in the game they play. In the end, the game turns one of the wives against her husband because, as the narrator suggests, 'this wife believes her husband would not hide her' (Englander *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* 32).

The second story, 'Sister Hills', differs greatly in style and content. The story is split into four parts covering the years from 1973 to 2011. It is a story about two families who settle in the West Bank area of Jerusalem at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War. Yehudit's daughter is sick, and she sells her daughter to Rena because she believes that Death will lose interest in her. The sale is conditional upon Yehudit being allowed to raise the girl until adulthood. Many years later, after Rena loses her husband and sons, she lays claim to Yehudit's child, Aheret, as her daughter. Rena's claim intertwines with philosophical and religious questions surrounding Judaism. When asked about the themes of the story in his interview with *Chicago Tribune*, Englander insists that it is not a story about Jews but about 'the ideas of

ownership of property and ancient contracts and what it means to live by the word of the Bible' (Englander *Nathan Englander Examines Identity*). Although there are several untranslated Yiddish words, as well as multiple references to Judaism and the Torah, included in the story, without explanation, the argument that Rena has with the rabbis and the discussion about the ownership of Aheret are accessible to readers who are not familiar with Jewish culture.

The topics of the Holocaust and violence against or by Jewish people are investigated in 'How We Avenged the Blums' and 'Camp Sundown.' The first story details how a group of Jewish boys in Brooklyn take a stand against some anti-Semitic thugs by learning martial arts from a janitor. The second story takes an unexpected turn when a group of elderly Jews at a summer camp suspects that one of the seniors is an ex-guard from a Nazi concentration camp. In the end, they punish him, and the burden of whether to report them or not falls on the protagonist, who is the camp's director.

'Free Fruit for Young Widows' is a complex, philosophical story that has three narrative layers: The first is a report, delivered using journalistic prose, of an event at the 1956 Sinai campaign in which Egyptian soldiers are mistaken for Israelis because of their identical uniforms. This narrative layer introduces the reader to the characters Shimmy Gezer and Professor Tandler. The second narrative layer becomes evident when, years later, Shimmy has a son called Etgar, and comes in the form of a series of dialogues about morality that evolve as Etgar grows older. The third is a flashback to Professor Tandler as a child survivor of the Holocaust, who returns home to find his nursemaid living in his house with her family. When Tandler hears that his nursemaid plans to kill him, he is forced to make a choice and ends up killing the whole family. On one level, it is a moral tale - a father tells his son to explain why he always gives free fruit to someone who almost beat him to death. On another level, the story engages with the reader's moral code: it puts the reader in a position to question Professor

Tindler's actions, given his background of experiencing war as a child and a surviving the Holocaust.

The rest of the stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk about Anne Frank* focus less overtly on questions specific to Jewish cultural identity and more on relationships and the search for self-discovery and fulfilment: 'Peep Show' focuses on a middle-aged man who is a secular Jew venturing into a New York peep show parlour where the line between fantasy and reality begins to blur; 'Everything I Know about My Family on My Mother's Side' is a search for stories from the narrator's family. It poses questions about how one might assemble one's cultural heritage from scraps of tales passed along from generation to generation; it asks if one can make sense of this patchwork pattern of tales and make it relevant to one's own life. 'The Reader,' finally, makes little mention of Jews, though it shares its title with the English translation of Bernhard Schlink's famous novel which deals with German national memory of the Holocaust. It reveals a special relationship between a writer who used to be famous and a reader who follows him everywhere on his book tour.

In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Englander stated that identity and its ownership are the themes that run through the collection, including the question of 'who owns the Holocaust, who owns memory, who owns truth' and that the concept of 'identity' contains multiple layers – 'religious identity, cultural identity, personal identity' (Englander *Three's a Charm for Nathan Englander*). His statement demonstrates that he is aware of the complex ways in which identities are constructed within specific national, religious and cultural contexts. Although Englander's writing in the collection is not likely to be considered avant-garde or experimental, the subject of Jewish identity is explored from different angles through a host of different writing techniques, making it a diverse and colourful collection. Jewishness is the theme of the book, and Englander himself points out that his stories are 'Jewish in thought and

Jewish in many elements' (Englander *Three's a Charm for Nathan Englander*). However, this does not restrict Englander to writing exclusively about Jewish culture and religion. When asked about his choice to use Jewish characters in his stories, he says, 'Who cares if the characters are Jewish? I don't. It would literally limit my creativity if I had to see my characters as Jews' (Englander *Nathan Englander Examines Identity*). This quote may seem to contradict the previous one, wherein he admits the Jewish elements have become the essence of many of his stories. Nevertheless, it implies that Englander does not purposefully use Jewish characters in order to portray his Jewish-related themes and other elements. Rather than, being Jewish himself, it might be against his nature to write stories that do not contain traces of his own Jewish mentality. As Judaism is an important, recognisable part of Englander's Jewish identity, it is hard for him to be recognised as an American writer without the Jewish label. Englander has described the inevitable categorisation of Yiddish or Jewish writers by society:

People want to group us together, but we've all had such different experiences as individuals. Jonathan Lethem's mother is Jewish, so is he a Jewish writer? Or Michael Chabon, who writes more about his Judaism now but who used to not write about it at all? On the other hand, when you mention Singer, that's where it switches for me. When you line it up across time, and you talk about Yiddish writers, and how story forms, from (Bernard) Malamud and Singer — it makes more sense to me. Then I can see it stylistically, and as part of that cultural tradition, and I can understand that. (*Nathan Englander Examines Identity*)

Englander points out the general inclination towards cataloguing Jewish writers together, despite the differences in their writing styles and personal experiences. Englander claims that a sense of individual is lost during the process, and that the selection of who to include in the 'Jewish writer' umbrella is questionable. However, it makes more sense to him when the Jewish writers are lined up chronologically together as part of the Jewish writing heritage and tradition. This quote illustrates one of the issues that come with identifying writers from another culture/religion: being Jewish or Thai does not constitute one's whole identity,

and the labels, put upon one by either publishers or media, do not define what or how one writes.

In conclusion, the discussion about Englander and his collection *What We Talk About When We Talk about Anne Frank* shows that the main theme of his short story collection is Jewish identity. Englander's interviews also show that cultural identity is not something one simply represents but, instead, something that one explores through themes that are strongly associated with that identity, such as the Holocaust, as well as themes that are often deemed universal. The result is less a portrait of a cultural identity than a collage of impressions that cannot easily be arranged into a single coherent picture and which interacts with other types of identity.

Some may argue that Thai and Jewish identities are vastly different. However, Englander's exploration of Jewish identity offers a fruitful point of comparison for the exploration of the Thai cultural identity central to this thesis's collection. As we have seen, Englander's strategy is not to give the reader any concrete definition of what Jewish identity is but to present a heterogeneous collection of stories that explore different aspects of Jewish identity. Some of his stories also test the boundaries of how much 'Jewishness' a story needs to contain for it to be defined as a Jewish story.

The following statement made by Englander best describes how writing about one's culture can lead to writing about something more universal than that:

I'd felt I'd better write a book without Jews, because people were saying my subject was Jews. And I realized that my subject was whatever it was — it was about human things, and it doesn't matter to me whether those humans are Jews. The point is, it took me a year of working through that novel [*The Ministry of Special Cases*] to understand that Judaism is not my subject at all (Englander *Nathan Englander Examines Identity*).

Conclusion

Each of these four texts highlights specific choices that I made when putting together *Thai Myths and Other True Stories*. I will return to these authors at the end of my commentary and assess these differences, in the context of my formal choices, writing strategies, and cultural representations, in detail. Before such an assessment is made, however, the reader should simply experience the fiction without any further ‘instructions’ about how to read or understand them.

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3 Part Three

THAI MYTHS AND OTHER TRUE STORIES

Arrival

Waves of hot air hit my face as soon as I step out of the plane. Even in an air-conditioned tunnel leading to the airport gate, the warm, dense air continues to press on my matted hair and sweat-soaked T-shirt. I pant while dragging my luggage up the tunnel and finally have long, deep breaths of cool air once I reach the airport gate. It is a temporary calm before the roasting temperature outside.

I know in advance grandma cannot make it to the airport, but her absence hits me harder than I thought. It is always our thing, picking me up and dropping me at the airport. When I see Uncle Chum and his wife at the arrival gate, I smile at them, but it is a smile of uncertainty and fear. I am about to face great changes in the weeks to come.

To Be a Backpacker (Or Not)

One can discover worlds within a world with just a step across the road. John recalled what he had read in some book a long time ago. He was standing under a blazing sun in Bangkok on the renowned Khao San road, the realm of backpackers. When he stepped out of the plane, the first thing that greeted him was the heat, and it packed quite a punch. He squinted at the guesthouse name on the reservation paper in his hand. His gaze wandered among the sea of overlapping signs hammered to the buildings on both sides of the street. The olive green rucksack on his sweat-soaked back weighed him down, and he felt a bit light-headed. He ignored the jet lag and started off.

He could tell it was a busy street by the amount of litter swept to the side on the pavements and gutters, remnants of wild nights full of street food and alcohol. He was startled by rats, some almost as big as cats, scurrying past him to the rusted drain pipes, and it made him question how much he could handle local food before he got diarrhoea. Apart from the hygiene issues, he could understand why this place became the first stop where most travellers would choose to begin their journeys. Guesthouses, cashpoints, bars and restaurants lined the street along with stalls of pirated DVDs, printed T-shirts, and wood-carved elephants. As he walked, he heard voices in familiar French and German. They looked comfortable with their surroundings, so he followed their route. He heard broken English from the Thai vendors and wondered how smooth the transactions could possibly be.

After checking the printed map and asking two passers-by for directions, John finally found the place. A giant, white, rectangular sign with a coconut tree on the background and the words 'Khao San Resort' was hung high above other signs. He had walked past the spot without noticing a narrow gap squeezed between two commercial buildings that turned out to be the

entrance with the name and an arrow written on a sheet of A4 paper. He hesitated at the entrance and checked on the person coming out of the guesthouse - a middle-aged white man in his khaki shorts and a white T-shirt carrying a rolled up magazine under his arm. He breathed a sigh of relief; he was afraid it was like one of those dodgy places with blood-stained bed sheets and a drug dealer at the end of the corridor.

When John showed up at the reception, there was a middle-aged Thai woman at the counter. A sour expression on her face was not a good sign, but he put on his best smile. He had read somewhere that he should try to haggle because everything sold to foreigners was overpriced, but the lady would not budge. Her narrow, slanted eyes conveyed a no-nonsense attitude. So, he just picked up the key and headed for his room.

The room was tiny but had its own toilet and shower room which was a blessing, John thought, as he put his backpack at the foot of a single bed and threw himself onto the mattress. He stared at the giant industrial fan overhead whisking the air in a gentle hum. He didn't know how long he had dozed off for, but when he opened his eyes again, the sunlight from the window was dimming. He propped himself up on his elbow and rummaged in his bag for his mobile phone. He dialled the number and waited.

'Hello?'

'Mum, it's John. I'm in Thailand.'

Silence.

'What the ...? Is this a prank?'

'No, I'm serious. Here, listen.' John stretched his hand with the phone through the gap of the curved metal lattice window. He held it there for a moment to transport the bustling sounds of the street and its people to Britain. Then he put the phone back to his ear and said 'See? I'm doing it now. Backpacking. Just like what I told you last Christmas.'

‘I merely suggested you do something before sailing straight to uni. But you went to Thailand? Without telling me? Are you mad?’ Her voice had got louder and higher.

‘Calm down, mum. I’m perfectly sane.’

‘If you’re just following your friends’ advice ...’

‘I’m not,’ he interrupted her. ‘I just want to find myself, you know, spending some time alone, exploring the world and other cultures.’ He tried to sound serious and convincing.

‘Seriously, just come back before something goes wrong.’ John could tell she was trying to suppress her anger and played the ‘worried-mom’ card instead.

‘Do you think I’m so incompetent that I can’t finish this trip?’, he teased her.

‘I just...do whatever you want. Don’t come crying home then when things go sideways.’

‘I won’t,’ he said tersely and hung up.

He was too restless to get back to sleep, so he picked up his mobile phone and wallet and headed back on the street.

John didn’t have any particular destinations in mind, and he guessed being a backpacker meant going wherever the road took you. So, he walked, took turns at random, and ended up on a night bazaar. He was overwhelmed by the warm smell of street food. John would have enjoyed more of the scene if his ears weren’t bombarded by the flying shouts of vendors and buyers around him. It could have been a normal conversation, but their loud, rapid speeches made him think of competitive bidders in an auction room. The ground was littered with food waste and dirty water pools that made him concentrate more on footsteps than contemplating the Thai lifestyle.

He stopped at a stall where an old lady sold various Thai desserts. He pointed at one and asked her how much they cost. ‘Arai na?’ she said, turning her face sideways to hear him better. He picked up a small, plastic-wrapped loaf of cake with one hand and showed his wallet with

the other. ‘Song chin ha sib,’ she said, giving him two fingers, spreading them apart before making a fist. He didn’t have a clue what it meant, but she kept making that gesture. He frowned and swore, considering walking away. His earlier conversation with his mother stopped him. She might never know about his struggle, but he ought to try, John thought. If he succeeded, he would have a story to tell, a good one, of how he was able to communicate with the locals despite the language barrier on his first trip outside Europe.

He looked around for help and decided to ask the vendors at the nearby stalls, but none of them seemed to speak English either. He was desperate and asked passing shoppers if they could be translators. His eyes swept along the aisles until he found a group of men in dark brown uniform walking towards him and the old lady. They didn’t carry guns and handcuffs like the Thai police he saw in the news, but he hoped they would be willing to help more than the other strangers. To his disappointment, not one of them spoke English. Even worse, they ignored him. The leading man – a fat bloke with an oily head – talked to the old woman like he was not there. The man never raised his voice, but the old lady looked more and more upset. First, she frowned, then her face became pale. She talked faster while rummaging through her belt pocket and showed him crumpled bank notes. The man in charge shook his head. Then suddenly the men started breaking things, flipped over the plates, and swept trays of desserts to the floor. John had a sudden urge to rush in and stop these bullies like in the movies, but his legs were rooted to the ground. He looked around. Many people just stood and stared, some averted their eyes and got on with what they were doing. The old lady was crying and begging, but they didn’t stop, not until they finished breaking everything. Then they just left, leaving John dumbfounded with a shrieking old lady.

He didn't know what to think about what had just happened. He thought he should comfort the old lady somehow but she just screamed at him and left. He looked around at the damage and the people. Then he left, too.

'No worry, Mister. Everything fine here,' said the policeman.

John had decided to go to the police station and insisted that the sergeant who took the case come to the crime scene and ask the witnesses. He had just taken a glance, had asked the neighbouring vendor and had told John not to worry.

'But the men in the uniform. They did all of this to the poor woman. You have to do something!'

'They do their job. Council police. No license. Now she cannot sell. Normal.'

'There must be something more than that,' John argued. 'They look like members of local Mafia.'

'Careful, Mister Calder. This is serious not funny. You cannot say that. If I ask old lady, what will she say?'

'She might say everything's fine, but that's because she's scared and ...'

'You worry too much. You understand what they say? No? Then you know nothing. Just forget. Go see temple. Many beautiful temple.'

The next day John found a group of young American tourists at one of the temples near the hotel. He never told them about his encounter with the locals at the night bazaar. He travelled with them to Chiang Mai in the north and Phu Ket in the south for two weeks. The group said goodbyes at the airport before the Americans set off to their gate. John didn't hesitate when he walked to one of the British Airlines counters and asked for the next flight to London.

Grandma

Grandma had got older, it seemed, without me knowing it. I had heard about her fragile health but had not seen it with my own eyes until I came to Bangkok. We hugged, she kissed my cheeks, and we held hands while walking to the house. I did not notice the shaking of her hands, at first, or her unsteady pace. I began to notice these little changes after my aunt and uncle told me the next day. She always acted strong, they said, refusing help from anyone. She would not even use a walking stick, they complained, because it made her look old, so I was their last hope. I knew it was not going to be an easy job, but I had to try.

It had been a week since my arrival in Thailand. I approached her in the evening around seven. She had just had dinner - a small cup of instant noodles. She no longer cooked, it seemed. She was watching her favourite Thai-dubbed Chinese soap opera. I waited until the commercial break was on before I sat on the floor next to her and put my head on her lap. I did this all the time when I was a kid, and the habit did not fade away as I grew up. She put her hand on my head and asked me what I wanted. She knew all my moves. I thought of beating around the bush for a while before mentioning the walking stick but then changed my mind. I approached the subject in a calm, careful, reasonable voice in fear of her sudden rage. She did not smile, but she was not mad at me either. In her mind, I had always been a child, no matter the age, and I was afraid that she would scold me for not knowing my place by telling her what to do.

When I finished talking, she just frowned and said she would think about it. I was really surprised by her response because it was exactly what I had been dreaming of – being listened to and treated as an equal. She had almost never treated me like an adult before. She really is getting old, older than I thought. Then I felt angry at her for no reason. She should have argued with me like she used to, and ultimately, she had always insisted on her independence to do

whatever she wanted. But then I looked at her closely, at all the wrinkles on her face, the sagging flesh on her arms, and her bony, long fingers. Age had gotten to her fiery spirit, and there was nothing I could do. I got what I wanted but at what cost? So, I cried until her lap was wet with my tears. She was still confused when I left her there, and I could not explain to her why.

Why Dead Fish Go with the Flow, It Asks

1

Wichai was supposed to be happy here.

Sairee beach, Ko Tao, was how most tourists would imagine paradise: sparse clouds on the light blue sky; delicate, white sand that hugged your feet as you strolled along the crescent beach while squinting your eyes from the burning sun above; gentle lapping waves that swept swimmers along the coconut-lined shore. A perfect holiday retreat if not for a woman's scream.

It was early morning. A few people on the beach were either jogging or taking a stroll. Wichai was lying on a wooden beach chair when he heard it. He opened his eyes but did not move. Then he heard the scream again, and again until he could not ignore the sound anymore. He had to find the source of the voice so that he could do what needed to be done to shut her up.

His joints creaked as he stood up, grabbed his walking stick leaning on the chair next to him, and started to walk towards the sound. People walked pass him, but he did not mind. He was not in a hurry to find whatever waited behind the screams, some horrible things for sure. He knew as a concerned citizen he should feel worried and showed sympathy but whatever lay ahead had already happened. Past Tense. Period. There was nothing else to be done but to acknowledge the facts and report them to someone. He already had his fair share of reporting, thank you very much.

The scene was surrounded by curious tourists with a woman in neon pink sport pants standing at the centre. Wichai was distracted by the woman's rant between sobs and moving hands so he did not see the bodies lying on the ground until the woman stepped out of the ring. The bodies were naked, male and female, both Westerners. Their pale skin had turned grey and judging

from their stiff bodies, they had been dead for at least a few hours. He knew what the fuss was about, so he should be on his way now. It was just another death among many he had seen in his life time, but he could not stop staring at the girl's body with blonde hair.

She reminded him of his daughter, Pilai.

Pilai did not have blonde hair or pale white skin but their similar age reminded him of the vitality of youth. It was not hard to imagine the energy packed in the slender body. The same energy ran through Pilai's veins, driving her to journey across countries. He imagined they shared the same adventurous spirit that overcame cautiousness. He warned Pilai not to take the risk, making a list of all the things that could go wrong, but she was stubborn. And here it was, the worst possible scenario for a teenage girl travelling abroad - killed and exposed for all to see.

It had been a long time since he had talked to Pilai.

There were traces of blood on the heads of both bodies. The young man's brown hair was plastered to his sunken skull by dried blood. The death blow to the head created a nasty deep hole. The girl's seemingly peaceful face contradicted the signs of violence on her body: bruises and scratches stretched across her dull grey skin, evidence of a struggle for life.

From the corner of his eyes, Wichai sensed that more and more people were gathering around, their feet stomping on the sand surrounding the bodies. So much for preserving the crime scene. He wondered where the police were, then he realised that Thai police's efficiency was not reliable, especially the ones on a small island like Ko Tao. But this was murder, a public display of tourist victims. He could already imagine the headline: 'Farang Backpackers Murdered in Ko Tao,' 'Murder in Paradise,' and so on. All eyes would focus on the case, and all the flaws of Thai justice system would be scrutinised and exposed. A few weeks later, though, things would go back to the way they used to be. Thai people were blissful in their

ignorance. It was just as the saying goes - Take your eyes to the farm and ears to the paddy field.

By the time the police finally arrived an hour later, the crime scene had already become a tourist attraction, and for that, it was a mess. Word had spread and in a few more hours he bet that all the locals on the island would have discussed and dissected every bit of information concerning the case. Yellow tape was strung around the perimeter but Wichai could hardly see any differences between the patch of sand on one side of the tape and the other.

One of the policemen saw Wichai and gave him a nod. He knew Wichai was an acquaintance of his boss, Lieutenant Mano. When Wichai arrived at the island two months ago, the police were suspicious of him at first because of his job at one of the biggest daily newspapers in Thailand. After a gift-wrapped bottle of Johnnie Walker Gold Label, though, their relationship developed smoothly.

His stomach suddenly growled. Wichai realised he had not had breakfast yet. His feet led him away from the crowd, but then he heard a voice calling out his name. He looked around until he saw a middle-aged man with a potbelly under a coconut tree's shade. He remembered the man. It was Ead, the owner of the café he had been visiting in the mornings. Wichai walked to him and saw the other two men next to Ead that he had not met before, a man with a goatee and a bald man.

'Sawasdee Krub, Koon Wichai,' Ead said, greeting him with two palms pressed together on his chest. Wichai did the same as Ead introduced his companions: The bald one was called Aek and the goateed Udom. They did not let the basic greetings between Wichai and Ead last long before asking about the crime scene. The three of them already knew that there were dead bodies on the beach but Wichai could tell they were hungry for more information.

'What a horrible way to die! Bashed on the head. Naked,' said Ead.

‘Poor kids. I wonder how they ended up here,’ said Aek.

‘There’s no mystery here. Two teenagers fucking on the beach without shame and someone decided to do something about it,’ said Udom.

Wichai winced at the remark.

‘Hey, they aren’t all like that. They’re just kids,’ said Aek.

‘But they are Dek Farang,’ said Udom. ‘They come from abroad and they do whatever they want. The boys are reckless and drunk most of the time, and the girls dress like sluts, wearing those two tiny pieces around and showing their bodies to everyone.’

‘You have a dog mouth, you know?’ said Ead.

‘Haven’t their parents taught them manners?’ Udom continued. ‘There’s no excuse for their attitudes and behaviours. No wonder someone couldn’t help himself and committed the crime.’

A flash of images of the blonde girl and Pilai runs through Wichai’s brain, overlapping until a rushed heat of anger rose inside him. He stepped closer to Udom, their faces less than a foot apart. Wichai did not raise his voice when he said each word slowly. ‘Shut the fuck up.’

The three of them were stunned. To them, Wichai was quiet and polite, a good mediator whenever there were bar fights or quarrels. At the moment, Ead turned out to be a conciliator. He said, ‘Wow, look at the time. I should get back to the café now before my hot-tempered son drives away the customers.’

Udom ignored Ead and said, ‘Or what?’

Wichai curled his fists by his side but said nothing.

‘Are you that Dek Farang’s father? No. What do you care?’ said Udom.

Wichai wanted to talk back but words failed him. And just when he thought he would use a fist instead, Ead stepped in and dragged Udom away, murmuring apologies and goodbyes.

Wichai closed his eyes and breathed deeply. As he calmed himself down he looked back at the bodies again before he left.

He asked himself, Why did he care? But no answer came.

2

A week later and still the news of the murder had not died down. In fact, it had become national news. An army of authorities and visitors swarmed the small island, spending money on guesthouses, ferries, and restaurants despite the locals' fear of losing distressed foreign tourists. Some of the local businessmen, including Ead, wanted the case to end well and soon so that things could go back to the way it was. Ead and some of the villagers asked Wichai to be involved in the case, despite his protest, in order to keep them up to date. He could not resist them for long before he attempted to have a meeting with Lieutenant Mano. Unfortunately, the chance never came since the police claimed they were too busy to answer any questions and that Lieutenant Mano often travelled inland to attend a meeting with his boss.

One evening when the sun almost set, Wichai was looking for a restaurant to have a small, quiet meal. His simple wish seemed to be out of reach when almost all the restaurants were packed with people. He finally found a vacant table at Chaba, a small restaurant near the police station, and he thanked the Lord Buddha for his good fortune as his stomach started to rumble. He was being shown to a seat when he realized that it was surrounded by four tables full of police officers. He felt uncomfortable being watched as he sat down at the table. The news of the notorious case had made the police suspicious and careful.

When he had nearly finished his meal, he saw Lieutenant Mano walk into the restaurant with his colleagues. Their eyes met, and etiquette required Wichai to stand and greet the man.

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Lieutenant Mano sent his colleague to their table as he greets Wichai and took a seat opposite him.

‘Long time no see, Wichai. How’ve you been?’

‘I’m fine. You?’

‘Busy as hell. The press are breathing down on our necks. The captain is whipping us to get faster results. More importantly, I’ve been home late almost every night and my wife is very vexed. If things go on like this, she might resort to having an affair!’ Mano laughed.

‘Any suspects yet?’ asked Wichai.

‘Careful there, Wichai. Are you interrogating me?’

‘No, of course not. I’m just curious. The sooner it ends the better, right? Don’t you want to go back to your usual routine?’

‘God, I miss the slow-paced paperwork now. It’s boring as hell but at least I have time to sip an iced tea, have a chat, even take a little nap. But don’t tell anyone that.’ Mano’s hearty laugh did not hide his shrewd eyes. Wichai did not want to get into any trouble with the lieutenant so he laughed, too.

‘How’s your daughter, Wichai? Are you two still not talking?’

Wichai paused for a moment. Mano knew his daughter was a sensitive subject. Wichai said, ‘Pilai was fine the last time I heard from my sister. I think it’s been ... six months since she moved to England.’

‘Huh, the same country the two bodies came from.’

‘So, they’re English?’

‘British, they say, but what’s the difference. You know, their government are making a fuss about our procedures. They even asked if they could send some top-notch investigators from

the so-called Scotland Yard to help.’ Mano made the air quotes gesture on ‘Scotland Yard’ and ‘help,’ rolling his eyes at Wichai.

‘But if it gets you closer to finding the killer, then an extra pair of hands would be great, no?’

‘Are you teaching me how to do my job?’ Mano’s light tone was gone. ‘Do you think my colleagues and I can’t handle this case?’

‘No, no, of course not. I just want to see the killer caught soon, and ... ‘

‘Don’t you think that’s what we’ve been trying to do for the past weeks? We don’t have time to please everyone. And anyone who says we’re not doing our jobs right can fuck off!’

The two of them glared at each other. The tension expanded until Mano excused himself and walked to his table. Wichai stared at the leftover food.

3

After his encounter with Lieutenant Mano, a stroll along the beach failed to clear up Wichai’s mind. As he entered his modest but well-kept bungalow, his mind was still swirled up by the murder, the villagers, the police, the dead girl and his daughter. The first four were out of his control but maybe he could do something about the fifth to ease his mind.

He turned on his computer and launched Skype. It must have been around noon in London, he thought. He did not have to wait long before his sister answered the call. They exchanged greetings before Wichai asked to talk to Pilai. When his sister disappeared, Wichai’s heart beat faster and he prayed that their conversation would not end up badly again.

‘Hi, Dad.’ Pilai appeared in a pair of pyjamas and unkempt, long, black hair.

‘Have you just woken up? Don’t you have classes to go?’ Wichai could not help stating the obvious.

‘No. It’s summer break,’ said Pilai with an irritated tone.

‘Okay. How about your study? Any problems? Anything you need?’

‘Fine. Whatever. Dad, I’m going to go backpacking in Europe for a few weeks.’

‘Alone?’

‘Yeah. Don’t worry. I know friends who’ve done it before. They’ve given me plenty of advice.’

‘I don’t think it’s safe for a young, Asian girl to travel alone. What about pickpockets and human traffickers? What if you need help?’

‘I can take care of myself. I’ve done some backpacking before.’

‘What? And you didn’t think of telling me?’

‘Shit. Fine. Would it help if I told you that I gave Aunt Jaan my travel plan and asked her not to tell you?’

‘Argh! Why won’t you listen to your father? You could have ended up in a gutter!’

‘Stop being paranoid!’ Pilai raised her voice to match Wichai’s. ‘This is why I never tell you things. I’m not a child anymore. And if you think I’m just like other dumb Thai girls to be chaperoned around then you don’t know me at all.’ The screen went dark.

Wichai stared at it for a long time. He sat there, oblivious to the creeping darkness and heat since he had forgotten to turn on the lights and ceiling fans. He could have sat there all night and forgotten about the world if a knock on the door had not startled him. The series of knocks were insistent and grew more violent every minute. Wichai shouted, ‘Go away.’ The person ignored him and kept knocking until Wichai gave in. He walked to the door and opened it. It was Lieutenant Mano, drunk and barely standing.

‘What are you doing here, Mano?’

‘About time you open the damn door, Wichai!’ Mano said and burped loudly. ‘I’m here to explain how hard it is to do our job. You reporters only judge, judge, judge, judge.’

‘You are drunk. Go home,’ Wichai said, trying to grab Mano’s shoulder but he shook his hand off.

‘I’m not a child. I’m a great police officer even when everything is fucked up.’ After that, he just mumbled words into the air. Wichai sighed and carried Mano’s slumping body inside the house to a sofa. He put cold water into a plastic bowl and returned to Mano with a small cotton towel, wiping his sweaty forehead and red face. When he finished, he let Mano sleep and called Mano’s wife, telling her not to worry about Mano: He would be spending the night at Wichai’s place.

Wichai woke up before sunrise and found Mano sitting with his head in his hands. Wichai gave him a glass of water.

‘You were really drunk last night,’ Wichai pointed out.

‘Yes, the throbbing head already told me.’

‘Why are you here? It’s the case, isn’t it?’

Mano hesitated then nodded.

‘I felt bad yesterday after talking to you. And the way you looked at me like I’m just another lazy, corrupt policeman.’

‘Well, are you?’ Wichai was taking a risk, but he could not help it.

‘Fuck you. I have mouths to feed. If I don’t take bribes or let the powerful men do what they want, my career is a dead-end.’

‘What about truth and justice?’

‘Only the rich and powerful can afford truth and justice. We’re just small fish in the sea, mate. Stop asking questions and go with the flow. That’s the only way to survive.’

Mano stood up and prepared to leave. Wichai considered Mano's words and asked cautiously, 'Does that mean someone rich or influential is behind the murder?'

'Maybe. I can't give you any details but maybe I said something last night, something about the Village Headman's son fight with the male victim the night before he died.'

Wichai wanted to ask more but Mano interrupted. 'Let it go and don't ever tell anyone about last night.' His usual threatening seemed more like a pleading to Wichai somehow. Wichai nodded.

'Don't worry. We always catch the bad guy in the end,' said Mano before he left.

4

It was better to know nothing than to know things you could not do anything about. Wichai was familiar with the tingling feeling at his fingertips that happened whenever he was on a lead. He would have researched all aspects of the case, found ways to approach the witnesses, followed the leads, and written the news piece to bring a sense of conclusion. Now that he was retired, the tingling sense found no release and he became more and more agitated. He did not know what to do with the bombshell Lieutenant Mano left for him about another suspect, the Village Headman's son. He couldn't ask other police officers without exposing Mano. The Village Headman, more commonly known as Phu Yai Gob, was influential enough to be guarded by a retinue of guards and flunkies that barred access to anyone that he was not in business with. His son, Dai, normally showed up after sunset surrounded by his friends, sauntering in and out of nightclubs.

It was the lead he could not hope to pursue until the day Phu Yai Gob walked into a small coffee shop.

It was seven o'clock in the morning when Wichai's steps took him to his usual place: a small, local coffee shop situated in a part of town where the buildings were still made of wood instead of concrete. The coffee shop had been open for almost half a century and had been in the hands of Chinese immigrants from the first generations to the third. Leewong's Coffee had long been the heart of local gossip for the islanders; one of the few places where tourists seldom went. It had taken him six months to be embraced by the local community and another three to be treated as an equal. As he entered the shop, he just nodded to the young man behind the counter, Ead's son, for some Oliang - a glass of sweet, black coffee.

Not long after he sat at his usual table, the one in the left corner facing the entrance, a steaming black liquid in a thick glass was put in front of him. Before he could take a swig, he heard footsteps at the front and saw that they belonged to Ead, Aek, and Udom, the three villagers he met at the beach after he found the bodies. They hesitated a moment, then Ead walked over to Wichai and the others followed.

'It's been a while, Khun Wichai,' said Ead.

'Yeah, sorry. Great coffee as always.' Wichai pointed at his coffee.

'Thanks.' A pause. Then Wichai broke the ice by turning to Udom and said, 'Sorry for being rude the other day.'

Udom was taken aback by his bluntness. He just murmured, 'Don't worry about it,' without eye contact.

'Udom has a big mouth,' Aed said, punching Udom's shoulder lightly. 'But he's an honest man. So, let's put it behind us.' He nodded in agreement and they joined him at his table.

They were talking about the weather and local gossips when Phu Yai Gob appeared.

Wichai watched him and his retainers order their coffee and take their seats and considered his options. He knew from experience that direct confrontation would not work. He could

provoke Phu Yai Gob into anger to reveal certain information, but his life could seriously be in danger if he did not play it right, especially when he no longer had a newspaper's credentials to protect him.

Then he saw an election flyer in one of the retainers' hand, and he knew what he had to do.

Wichai asked Ead to introduce him to the Village Headman. Ead was surprised but did it anyway. Wichai used all his charm to convince Phu Yai Gob that he was on his side and that he was an eager supporter of his re-election campaign. Wichai glanced back at his table and saw an uncomfortable look from Ead and Aek and a look of disgust from Udom. Wichai hid a pang of shame inside and continued to until he could approach the subject of the major's son without being too suspicious.

'Handling scandals is one of my skills. I know how to spin a story, and I'm happy to give my advice if anyone in your family finds himself exposed in a certain situation, if you know what I mean.'

Phu Yai Gob's men became tense and looked at each other while their leader's face barely changed except for a faint frown. He looked Wichai up and down. Wichai hoped that Phu Yai Gob would see him as just another sleazy, flattering fox who could be bought.

'What's the catch?' asked Phu Yai Gob.

'Let's just say I really like Ko Tao and the way you manage things around here. I might take up residence here and your blessing will really help smooth things out.'

'I'll think about it,' said Phu Yai Gob who waved him away.

Wichai walked back to his table. Ead, Aek, and Udom were staring at him. Anything Wichai said now would seem like an excuse, so he said nothing.

It was not long before one of Phu Yai Gob's men called him. It was midnight when the phone rang. Wichai squinted his eyes at the unfamiliar number on the screen. The voice told him to go to one of the well-known bars on the island as soon as he could manage. When he asked what they wanted him to do, the man only said to fix a problem.

Wichai arrived at the bar fifteen minutes later. It was not hard to figure out what kind of problem he was meant to fix. The bar was crowded with people, both Thai and foreigners but there was a small gap surrounding one table where four young men were sitting on chairs while a boy, not more than sixteen or seventeen years old sat on the floor with a bloody nose. Wichai walked up to them and before he could say anything, the young man holding a glass of amber liquid said, 'Did my father send you?' Wichai nodded. 'Well, what are you waiting for?' He pointed at the young man sitting on the floor. Wichai frowned, thinking of what to do next. The young man must be Dai, Phu Yai Gob's only son, the suspect of Ko Tao's backpackers' murder case. Clearly, the boy sitting on the floor had done something to piss off Dai, but Wichai was not sure how these things were handled.

One of Dai's friend stood up and approached Wichai. 'I can see you're new. We just want you to take this man to the hospital, pay his bill, and make sure he doesn't go to the police. Can you do that?' He said it slowly with a mocking tone like he was speaking to a child. Dai and the rest laughed. It took a lot of willpower for Wichai not to punch the brat in the face.

'What happened?' Wichai asked.

'Just a misunderstanding in the bathroom. Right, buddy?' Dai threw a fake punch at the boy's shoulder. The boy cringed.

'Show me how it happened,' said Wichai.

Wichai could tell they were puzzled by his request. ‘Are you deaf?’ said one of them. Another one added, ‘This smartass here used to be a journalist, right? Being nosy and arrogant is his trait, you know.’ They all laughed. Then Dai stood up and said, ‘Okay, guys, let’s show him how it happened. It’ll be fun. I’m sure our little friend here wouldn’t mind.’ Dai patted the boy’s head. They all stood up. Two of them put their arms under the injured boy’s armpit and supported his walk along the way.

After making sure no one was in the bathroom and ordering his men to stand guard outside, Dai started to enact the scene, pretending he was the victim who was showing the police how he was attacked. Everyone except the boy acted out so dramatically that it was almost like a parody of a stage play.

The scene started with the boy washing his hands at one of the sinks when the door was slammed open. Dai strode in through the door, complaining loudly about the place’s worn-out state and poor taste of music. He didn’t see a pool of water on the black ceramic-tiled floor, so he tripped. The tripping was acted in a slow motion, so Dai’s bottom hit gently on the floor. The boy turned to see Dai and was supposed to laugh but his lips were trembling, and his body was shaking for what was about to happen. Dai forced the boy to roar with laughter, but the boy only managed a dry laugh. When Dai told him to stop, he stepped slowly towards the boy and punched him once in the face. Then he told the rest of the gang to land a few blows to the boy’s face and body. Horror was apparent in the boy’s face and he kept begging for forgiveness, but the gang’s feet and fists were delivered mercilessly on his body. When Dai was satisfied he turned to Wichai and took a bow like an actor finishing his act.

‘Like I said, just a misunderstanding,’ said Dai. ‘He thought it was a joke. I showed him it wasn’t. Now we understand each other.’

Wichai considered what to do next. He pulled the boy to the corner and had a quiet conversation with him. There were occasional sobs and swear words but eventually the boy's shoulder slumped down in defeat. Wichai patted his back and turned his attention back to Dai.

'It's sorted.'

'Are you sure he won't go to the police?'

'I am.'

Dai opened the door for the boy and told the men to let him go. As soon as the boy and Dai's men walked out, Wichai closed the door before Dai could step out.'

'You and I are not done yet,' said Wichai.

'What the fuck?'

'Your problems won't always go away like this, you know. If you continue on this destructive path, your father's influence won't be enough to keep you out of trouble.'

'Who the fuck do you think you are? I don't know how dad brought you into this but you're crossing the line here!'

Strangely, Dai's threat felt pitiful instead of intimidating to Wichai, like a child's ranting excuses in front of his headmaster.

'I know about your fight with the Farang backpackers,' said Wichai.

Dai's face was suddenly pale. He stuttered. 'What? Who told you? Fuck! Who else knows about this? The whole island?'

'It's not out in the open yet,' Wichai assured him. 'But believe me, when the press catches wind of this, your name will be on the news headlines across the country. They'll love it, "the mob leader's son suspected of killing two tourists: will justice outlast his father's influence?" Anything you say will be twisted and turned against you, making you look more guilty, and unless you do something soon, the outside world will tear you apart.'

Dai was pacing around the bathroom, mumbling and cursing, until Wichai grabbed his wrist tightly. 'I can help you,' Wichai said. 'But I need to know one thing, and don't you dare lie to my face. Did you kill them?'

'I didn't. I swear. I just flirted with the girl and the guy tried to intervene, so we exchanged words, you know, showing him who's boss, but nothing happened after that.'

Dai's pulses were steady and his pupils were not dilated. Wichai believed Dai was telling the truth. He released Dai's hand.

'When the news of your involvement is out, I suggest you get ahead of the game and hold a press conference. Going through forensic tests to confirm your innocence is your best choice. That's all I have to say.'

Then Wichai walked out of the bathroom. Dai's men looked suspiciously at him but did not stop Wichai. He found the boy waiting by his car. He took the boy to a nearby private hospital, waited until he walked out with bandages on his nose and torso, and took the boy back to his home, a fisherman's hut. The boy's parents were distraught at the sight of their son. Wichai explained the diluted version of the truth and assured them that the hospital bills were taken care of. They just nodded without any questions or protests when they heard Dai's name. There was a moment when Wichai wanted to shake their shoulders, encourage them to fight back, but it had been a long night. Besides, Wichai reckoned Dai's extreme behaviours were common knowledge among the villagers.

The news of Dai's involvement in the case did get out as Wichai predicted. Phu Yai Gob contacted Wichai directly and begged him to help with the press. Wichai already got the truth

out of Dai and he wanted nothing more to do with either of them, but there was a life-threatening risk if Wichai refused to help them. So, Wichai compromised by giving them advice on the phone. The pressure from the press and social media forced Phu Yai Gob to prove his son's innocence by comparing Dai's DNA to the one found at the crime scene. The result exonerated Dai but public opinion continued to be against him and assume his guilt. As a result, anyone associated with Phu Yai Gob and Dai became rotten fish and was shunned from society. This included Wichai.

Two months after Wichai's encounter with Mano, Wichai bought a newspaper and learned that the police had finally got their men. He bought more newspapers and checked online sources, but they all reported the same thing. The press release detailing the suspects' crimes was straightforward; apparently, there was a full confession from the accused. Saw Lo and Way Pia, two Burmese labourers, and their friend Mo had been smoking and drinking on the beach on the night of the murder. Then Mo left the group on his motorcycle to his girlfriend's house. The murder that supposedly happened afterwards was supported by partial DNA samples collected from the crime scene and security camera footage from the nearest convenience store. In the eyes of the police, the case was closed and everyone got their justice, though some people considered the two Burmese scapegoats and various agencies offered them help. Not long after that, Saw Lo and Way Pia withdrew their confessions and denied all charges against them. In the world's eyes, the corruption in the Thai justice system had won yet again. Wichai was not sure what to think about the case anymore. It was strange, finding out the facts from the newspapers and social media like other people. He used to be in the inner circle, knowing things before the public and selecting pieces of news that would enthrall the reader most. Wichai the Editor had gone, and Wichai the Retired did not have the power or the will to chase after the case anymore.

He looked at the photos of the suspects again. The two Burmese men looked tired, their scrawny bodies and slumped shoulders invoked sympathy. One could picture them behind bars, poor immigrants whose language barriers made them perfect scapegoats. Besides, the DNA evidence was circumstantial, but then Wichai remembered how messy the crime scene had been. Even if the two Burmese had murdered the backpackers, there was no concrete evidence or witness that could prove that they did it.

Wichai's thoughts wandered in his head while his feet brought him to the beach right at the spot where he had found the bodies. The yellow tape had gone. There was no smudge of blood on the patch of sand in front of him anymore. He figured the blood-soaked sand had been dug out and analysed; any rocks or logs picked up for DNA tests, sand holes filled again by the tide at night after everyone had gone. The world went on without the dead. It was as if nothing had ever happened.

He looked at the peaceful beach with a troubled heart. Each newspaper story gave the illusion that a conclusion had been reached. Once the accused were sentenced, the news of the trial was replaced by the latest news of a superstar couple's break-up.

But Wichai was stuck on this island, alone with nothing important to do. He missed the tense, bustling atmosphere of the office, the filing deadlines, printing plants, and more importantly, the following of each story's thread to the end of the line. Sometimes it had been frustrating when he was stopped before he'd gotten to the bottom of a particular story, but a new thread of a new story would soon occupy his mind and time instead. Without these tangible threads, life seemed pointless. It was the backpacker case that had stirred him awake and made Wichai's life move forward again. Now, though, he did not know where he stood among these threads anymore. At this stage, he would normally have an opinion on which side he was in concerning the case, but now he was still standing in the middle of a junction. He could not make peace

with one opinion and decided to go with the flow. Maybe there was no way to know who killed those poor kids, no sure way to know anything.

He looked at the sea waves and let his mind go wherever it wanted.

You still have Pilai, a little voice in Wichai's head said.

A daughter who hates her father and won't speak to him, Wichai argued.

You're still her father. Your love for her hasn't stopped, has it? The voice argued back.

No, but we can't have a conversation without it ending in a fight. I can't understand her.

No, but you have to try. Sometimes you can only try and hope for the best. Your ego must die before you can go with the flow. Be in tune with your daughter.

Wichai nodded to himself and walked back to his house. He felt like he was in a trance. That afternoon, it was as if his body was possessed by fate, doing things he would not normally do. He watched his own hands turn on the computer, open a web browser to buy a plane ticket, and click 'pay' for a return ticket to London. He had imagined this moment to be hard and awkward. The willingness to be the first to say sorry and make amends rode over other feelings. During the less-than-ten-minute booking process, there was none of the anxiety which usually bothered him whenever he called his daughter, Pilai. It was a good sign, and better yet, it would be a surprise.

Wichai emailed his sister about his decision and insisted that she kept it a secret. He still needed a few weeks to prepare visa documents and to cancel his rent contract, but he told her he would be there soon. He promised that he was ready to be a committed father again.

On the day of his departure, he brought his packed suitcase to the front door and put the plane ticket and passport on the counter. While he was drinking a cup of coffee, someone knocked on the door. He opened the door and found Ead, Aek and Udom. Before Wichai could greet them, Ead interrupted him.

‘Something terrible happened, Khun Wichai. Please come with me now.’ Ead grabbed his hand and pulled it. Wichai resisted.

‘This isn’t a good time Ead. I’m leaving.’

‘We can talk later. My son was in an accident.’ Ead’s hand still held Wichai’s tightly.

‘We’re wasting time here,’ Aek said. ‘The driver is getting away as we speak.’

‘What happened?’

‘It was a hit and run, near Ead’s café just five minutes ago,’ said Udom. ‘The police are going to be late, we know that, and they’re useless. But you, you know what to do, right?’

It was not long before Wichai made up his mind. Fate had a strange sense of humour, he thought. He grabbed the walking stick next to his suitcase. He closed the door gently while the morning sun shone on the counter and the deserted passport. Maybe his daughter could wait a little longer, he thought.

Bedroom

My room had not changed since I left it a year ago. Grandma said she had someone clean the room weekly, but the cleaning did not include inside the wardrobe and under the bedsheet. On the night I arrived, I found the room dark and musty. The stuffy smell in the wardrobe hit my nose when I tried to find fresh underwear and pyjamas, but they were far from fresh: the light-coloured ones had turned yellow and they were all crumpled. I had always hated the musty smell of clothes left too long in the closet, but I had no choice at the time. Then there was the matter of lifting up the duvet. There was no crease in the sheet, but the smell was as bad as the closet. I picked up a small, silk blanket folded next to the pillow and began ‘thrashing,’ sweeping the surface left and right the way I would with a broomstick. I still don’t know if it helps clean the sheet, but I picked it up watching grandma every night. It also helped with my fear of having tiny, white cockroaches that I often imagined crawling on my skin. I had seen the creatures a few times before when I was in elementary school, and the image had been stuck in my head since.

Once I turned off the light and lay on top of the bed, my eyes stayed open for a while. The windows of my bedroom faced an intersection, exactly at the point where the street’s vertical line met the horizontal. Some people warned grandma that a T-junction house was considered bad Feng Shui, but grandma always told them not to worry; the main entrance didn’t face the junction directly and she had someone put a Bagua mirror on the fence to drive evil spirits away as a measure of precaution. Even so, the stretched shadow on the ceiling often appeared in my dream as dark demons. I used to have nightmares about them until grandma told me that as long as I was a good girl, the demons would leave me alone. I believed that for a long, long time.

Hide and Seek

‘Don’t play hide and seek at night or a ghost will take you away,’ Walee tells her son before leaving at six in the evening. Nop does not believe his mother but says nothing. He looks at his grandmother who is watching her favourite soap opera in the living room. He knows her eyes won’t be leaving the screen for another two hours, so he decides to read a book. The study room at the back of the house faces the backyard and the pond. He opens the window to let in the night's breeze, picks up Thai Junior Encyclopedia Vol. 21 from a shelf, and sits on a soft, leather armchair.

A voice breaks the silence.

‘Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a princess named Pailin whose life was full of happiness.’

‘Idiot.’ Nop can’t help interrupting the story.

‘What?’

‘There’s no way anyone’s life is full of happiness. It’s absurd.’

‘Well, maybe she’s a special princess. Being a princess, she can have everything she wants,’ the voice argues.

‘Is she a human?’

‘Well...’

‘Then she definitely has problems like others. Everyone is miserable. It’s a fact of life, just as the Buddha said. And what with the name Pailin? If she lives in a faraway land, she can’t have a Thai name,’ Nop speaks confidently.

‘But I like “Pailin.” It’s a good name - Sapphire. Why can’t she have a Thai name?’

‘We only have Thai royalty here, duh. Thailand only. And if you really want her to be a princess, you have to use “Her Royal Highness,” and proper royal words. All the nouns, verbs, et cetera.’

‘It’s my story. I’ll do whatever I want with it. Why can’t you just stop being a smart ass for once and keep reading your book.’

‘I could have, but someone broke my peaceful silence a minute ago with her squeaking gibberish.’

‘Oi! You’re such an annoying brother.’

‘Then shut up and let me read my book!’

Silence.

Two minutes later, the girl continues her story.

‘Her Royal Highness Princess Sarah with blonde hair was always happy because she had a cat as white as snow, the proudest, most beautiful cat in the kingdom.’

‘Huh...And now there’s a cat, eh?’ Nop can’t help making a remark after a sigh. ‘Why can’t you just leave me alone, Fah?’

‘I thought you liked my stories,’ Fah says, pouting.

‘I do, even if most of the time they don’t make much sense to me,’ says Nop. He starts pacing around the room, flustered, and finally says, ‘It’s you who’s driving me crazy.’

Fah’s pouting lips begin to tremble. ‘Why? What did I do wrong?’

‘Do you really want me to list all your flaws out loud?’

‘I can’t change who I am, can I?’

‘No, but you can stop all the pretending and childish stuff and grow up.’

The girl goes quiet, which is unusual for her, so quiet that Nop is afraid she is going to disappear into thin air at any moment. Then she looks up at him, long and hard, and he feels

embarrassed and ashamed for what he has said. He forgets that the girl in front of him is just like other ordinary, annoying girl. Because she is not.

'If you want me to go away, just say it and I'll be gone,' Fah says quietly.

'I didn't mean that, it's just...'

'It's time for me to go anyway. But first let's play hide and seek,' Fah says with a decisive voice.

'What? No! Mum said...'

'Hmm...yes, we should,' Fah interrupts Nop, as she always does. 'I'll hide and you'll find me. You always do.'

'Be sensible. It's the middle of the night. Mum said I can't go outside at night, especially not near the pond.'

'Are you a chicken, Nop?'

'No, it's just silly and stupid and I'm too old for this.'

Fah pretends she does not hear his protest.

'Great. Don't look. Count to one hundred and find me.'

As she runs out of the room, Nop hears the girl mumble. He only catches the words 'cat' and 'happiness' before she disappears. He pretends not to care, keeping his eyes on the pages in front of him, but his mind wanders. He can't help counting, one-two-three until he reaches one hundred. He opens his eyes and everything looks the same. The perforated, lace curtains billow as the breeze catches them. He smells jasmine and he wonders where it comes from since there is no jasmine bush nearby. He stands up, puts the encyclopedia back on the shelf, and walks around the house. He sees only his grandmother on the sofa who is watching a gum commercial with her eyes closed. He checks every room in the house, but the girl is nowhere to be found. He walks back to the study room and looks out the window. The light from the house sheds

little light on the dark surface of the small pond in the garden, and the floating fog hides the reflection of the starry sky above. Nop stares at the misty pond until his eyes blur, then in a flash, he catches sight of dark hair and white frock. With the sight comes a faint smell of jasmine, and he hesitates. Eventually, his curiosity overcomes his doubts, and he leaves the room and steps into the dark world outside.

Walee comes home at half past ten. She sees her mother sitting in front of the television with her eyes closed. She puts her finger under the old lady's nose and thanks the Lord Buddha that there is still breath in the frail body. She walks through all the rooms in the house, but she cannot find Nop. Her pace becomes faster as she looks for him outside the house; around the pond, in the garden, along the metal fences. She circles the house a dozen more times, looking in every nook and cranny but all to no avail. She wakes up her mother, Tiwa.

‘Mum, have you seen Nop? I can’t find him.’

‘Huh. Isn’t he in the study room?’

‘No. I’ve checked everywhere.’

‘He’s thirteen, stop worrying.’

‘Of course, I’m worried. He’s my son.’

‘I’ll go upstairs and pray for his return in the worship room. I know a sacred prayer or two.’

Tiwa takes her time climbing up the stairs, humming a lullaby song Walee used to hear when she was a child.

Walee wants to scream at her mother for being so calm during an emergency. She does not believe that superstition can help her find Nop.

Another search turns out to be useless, but at the last moment before she gives up and calls the police, Walee hears a faint sound near an ixora bush beside the pond. She hurries in the

direction of the sound and finds Nop rocking back and forth, sobbing and murmuring to himself. She is surprised to see him there as she has walked past the bush several times but heard and saw nothing. She casts away her doubts and focuses on comforting her son who is shaking like a leaf.

When she takes Nop inside the house, Walee hears a clattering of pots and pans in the kitchen. She finds Tiwa making soup on the gas stove. She does not look surprised to see Nop and Walee in the kitchen, and she continues her cooking. Once it is done, Tiwa puts a bowl of steaming chicken soup in front of Nop, but he just stares at the floating vapour. Only after several threats does Nop finally give in and take a spoon. When he has emptied the bowl, Walee's interrogation begins.

'What happened, Nop? I was worried sick, looking for you everywhere.'

'I was playing hide and seek, but I couldn't find Fah.'

Walee is silent for a moment before she says, 'That's not funny. We've talked about this.'

'No, really. I talked to Fah in the study room and she asked me to play hide and seek with her. I didn't want to but then she was gone and I knew I had to find her. I'm sorry.'

'I'm not angry with you because you broke the rules,' Walee says before she lets out a long sigh. 'Fah's gone and you talk like she's still around. And you were missing for hours! I couldn't find you anywhere. I swear I even looked around the ixora bush where I found you.'

'But I was behind the bush the whole time. How could you not see me?'

'It must have been Fah's ghost,' says Tiwa with an absolute certainty in her voice. Then she says, 'They say a ghost can hide a person from anyone's sight. That's why I prayed a special prayer to ask our ancestors to protect you and reveal your location.'

'What ghost?' Nop looks confused.

'Your sister's ghost, of course,' Tiwa says.

'Shut up, mother!' Walee raises her voice to Tiwa before turning to Nop. 'There is no ghost and there is no Fah anymore. She is dead, lost and gone forever. Why can't you accept that?'

'But she's not a ghost,' Nop insists. 'She's as real as you and me and grandma, and I'm not crazy!'

'Ghosts come back sometimes, you know,' Tiwa says. 'After your grandpa died, he came to see me for a few times. The only regret I have is I should have asked him for lucky numbers to win the lottery.'

'Mother! How can you say that?'

'I'll say whatever I want.' Tiwa turns to Nop and says, 'Now go upstairs and take a shower. You look like a stray dog.'

Nop slowly walks upstairs with his head down while Walee and Tiwa continue their talk.

'Why did you keep saying it was a ghost, Mum?'

'Why not? Don't you believe Fah is somewhere out there, even as a ghost?'

'No, and you shouldn't encourage Nop to think like that.'

'You don't believe in ghosts and superstition? Fine. But I do what I believe in and I believe in what I do, just as the saying goes. There's nothing wrong with that'

'You're unbelievable! Don't you see Nop is hallucinating? He might be going crazy.'

'You worry too much again,' Tiwa snaps at Walee. 'Believe whatever you want. I'm going to bed now. All the praying and arguments are exhausting.'

Nop hears their conversation, leaning against the stairs' hardwood handrail. He retreats to his room when Tiwa walks up the steps. He takes a shower, puts on new clothes, and sleeps until dawn arrives with the sound of sparrows twittering by his bedroom window. When he wakes up, he goes to the study room and sits by the window for a long time, staring at the pond. Before he leaves, he sees something that makes him smile: a white Siamese cat with black ears

and tail, looking at him across the pond. Her turquoise eyes follow him as she circles the pond to sit under his window. He winks at her and she meows back at him before dashing behind the ixora bush.

Naak of Phra Khanong

During the reign of King Rama VI, there was a happily-married couple who lived by the Phra Khanong canal: Maak the husband and Naak the wife. After a brief blissful life of marriage Maak was conscripted into the army whilst Naak was with child. Maak was sent to battle and was seriously injured. While he recovered elsewhere, Naak's belly grew larger and larger until it was time to fetch a midwife. The baby's feet were where the head should be, and so the labour was difficult and filled with pain. The pain was too much and Naak took her last breath while the baby was inside her. Her death frightened the villagers for Tai Tong Klom was one of the most violent ways to die and would create a horrifying ghost.

The news of Naak's death failed to reach Maak, and when he returned home, he found his wife and newborn baby waiting. Maak's life was fulfilled and he ignored villagers' ridiculous calim that both his wife and child were ghosts. Those who had warned him were later found dead, no doubt spooked by Naak's ghost. One day, while Naak was making Nam Phrik on the porch, she dropped a lime on the ground. She was unaware, while reaching her inhuman, long arm to pick it up, that Maak saw everything. He was horrified and realized he needed to find a way to escape.

One night, Maak told his wife he needed to relieve his bladder. He walked down the steps and away from the house to the toilet shed. A big, earthen jar full of water stood in front of the shed. He had drilled a hole on the jar earlier and had plugged it with a piece of cloth. He removed the cloth and ran away, hoping that it would tricked Naak into thinking he was using the shed. It was sometime before Naak got suspicious, came down the house to check on Maak, and learned that he had fled. She searched for Maak and chased him until he hid behind a Blumea bush – one of the plants ghosts were afraid of. Angry and frustrated that Maak was out

of reach, Naak took her revenge on the villagers. Maak sought refuge at Wat Mahabut hoping that the temple's holy ground would keep Naak away, but Naak was too powerful for mere monks to handle. Naak's notoriety spread across the country and with it came dozens of ambitious witch doctors. None of them was able to defeat her until the final, most powerful witch doctor was able to stop her by trapping her soul in an earthen jar.

That was the end of the story, or so they said.

Some say the earthen jar lay at the bottom of the canal for a few years before some villagers' net brought it up to the surface. The seal was broken and Naak's spirit was freed again. The haunting resumed and the villagers lived in fear until a renowned monk came. It was said that Somdet Phra Phutthachan, more commonly known as Somdej Toh, had magical powers and sacred amulets. It was said to be a fierce battle of forces between good and evil, but the monk eventually won. He told the villagers not to be afraid of Naak's spirit anymore. They asked for proof and he showed them a thin, flat piece of bone with strange markings. It was Naak's frontal bone with her spirit enclosed under charms, he said. The Ghost of Phra Khanong was gone and the villagers have lived in peace since then.

Naak

I see changes throughout the centuries, yet essentially, people are the same. Love, greed, anger, and passion still govern the way people live. Phra Khanong used to be an accursed place where only desperate villagers lived.

The legend of my haunting spread far and wide into songs and stories of a vengeful spirit and her undying love for her husband, Maak. The most recognised scene people remember is of me sitting on a pier by the river singing a lullaby.

‘Oh la he, oh la huk,

Duangjai kondee lukja,

Deuklaewna, saengdao sawang sawai,

Duangjai yaguan maelei,

P’Maak, hua-og mia rao,

Avon alai ram ha,

Peerangpai, maikei penhuang penyai,

Mayiew maya, Maak ja,

Oh la he, oh la huk,

Nawnsia jongnawn lukja,

Pawpawma laewmaejaploog,

Luknoi gloyjai teun aei.’

The song was not just for the baby. It was a call for my husband, a conscripted soldier, to come home. It was my promise to wait for him, even in death. He did finally come back, for a while, before an incident involving a lime made him realise that my child and I were ghosts. When he left, all hell broke loose. The more you loved, the more you hated, as the saying went. It was a wild, dark time for me. Not anymore.

They built me a shrine to appease my spirit at Wat Mahabut, where people believed my spirit was vanquished by Somdej Toh, the most famous monk of the time. They imagined a supernatural battle between good and evil with magic spells and spiritual powers. I wish I could explain to them it was just a serious, long conversation. A heart-to-heart talk; negotiations that led to an agreement. I regretted the havoc I had created with my haunting and had come to terms with life as a ghost without my beloved Maak. The monk, in turn, promised that no witchdoctors would bother me again once he told them and the villagers that I would not cause troubles anymore. All was well. Then, the legend spread by word of mouth and a shrine was erected to appease my spirit. I was hoping for a modest but graceful clay statue. Instead, the bronze statue sitting in a lotus position was bald and had a bland face. Fortunately, someone with a woman's touch added a black, straight, wig, drew a pair of eyebrows, and painted the lips red. The result was far from professional but at least it was an improvement. As time went by, the offerings also improved. Beautiful dresses and cosmetic goods became popular among worshippers. Others would add little baskets of toys for my stillborn baby. As far as the daily existence of a spirit went, it was not as unpleasant as I thought. To see various people with different problems coming to the shrine for blessings and guidance amused me. How they worried so much about little things puzzled me. Even so, when it came to love and romance, I could not help but feel for them. Perhaps the shrine's medium could sense my empathy for people in love because more than half of the shrine's visitors were couples and young women. None stuck in my mind

except one couple: a man whose face was similar to Maak called Ming, and Noon, a woman who would do anything for him just like I used to. I observed them a few times. I could hear their prayers but there was a limit to what a spirit could do to save a relationship.

Today, the couple appeared at the shrine. Ming coughed when he walked past a lingering cloud of incense smoke. Beads of sweat clung to his forehead until Noon wiped them away with her handkerchief. He pushed her hand away and walked briskly to the shrine as if to get it over with. Noon pursed her lips, held on to the handkerchief tightly, and almost cried but did not. She paid an old lady at the table nearby for two sets of candles and unlit incense sticks and followed him.

They sat on their heels in front of the shrine with a candle and three incense sticks, lit and ready for prayer. Their eyes closed, praying. After a few seconds, he finished. He waited and waited for Noon to finish praying. She was frowning with concentration. He lost his patience after a few minutes had passed. 'How many wishes are you making, Noon? A thousand?' Ming's remark was loud enough for others to hear. Noon's cheeks turned red, but she kept her eyes closed. When she finally opened her eyes, he snatched the candle and incense sticks from her hand and dumped them on a bowl full of ashes in front of them. He bolted across the lawn without waiting for her until they were back at the temple's courtyard.

'Do you want some Coke and ice, Ming?' she asked tentatively.

'Yeah. And a bag of crisps, too,' said Ming, not looking at Noon.

The whole scenario did not surprise me, but today it seemed like Ming and Noon had reached a breaking point. I watched Noon walk swiftly to the nearby kiosk like a loyal servant, like me in the past; so ready to please her loved one. So much love to give with only little gratitude in

return. I watched her and saw myself running around the house, making sure Maak had everything he wanted close at hand after coming back home from the war. He was pleased and never suspected that I was already dead, that the baby in the crib was just a husk of an infant that would never grow. I was the ideal wife with great love and loyalty to my husband without ever considering a probable, bitter ending if he found out the truth. In the end, the monk helped me come to terms with who I was – a ghost. When that happened, I could see the chain that bound me to the world. It was not Maak. It was my refusal to let him go. In the end, I felt lighter, but I was still embedded in the world.

I might never know the reason why my presence still lingered in the world of the living, but I was put here, now, to protect and to guide those in need. So, the question was what to do with the couple.

While Noon was queueing for her drinks and snacks, I appeared behind her as a withered, old woman with a grey bun.

‘Aiyah! Too hot for an old woman like me. Oh! The world is spinning.’ I pretended to faint.

Noon turned around and stopped me from falling.

‘Auntie, are you all right? Do you need a doctor?’

‘No, no. I just need to rest.’

She took me back to the bench where Ming was waiting. He did not move from the bench until Noon signalled him to stand up and helped me.

‘Could you get a bottle of water for me, Ming?’ she asked.

‘Eh? Okay. And where’s my cola and crisps?’

‘I had to help Auntie here. Could you please get the water now?’

He walked away, then came back with a bottle of water which he gave to Noon. Holding a bag of crisps and a can of cool cola, he looked at me, then at Noon and asked, 'Is she all right now? We should get going. I have to pack my bags.'

She breathed in and out deeply. 'I'm staying with her for a while. You can wait in the car, Ming.'

'Don't take too long, Noon,' he said then walked away.

I watched her put her face on her palms and stayed in that position for some time while I was drinking water.

'Sorry to bother you,' I said. 'You can leave now. I'm feeling better.'

'It's all right. We can sit together here for a while.'

'But if your boyfriend is in a hurry...'

'It's fine. He can wait. He should learn how to wait.'

Noon closed her eyes. I saw her thoughts drift in the air. The flashing images of the thoughts were grey, and blurred unlike the clear, colourful ones she made in her prayer earlier. One of the perks of being a worshipped spirit is that I was able to sense people's wishes and desires. These flashes of grey could be sensed more than seen.

'Is everything fine, my dear?' I asked.

'Yeah, yeah. Fine. Yes,' she said.

'I'm old but my ears are fine. If you need someone to talk to, I'm here.'

She looked me in the eye, held my gaze for a few seconds then looked away and sighed.

'I think we're fine. I AM fine,' she said. 'I don't know. It's normal for couples to argue, isn't it?'

'Yes, I suppose. But is it always like this?'

'Not always. But it's getting worse. Not by me. No, I'm as cool as I've always been.'

‘Seems like he doesn’t want to be here,’ I said.

‘He’s just in a hurry. He’s leaving to study abroad tonight, and we promised each other to wait,’ she says.

‘Are you sure?’ I noticed a flash of anger in her eyes but when she saw my genuinely-concerned face, she stopped herself from lashing out at me.

‘I know I can wait for him but I don’t know any more if he’s going to come back.’ Noon paused before she said, ‘I asked Mae Naak at the shrine if Ming and I are going to make it, if I should wait, if he will come back. If she’s really a powerful spirit like other people say, will she grant me my wishes?’

‘What do YOU think?’ I said.

Noon was silent for a moment. Eventually, her still expression twisted into a frown and quivering lips. She then started to cry and her whole cheeks were wet and red like boiled shrimps. I let her cry before I stood up and said, ‘All the prayers in the world wouldn’t help if his heart’s not with you anymore. Don’t spend your life waiting for him. He’s not the same guy you fell in love with. I suspect he’ll be gone from your life forever.’ Then, I walked away.

I found Ming at the car park and appeared before him as a young woman wearing blood-red lipsticks and knee-length black dress. I found the man’s car and knocked on the driver’s window. When his smirking face appeared, I said ‘Wanna go to a magical place?’

The Encounter

It feels like forever since the last time I was brave enough to take a leak at night outside the monk's chamber. In truth, it has been only a week ago that Joke, one of the temple boys, was haunted while he was in the toilet shed. Some of the strands of his hair have turned grey, and he is still spooked by the slightest movements and sounds. The constant fear of night time has kept the other temple boys and me on edge. Even the monks have become more tense and seem worried when their morning and evening prayers are interrupted. The temple's door has slammed shut by itself several times, while most nights, dogs keep howling. All their sacred chanting is to no avail. The abbot has asked for help from other temples. They said they would send someone.

The sun is burning on my neck as I sweep the leaves on the temple's courtyard. I hear a cough and I turn around. A monk appears at the gate and asks, 'Is this Wat Mahabut?' I say yes and ask who wants to know. His answer sends me down on my knees, palms pressed together on my chest. It is impolite to stare but I look up and have a quick glance at the person I presume is that someone.

I have always imagined Somdej Toh to be very old yet fierce and burly, like the name 'Toh' suggests, surrounded by servants and followers. Instead, the slender monk in his forties seems to be alone. He looks too ordinary to be one of the most respected monks in the country.

I stay quiet until his smooth voice says, 'Could you take me to the abbot?' I regain my composure and lead the way. When we reach the abbot's chamber, I wait at the foot of the stairs while he talks to the abbot. I am sure he is sent here to help with our supernatural problem and I am curious as to how he is going to handle the problem. Some say he is a collector of holy artefacts. Others claim he has Kuman Thongs – ghost boys kept for good fortune and protection.

I imagine a trunk full of Kuman Thong dolls, holy water bottles, blessed uncooked rice, and other magical objects, but there is only a large, dark brown, cotton rucksack on his shoulder. An umbrella of the same colour protrudes from the bag. He looks just like any other monk on pilgrimage.

He comes back down after an hour and beckons me over.

'Luang Ta said I should tell you if I need anything. Is there a little-used building at some distance from the main temple cluster?'

'There's an old pavilion near South Gate that we rarely use. Why? Are you going to fight the ghost there?'

A little smile appears at the corner of his mouth. 'Are you afraid of ghosts?'

'Yes, but people say you're the best. So, I'm not afraid.' I sound arrogant, I know.

'Why don't you come by at midnight and see how it's done?'

I realise I have just dug my own grave. My temple boy's honour prevents me from running away then and there. I hide my panic inside and smile at him. 'I'll be there.'

I arrive at the pavilion before midnight with a bag of blessed, uncooked rice, candles and a spool of holy thread. I do not know the proper set-up for a ghost banishing ceremony, so I just draw square lines on the ground, put four lit candles around the corners, and string the holy thread along the square lines. When Somdej Toh arrives, he looks at the setup and then at me with a raised eyebrow. I just shrug.

Once Somdej Toh seats himself in the middle of the holy square, he begins chanting. Following three *Namo Thassa*, the Pali verses sound different than those I have heard before. They are shorter than Morning/Evening Prayers but longer than the Buddha-praising mantra. I find out later that it is a special incantation called *Chinabanchorn Kata* which is said to be

invented by Somdej Toh himself. During the chant, my curiosity about the unknown spell is gradually replaced by a foreboding feeling with goosebumps on my arms as a proof that something unnatural is about to happen.

First comes the sound of rustling leaves and a breeze against the candle on the right corner so subtle I almost miss it. When the wind picks up, it becomes chilly and I can feel the hair on my arms stand up. As if on cue, the temple dogs begin to howl one by one, ‘Woof, Woof, Awoooooooo.’ I look at the monk who is unperturbed by the signs, and I feel more confident. I shouted ‘Keep barking, dogs. We know she’s here. Is this all you can do? Stop teasing us and show yourself!’

All becomes silent. I blink and suddenly see a woman with long, dark hair in a strapless top and Chong kraben. I yelp and pee a little. This is the first time I have actually seen the ghost in person. Her figure is clear but not solid. It shimmers in the air as if she is fading in and out of this world. Somdej Toh had opened his eyes and stopped chanting.

‘Yom Naak?’ He asked.

She tilts her transparent head to one side. ‘Naak, yes, a life ago, who wants know?’ she drawls in a high-pitched voice, black eyes darting back and forth between Somdej Toh and I.

‘I am Somdej Toh. The monks and villagers are terrified by your haunting. Would you kindly stop harassing them?’ He speaks calmly as if he is talking to another sane human being instead of a ghost.

Naak does not respond. I don’t know if she pretends not to hear us or, as the saying goes, turn her ears against the wind. I wonder if she still has ears to use and if not, which part she uses instead. Then Somdej Toh asks, ‘Is haunting people your way of getting your husband, Maak, back?’

She hisses at the sound of the name. Her expression changes into that of a snarling beast. Her mouth gapes wide with bare teeth as she curses so loudly they echo in my ears. I cower in fear behind the monk and wonder how he can still look so calm. Naak's rampage is like waves hitting Somdej Toh's invisible wall until it subsides, and then she is calm again. They stare at each other for some time. Emotions battle on her face while the monk keeps a straight face. I do not know how long they are like that for I am suddenly overcome by drowsiness and I close my eyes. The last thought I have is the impression that they are having a conversation in their minds since their mouths do not move. Or perhaps they are now communicating somewhere else, a place that exists between the living and the dead.

I do not know how long I nod off for until Somdej Toh raps my head gently with his knuckles. I wake up and see that the dark sky has turned purplish blue. A ray of light glimmers in the air in front of me for a second, but when I rub my eyes it is gone. Somdej Toh has black circles under his eyes, but apart from that he looks unscathed. He walks out of the pavilion and I follow him in silence. When we are outside the building where the abbot lives, I cannot not keep my mouth shut any longer.

'Did you get rid of her? Has she gone to heaven or hell? I shouldn't have slept but tell me, did you do it with a magical spell or your psychic power?'

'I'm tired. Can't this wait?'

'I want to know. Please.' I plead.

'I just reasoned with her.'

'Not a chance. People won't believe it. How do you know she won't be back?'

'She won't. Monks can't lie. End of discussion.'

'No, please. What if by chance she came back? We need to be sure we are safe. I need to know.'

‘Stupid kid. Stupid people.’ He sighs. ‘All right. Do you know the local undertaker?’ I nod. ‘Ask him where Naak’s body was buried and bring the bone of her forehead back to me.’

I gasp.

‘Be off with you!’ He waves his hand and walks up the stairs to the abbot’s chamber.

Two days later, I finish the dreadful task and present the bone to Somdej Toh. He draws some lines and symbols on the bone’s curved surface while mumbling and when he finishes, he presents it to the abbot and me.

‘This relic is called Pan Neng. It confines the spirit to the owner, which is me, so the spirit can’t roam freely. You can tell the others it’s over.’

I can finally breathe with relief when I see it is done with my own eyes. Somdej Toh drills a hole on the bone, threads a string through the hole and ties it to his waistband. The abbot showers him with praises. On the day of Somdej Toh’s departure, the news has spread and a flock of people, monks and seculars alike, gathers to see the most venerable monk who brought peace back to Phra Khanong. Somdej Toh’s farewell is brief since he has forbidden any kinds of celebration in his honour. The abbot asks Somdej Toh if he needs an escort, and his answer is no. He says by doing good deeds, he will be protected from harm. Then, he walks away, leaving only dirt footprints that vanished in time.

Food obsession

Before I left for Thailand, every Thai person I met in Birmingham told me to do one thing - to eat, not just any food but the most authentic Thai food I can find before coming back to the UK. One even radically suggested not to waste my tongue on ordinary food, the made-to-order, kind of food that one can find on any streets. It showed to what extent Thai people were obsessed with food.

I did not expect to ‘eat like a king,’ as the Thai saying goes, every meal in Thailand, but a home-cooked meal by my grandmother was a must. My hopes shattered when I learned that she had abandoned her cooking in the kitchen. All the meals in the house had changed to takeaways or processed food: Congees or porridge in the morning, takeaway curries for lunch, and instant noodles for dinner. I endured the pattern for three days before I gave up. My first real food outside the house was just an ordinary wonton soup at a nearby, small restaurant. I remembered hating it for a while, despite it being the best wonton dish around the neighbourhood, because of boredom from having it for two weeks straight. Tasting it now after a year away brought back memories of eating it with my family and friends. It was ordinary but perfect. But two days after that I was bored of it again, so I bought food from a 7-11 instead.

I was attracted by its air-conditioned shelves full of everything you need for an urban life from the basic instant noodle to premium frozen meals. I missed the convenience of the 24-hour food service when, at two o’clock, you could buy a cup of warm, wonton soup instead of tossing and turning sleeplessly on the bed because you were too hungry to go to sleep. The first time I entered the store, I was dazzled by the new products I had never seen before (grilled pork rice burger, ready-to-drink bubble-tea, green tea ice drinks, etc.). I ended up putting more and more products in the basket until it was almost too heavy to carry. I went to the till and was

shocked by how much I had spent: three hundred baht, an equivalent of six standard takeaway meals. The shock came from the feeling that the price of things had gone up over the year without me knowing it. Maybe three hundred baht had become normal without me knowing it. In the end, I could only take comfort in the UK currency: it was only six pounds after all.

How to Brew Sunlight in Your Dream

My mother used to work for the Home office. Part of her work was to check if a non-UK spouse fulfilled his or her role in the marital relationship. In other words, to see if it was not a hoax to gain a UK visa or citizenship. Thai women were high on the list and after years of observation, my mother could see the pattern: short, slim women with tanned skin and dark, long hair whose illiteracy and submissive attitudes annoyed mum no end.

You see, my dad left us when I was twelve for a Caribbean girl who was at least ten years younger than her. It should have been a trauma in my life but we were never really close and he hardly exhibited any gesture of affection like a pat on the head or a warm hug. I told myself I already got over it but sometimes on a chilly, overcast day, I looked at the trails of raindrops on the window and thought of my father lying on a deck chair by the beach somewhere on the British Virgin Islands with his tanned lover in a bright bikini by his side.

You might assume by now that she had developed a negative attitude towards Asian women – almost to the point of racism - because of her job and personal conflicts. But there was an exception in the form of a tiny Thai lady. Her name was Araya and somehow mum could not bring herself to hate the woman. Maybe it was in her frail little body of forty, or in the guileless smiles she gave to mum whenever she came to check on her. Mum had a talent for catching a lie and she could tell that Araya had no hidden agenda in her love for Robert. Mum said she could tell that Araya was willing to leave her homeland behind to start a new life in the UK. Without personal income and sufficient language skills, Robert was everything to her.

Unfortunately, Robert was a brute. The evidence of his ‘affection’ appeared in bruises on Araya’s face or body in different shades of black and blue, each time a bit darker. It was not mum’s business to intervene in the couple’s situation since she was not a social worker, but she

was worried nonetheless. The problem was, because of Araya's fear, culture, religion, or whatever Oriental beliefs she had, Araya refused to take action against Robert. Like a loyal servant, she cleaned up the dishes, did all the housework, and cooked for him without complaint. He often told mum during her visits that he loved his wife dearly. It was just that things tended to heat up whenever alcohol was involved. But everything was under control, he would say, ending the conversation by assuring mum that there was nothing to worry about, that their love was genuine.

Sometimes, his love was just too much for Araya to handle. The day came when Araya reached her limit. Mum picked me up at school, I was twelve at the time. I remember sitting in the red Vauxhall Astra when she took a call. After Mum hung up the phone, she pursed her lips and drove faster than I had ever seen. I knew then that something serious had happened.

Once we reached Araya's house, mum told me sharply to wait in the car. Her stern face told me that she was serious, so I nodded and watched her sprint through the unkempt lawn to the front door. The door opened and revealed Araya carrying a small, red suitcase, and I spotted blood on the corner of her lips. One of her eyelids was so swollen that her eye could barely lift up. They had a brief conversation before mum used her shoulder to support Araya who was limping by her side to the car. I looked over my shoulder to stare at the woman when she positioned herself at the backseat, and to my surprise, she smiled at me, despite the pain she have been feeling. I was scared of her contorted face, so I buried myself back into the seat and looked out of the window all the way back home.

Mum tried finding a safe place for Araya. There were a few houses and shelters for abused women, but none seemed to be good enough. So, she did something no social worker would have done: she brought Araya back home. She insisted that Araya stay with us for a few days in spite of her protest. I did not know whether her refusal to stay was out of politeness or fear

of displacement, but she eventually gave up and started to occupy herself by cleaning the house. Mum tried to stop her, but she gave up after Araya's insistence that a guest in her country needed to return the favour to the host by being useful, and if mum tried to stop her, she would be dishonoured. After learning that she did not know anyone else in the UK or have enough money to return to Thailand, mum made a suggestion to Araya: until her case was processed and resolved by a social worker, she would be provided with three meals a day and a place to live under our roof.

It took Araya a week to get rid of her husband. She obtained a civil injunction with my mother's support. She entered our lives gradually and permanently with her kind heart, but it was her food that I remembered most.

Let me take you back to the most memorable part of my childhood. I remember waking up that summer morning with the smell of what I thought was like sunlight in the air. There! A refreshing whiff of unseen delight: if I could describe the smell as a picture, I would imagine a bright orange scarf floating in the blue sky. It was an unfamiliar scent that set itself apart from the stale, cool air. And with the smell came the growling sound of my rumbling stomach that urged me to get off the bed and to find the source.

What I found in the kitchen was close to what I had imagined before I stepped into the room: If it was Halloween, Araya would be a witch – a good one, of course – wearing a long robe, holding a wooden ladle over a large bubbling cauldron, brewing magic potions. In reality, I found her in a dark blue apron hovering over a stainless-steel pot of boiling liquid with a wooden spoon in her hand.

‘Are you brewing sunlight, Araya?’

She tilted her head to one side before she smiled and said ‘Yes. Wanna help, Justine?’

‘Yes. Teach me. Tell me how to do it.’ It had been a long time since I was eager to learn something, and I could barely stand still to learn the secret recipe. ‘What’s in it?’

‘It’s Takrai, Baimagrut, Kha. Don’t know English names. Let’s say a bag of herbs’

‘From the woods?’

‘Concrete woods of Chinese Store. And this is Hed Fang, you know, small ugly thingy on dirt. Boil water, put Nam pla, add Hed Fang.’

Alien words puzzled me, and I was gaping like a gold fish.

‘Ok, I brew Earth plants and Sea sauce.’

‘Cool! What about the grey meat on the board?’

‘Kung, oh I mean, Queen of Sea. They are proud animals, floating in the sea with red dress. One day, they say bad things to a witch turtle, but they don’t know she’s a witch, so they are, what do you call when someone say bad magic words to you?’

‘Cursed?’

‘Yes, cursed. Backs bend like old people. Red dresses are grey, hard like shells. Black hearts pulled on their back, so you see, black lines today. You must not eat black lines or your heart is black.’ She twisted her mouth and wrinkled her nose.

‘I don’t want to have a black heart,’ I said.

‘No worry. Aunty Araya here take care everything.’ She picked up a small sharp knife on the board and quickly cut out lines after lines from, what I had learnt later were veins from prawns.

‘Easy. Now your heart is red for sure ... if you are a good girl.’

‘I will. I promise. Can we remove the curse somehow? I feel sorry for them.’

‘Hmm. Yes. But you have to wait for the water to bubble before you put meat in the pot. Now count one to ninety for me.’

I counted the numbers out loud. When I finished, Araya carefully slid each chunk of grey meat into the pot, and the magic worked its way through the flesh, red seeping through the grey until red ribbons twisted around white flesh. Then, she turned off the gas and poured the aromatic liquid into a bowl with some strange-coloured sauce.

‘What sauce did you put in the bowl before you pour the soup?’ I asked.

‘Hush! It’s a secret sauce with secret ingredients. You must grow up before you know.’

Seeing my disappointed face, she stirred the soup with a spoon before handing it to me. The taste was unfamiliar and the spicy soup burned my tongue, but it was surprisingly delicious. I could feel the hot soup flow through my body, from stomach to head. My taste buds were bursting and I was dying for an answer. I was preparing questions in my head. I was going to tell her that being twelve years old should count as a grown up as long as I thought and behaved like adults, which I already was, but I never had the chance. Mum entered the kitchen with her sniffing nose and a squeal of delight, which was very unusual, at the sight of the food and us. I tried to squeeze out the answer from her but mum diverted Araya’s attention away from me. I pouted through the most elaborate meal I had ever had, a spicy soup and a plate of boiled rice, and wondered when my mother would shut up. I still had a wry face when we finished the meal and I did not smile when mum kissed me on the forehead before she went to work. I wanted to ask about the soup again but Araya turned her back on me – watching the dishes and ignoring me. So I ignored her back for a few days but then the news hit me: Araya was going back to Thailand. Forever.

On her last day with us. I did not care if it was childish to wrap my arms tightly around Araya’s waist.

‘I’m really, really, sorry. Please don’t go.’

‘It’s time I go back to my family, Justine.’

‘But I thought we were family. You can stay with us forever, right mum?’

‘Yes, but not forever, dear. Now stop clinging to Araya and say goodbye,’ mum said and tried to pull me away but I hugged her tighter. Tears were welling up in Araya’s eyes, too, when she squatted down in front of me and cupped my face.

‘I love you very much, and you will always be my family.’

‘I love you, too. I was just mad this past week because you didn’t tell me about your soup’s secret sauce.’

‘What? Stupid girl. It’s ok if you know the sauce. Say, I tell you about the sauce but you have to let me go, ok? We can be together again. You can go to Thailand and see me and I can cook food for you, yes?’

She put her right hand in front of me and waited. I thought for a long time, weighing my options carefully before reaching my hand to shake hers. Then her face came close to my ear. She leaned in and whispered the secret of her secret sauce.

It was not until five years later that I got to see Araya again. It was during a gap year before university that I travelled to Thailand. Mum thought I went there partying like other teenagers, but I went looking for Araya instead because I could not get Araya and her cooking out of my mind.

My first trip to Thailand brought an answer to the secret sauce Araya made that day: it was made of lime juice, sugar, fish sauce, and chillies. Simple ingredients, but it took me more than a dozen tries before I could make a decent Tom Yum Kung, and it was a few years later when I discovered that cooking the dish in Thailand, with the exact ingredients found in the UK,

yielded a far superior result. Up until this day, I still cannot prove how the dish is scientifically better cooked in Thailand. Maybe it is Araya's magic touch that makes the difference.

Her Ghost Mother

I remembered reading the news about a four-year-old girl who lived with her mother's corpse for three days, alone in their house. It seemed like a tragic news at the time, one among many that usually ran at the end of news shows, drawing tears and sympathy accompanied by bank accounts of the victims or the supporting charity organisations. Instead, the incident's focus was on the mystery that led to a supernatural conclusion: How could a four-year-old girl, whose livelihood depended on her mother to feed her, survive for three days without any signs of malnutrition or starvation? The surprising yet widely acceptable answer after an interview with the child and her aunt who found the girl and the body implied that it was the ghost of the girl's mother.

It was not the ghost mystery that attracted me to the news, but the girl's eyes. The way her dark, unwavering eyes stared at an empty space was more convincing than the word 'Mum' she said when asked about who had taken care of her during the three days and who she was looking at behind the interviewer.

Game of Khon

SCENE ONE

An indoor café. BOOM, overweight, aged 20, sits alone at a table for four. An empty cup of coffee is on the table next to his laptop. He is typing on the keyboard with his headphones on when MEZ, skinny, aged 19, approaches.

MEZ: Hi.

BOOM (*not lifting his eyes from the computer*): Hi.

MEZ *looks around*

MEZ: King's late.

BOOM (*still staring at the computer*): As usual.

MEZ: Are you still working on the coding?

BOOM (*gives a quick look at MEZ*): Yes. And if you don't mind, I need to be in the zone

MEZ: Sure! Of course!

MEZ *sits on a chair opposite Boom, looks at Boom then away*

Do you know why King suddenly called us in? We're going to meet next week anyway. I mean, I'm almost done but I've still got tons to do.

MEZ *looks at Boom but gets no response*

Fine! I'll leave you alone.

MEZ *fidgets with his smartphone. A long pause*

Enter KING, well-built, aged 21.

KING (*Sweeping BOOM and MEZ up from their seats into his arms*): Hi, guys! You're early!

BOOM *frowns and is about to say something but decides not to, then sits down. MEZ blushes and almost trips on his chair before he sits.*

(To BOOM) How's the coding Boom? Can we make it in time for the competition?

BOOM: It'll be close, but yeah, we can make it. There's nothing energy drinks can't fix.

KING: (To MEZ) How about the graphics?

MEZ: Almost done. I just need to tweak the interface and character designs.

KING: Good work, guys. Well, sorry for the urgent meeting, but you see, I've had an idea.

(Pauses for effect) What about a teaser video for 'Game of Khon' using real Khon performers?

A video for the pitch, you know? Real traditional Thai dancing and stuff, then we add clips and screenshots from the game. Mez knows what I'm talking about, right? I remember you mentioned learning Khon with your friends in High school.

MEZ: Primary School.

KING: Whatever. It's not enough to create a unique game. We need a unique presentation. It's going to be a short video. I can rent a camera and lighting equipment and hire a few guys from the faculty. I'll be responsible for the whole operation, so you two won't even have to lift a finger.

MEZ: I don't know. It's not the workload I'm worried about. But... why do more?

KING: Why not?

BOOM: He's right – anything more than the game is just a distraction. You always have *ideas*. I'm asking you to be more practical!

KING: I AM practical! That's why I called this meeting instead of just doing it.

BOOM: It's not just that we'll be doing more than is necessary. It's... are you sure about this? Knowing full well that what we're doing is ... touchy to some people.

KING: You worry too much. Change is necessary. Tradition needs to evolve. We're doing people a favour.

(To MEZ) By the way, I'll need your friend's contact in the Khon School. Do you have his number?

MEZ: (Hesitating) Yeah, sure. (Swipes on his smartphone then gives it to KING)

KING: Thanks.

KING pulls out his smartphone from his pocket, copies the number onto his phone and returns it to MEZ.

Done. So, any objections to my going through with this? *(Pause)* Great! I'll tell you when we have the shooting date.

Exit KING.

BOOM: I hate it when he does that.

MEZ: He certainly has a way of making people dance to his tune.

BOOM: And we always let him. *(Sighs then stands up)* I'll see you when I see you.

Exit BOOM.

MEZ sits at the table sipping his coffee. The lights above MEZ's head dims out.

SCENE TWO

FLASHBACK.

The lights are on again behind the stage backdrop. The café props are gone. The transparent wall shows a silhouette of a room with boys standing in rows. It is MEZ's primary school. The shadows of boys are moving in rhythm to the traditional Khon music.

Enter KRU PETT.

KRU PETT, a stern-faced, middle-aged man with a whipping stick, walks from stage left to right, back and forth. His eyes are focused at the centre stage as if there are students at the

spot. MEZ steps into the spotlight at the centre of the stage, looking back and forth between KRU PETT and the audience.

MEZ: (To the audience) The memory of Khon. Ah! I miss the old times, especially Kru Pett. Kru Pett stops walking and suddenly whips the stick near MEZ's thigh. MEZ springs into one of the forms used in Khon positions, bending and spreading his knees wide, facing the audience. KRU PETT walks around MEZ to inspect his posture.

Other kids got the foot soldiers' roles of either the giants or the monkeys. Me? I got to be 'Thotsakan,' the King of Giants in Ramakien. It was a leading role that came with sweat and tears.

KRU PETT: Keep your back straight! Stop being lazy! (Another lash on MEZ's back)

MEZ: Hard love, huh? He was never very nice, but you couldn't help but respect the man. The thing that sticks in my mind isn't his brutal mentoring. It's what he said at the end-of-term performance.

MEZ sits on the back of his heels. KRU PETT walks off stage and comes back with a Thotsakan mask. MEZ puts his palms together in front of his chest and lowers his head.

KRU PETT: (Putting the mask on MEZ's head) Respect the art and the traditions.

You will come to no harm and be protected from misfortunes.

Lights dim until blackout.

SCENE THREE

EXT. A recreational park under a bridge on Chao Phraya River. KING is sitting on a director's chair with a megaphone in his lap. (Left) KING is surrounded by a crew of three people who are handling a video camera, a boom pole, and a laptop attached to a monitor. (Right) Standing apart from them is a group of Khon performers (6-12 people) in full costumes. They are not

wearing the masks but keep them nearby; in their hands, or on the table but never on the floor.

A big, black bag is on stage right near the performers.

Enter MEZ and BOOM from stage left.

KING: Hi, guys! So, what do you think? *(Spreading his hands)*

MEZ: *(reluctantly)* Impressive, but –

BOOM: What about the budget?

KING: Don't worry. We've just finished filming the dance. *(To BOOM)* I need help with the editing and special effects. *(To MEZ)* Can you tell the performers not to take off their costumes yet? We have more scenes to shoot.

MEZ walks to the performers and talks with them while BOOM hunches over the computer near KING.

KING: *(To BOOM)* Look at the footage. I want a brighter and more vivid sky, like a golden dawn colour. As for the sound, I want you to add something to the performer's march, something that sounds like thundering boots.

(Pointing to the guy who was previously standing in BOOM's place) This guy is useless!

BOOM: I'm a programmer, not a special effect wizard!

KING: You're good with computers, and that's all I need. So, just do it.

While BOOM types and moves the cursor on the laptop, KING points at the screen with his fingers and mumbles yes and no until Boom becomes annoyed

(To MEZ) MEZ, I need two giants and Thotsakan here, and bring the black bag, too.

MEZ picks up the black bag and leads the performer to the centre of stage. KING stands up and opens the bag in front of them. It was full of items associated with tourists such as a selfie stick, small suitcases, and marigold wreaths.

Go on. Pick one up and act like you are tourists.

The foot soldier giants pick up suitcases while the one in the Thotsakorn role holds a selfie stick like it is a marching band's baton.

Imagine you've just come out of the pages of Ramakien. You are amazed by Thailand's landscape and its people. You are learning to be tourists and to enjoy their activities until suddenly, in the middle of a park under the bridge, you see your enemy – Pra Ram's army has also escaped from the book. Now look surprised at the camera and growl, then raise your fists like you're ready to fight!

The performers follow KING's orders. The foot soldier giants walk around the stage with the suitcases while Thotsakan walks and pauses to take a selfie with the stick. When they try to growl, their voices are muffled inside the masks, so they become dull and slurred.

Come on! Louder!

The performers try again. There is no real difference from the first time. The performers are getting restless.

MEZ: (To King) Don't force them. They're used to being dubbed by the band's singer so that they don't usually have to voice their characters.

KING: It will work. (To the performers) Keep going.

The performers continue their act for a while. Then Thotsakan drops his selfie stick on the floor. He doesn't pick it back up but walks towards stage right exit. Instead of leaving through the exit, he jumps down from the stage. He keeps walking along the audience's aisle until he exits the theatre's door. The foot soldier giants drop their props and walk back to join the rest of the performers. They talk for a brief moment before all of them leave the stage. KING looks shocked and starts to follow them, but MEZ blocks him with his body.

MEZ: Let them go.

KING: I'm not finished with them! I paid for four hours and I'll have their time until the last minute.

MEZ: (Quietly) Don't you think you've done enough?

KING: What did you just say?

MEZ: (Flushed, but speaks louder) I said, 'Don't you think you've done enough?'

KING: What is wrong with you?

MEZ: It's just...

KING: (Pissed) Spit it out!

MEZ: (Slowly, but clearly) There's a fine line between challenging old ideas and disrespecting them. Maybe this isn't the right occasion to do what you're doing.

KING: (Incredulous) You? Of all people? Are you turning into some sort of reactionary? I thought we were on the same side.

MEZ: We are, but you've crossed the line.

KING: You sound like those lunatics who troll people on social media every time someone tries to adapt or modernise Thai culture.

MEZ: No, I don't.

KING: Yes, you do. And if you don't believe in what we're doing, why are you still here?

KING *pokes his index finger to MEZ's chest. MEZ clenches his fist. BOOM steps in between the two.*

BOOM: Take it easy, guys! I think we've shot enough footage. I need your eyes on the editing, King.

KING: Fine.

King *elbows Mez aside and walks away.*

Lights dim out.

SCENE FOUR

INT. A luxurious living room in KING's house. On Stage Right, KING's MOTHER, in her late forties who looks younger than her age, is sitting at the couch, flipping pages of Hello magazine.

Enter KING.

KING: I'm home.

MOTHER: (Hugging KING) Have you eaten?

KING: No, but I'm not hungry.

MOTHER: Nonsense. You're always hungry around this time.

KING: Not today, mom.

MOTHER: How did it go?

KING: We came third.

MOTHER: Congratulations! I knew you could do it. But why the long face?

KING: We would have come first if it wasn't for one of the judges. She doesn't even have a background in IT!

MOTHER: No way!

KING: Yes. I still can't believe it. We knew in advance we were in the Top Ten. The feedback from the game demo we'd submitted earlier was great. The interview with the judging panel was just for pitching and Q&A and at the beginning, everything was fine. But things went south. Boom was explaining about the game's mechanics and interface when the female judge interrupted him.

MOTHER: What did she say?

KING: That is was inappropriate; that our presentation of Khon was disrespectful to the art.

We were stunned. I wanted to talk back but Mez told me to shut up. Boom just said, ‘Sorry to hear that,’ regained his composure and continued the talk. When we were out of the room, Boom said he recognised her from a newspaper. The woman used to work for the Ministry of Culture.

MOTHER: Miss Nanta?

KING: Yes.

A pause.

MOTHER: I know how much time and energy you have devoted to this project, but it’s done. Despite what other people said, your success proved them otherwise. What more do you want?

KING: To be the best! To make Grandpa proud!

MOTHER: I’m sure he was, honey, looking down from heaven. Cheer up! I’ll fix you something to eat.

Exit MOTHER.

Lights gets dimmer except the one above KING’s head.

KING: *(Looking straight at the audience)* I wish HE was here. I miss our trips to the theatre to watch Khon together.

Lights on KING’s head dim while the ones on Stage Left get brighter. GRANDPA, an old man in his late sixties, and YOUNG KING walk to the spotlight. GRANDPA’s one hand is holding YOUNG KING while the other points somewhere at the back of the audience.

Cue in Thai traditional music used in Khon performance.

A spotlight shines on one of the entrance door at the back of the theatre where Khon performers emerge in full costumes. They dance gracefully along the aisles between the audience’s seats. They gather in front of the audience near the front row seats as the music comes to an end. One

of the performers wearing a monkey mask of Hanuman turns to Young King on stage and speaks.

HANUMAN: You look like a brave young man. Will you help us defeat the king of giants, Thotsakan?

YOUNG KING: Yes, yes! I will!

HANUMAN and the rest of the performers climb onto the stage. YOUNG KING is lifted up into the air by HANUMAN, the boy's arms thrashing about as if he is fighting an invisible enemy. Bellows of laughter come out of YOUNG KING and GRANDPA while the other Khon performers encircle them and dance in rhythm with the music. Then a female voice interrupts the music.

MOTHER: Supper is ready!

YOUNG KING, GRANDPA, HANUMAN and other performers freeze mid-air. Lights cut off abruptly on top of YOUNG KING, GRANDPA, HANUMAN and other performers while the ones on top of KING grow bright again.

KING jerks up as if waking from a dream. Enter MOTHER with a tray of food.

MOTHER: Are you daydreaming again?

KING: No. Just reminiscing.

MOTHER: Here're some bread buns and a glass of milk

KING: I'm not a little boy anymore.

MOTHER: Food is food. You think too much. Now eat so that you can think straight and be on your feet again.

KING: For what?

MOTHER: For your next step--that is, if you really can't let it go.

KING: But the competition is over.

MOTHER: You'll find other ways. I can list all the reasons in the world for you to move on, but unless you feel you've done everything to resolve the issue, you'll always feel restless.

KING: (Chuckling) You know me better than I do. And I hope you're right. I really do.

SCENE FIVE

INT. *The same coffee shop from the first scene. The lights are dark except the backstage set, which is illuminated and transparent instead of solid white. The audience can see the bright light of a projector from behind the wall on which an inaudible video is playing. It is a medium close-up shot of Kru Pett. He is talking to the camera and pauses from time to time. It is an interview.*

BOOM *appears on stage left with a spotlight shining above him. Light follows BOOM as he walks to the centre of the stage and sits on the same chair from the first scene. Queue in the atmospheric sound of people chatting and cups clattering. BOOM puts his laptop on the table, but he isn't looking at the screen. His eyes wander around the shop and he sighs. He is deep in thought when MEZ enters from stage left, sits down next to BOOM and greets him with a faint smile.*

MEZ: How are you?

BOOM: Not bad. Working on a new project now. A quiz app.

MEZ: Great.

BOOM: You?

MEZ: Back to lectures and coursework, I suppose.

A Pause.

(Hesitantly) Have you seen King?

BOOM: Not since the contest. But I saw the Music Video.

MEZ: I saw it, too! Do you think King has anything to do with it?

BOOM: I was suspicious. That was why I wanted to meet up. I've heard about the director and the lead singer, and their 'unique style'. But there are so many similarities to ours.

MEZ: That's what I thought! The luggage, the selfie stick.

BOOM and MEZ appear to be deep in thought.

BOOM: It's been three months and I thought that project was behind us. Do you think we'll be dragged into another dispute?

MEZ: (Anxiously) This is King's doing, but I don't think the two of us are in trouble. Only a few people saw our promo video. Unless someone leaked it to the media, no one would think to compare the two.

BOOM: You're right. Maybe King just showed the video to the director. Our idea was there, but there are lots of changes. Theirs is a lot more polished.

MEZ: But my gut still twists every time I see the new video. It's viral. People are cursing it or loving it.

BOOM: I've read the paper. Rumour has it that the Culture Surveillance Bureau might have it banned.

MEZ: (Shakes his head in disbelief.) Only in Thailand.

BOOM: Scholars and experts are giving out opinions, too.

BOOM pulls out his phone from his jeans pocket and puts it on the table. Lights dim above

BOOM and MEZ. The audience's focus is back on Kru Pett's video on the wall.

Then, the footage changes from a medium shot to a close-up on his moving mouth.

Queue in the video's sound.

KRU PETT: – disrespecting the sacred position Khon holds in art and –

A flicker. As if someone is rewinding a tape.

Kings like Thotsakan can't be seen doing commoner activities.

Another flicker.

– Strict patterns to follow. Inappropriate dance moves and settings mean destroying the art

–

Another flicker.

– lack of aesthetic taste.

MEZ: (Shouting) Enough!

The projection disappears. The lights focus on MEZ and KING again. The wall becomes solid white. MEZ is pressing both of his hands on his head. BOOM looks worried.

BOOM: Hey, are you all right?

MEZ: No. I'm not all right, nothing is all right. I have to go.

BOOM: Wait, Mez!

MEZ jerks up from his chair and walks briskly off the stage with tears in his eyes. BOOM is still sitting with a puzzled look on his face.

It's just a stupid game.

Lights dim out.

SCENE SIX

INT. A room in MEZ's primary school. A dozen boys in white T-shirts and red loose pants are walking around, stretching their bodies. KRU PETT enters from the door on stage left. Stage right stand a table and two chairs. The table has a cassette player on it. While KRU PETT walks over to it, the boys scramble to their feet and position themselves at the centre of the stage in three rows, facing the audience. When KRU PETT sits on the chair and hits the play button on the cassette player, Thai traditional music rings out like a broken record at first, but

the sound clears up as it reaches the fourth note. The boys begin to move rhythmically in unison. Before the end of the song, MEZ appears and stares at them from the door on stage left. KRU PETT notices him but does not say anything. When the song ends, KRU PETT addresses the boys.

KRU PETT: 15-minute break, and not a second longer, you hear?

The boys disperse and leave the stage. MEZ walks to stage right where KRU PETT is sitting. MEZ falls to his knees when he is a few steps from KRU PETT and starts crawling towards KRU PETT until his knees almost touch KRU PETT's feet. MEZ puts his hands together in front of his chest and lowers his head.

MEZ: Sawasdee Krub, Kru Pett.

KRU PETT: Good day to you, too. You look familiar. Were you one of my students?

KRU MEZ: Yes, a long time ago. I was Thotsakan.

KRU PETT: Ah! MEZ, isn't it? What brings you here today?

MEZ: I saw a video clip of your interview.

KRU PETT's *face darkens.*

KRU PETT: That damn video! Are you here to praise me or scold me?

MEZ: Neither! I mean no disrespect.

KRU PETT: Then say what you want before I lose my patience.

MEZ: (Hesitates) I'm responsible for the Khon music video, maybe not fully but in part.

KRU PETT *gives a puzzled look at MEZ.*

MEZ: We made a game. Then there was a video. My friend King said the video would be great but it wasn't. King was ... disrespectful. He ... went too far. I warned him. I FUCKING WARNED HIM. He must be behind the viral video. I know it in my guts. He... I... It's my fault. All my fault.

KRU PETT: Calm down. Stop flustering. Now, breathe in deep, hold it, and breathe out. Do it just like we used to do before we performed.

MEZ breathes the way KRU PETT tells him to. He looks less flustered.

KRU PETT: Good, good. Come sit here with me.

MEZ stands up and sits on the other chair, but he doesn't look at Kru Phett.

KRU PETT: Stop sulking. We're all adults.

MEZ looks at Kru Phett then gives him an uncertain smile. Kru Phett smiles back.

KRU PETT: There's nothing to be ashamed of. Don't believe everything you hear on TV. I didn't accuse the people who made the video of destroying Khon.

MEZ: But the interview ...

KRU PETT: Have you heard of the magic of editing? Bah!

MEZ: I don't get it. So, you're not against the music video?

KRU PETT: Not entirely. They cut out my admiration for their innovative ideas and my advice on how they should handle some of the more daring scenes.

A Pause.

MEZ: I don't know what to think anymore.

KRU PETT: I know how you feel.

MEZ: How? You've always been a rock. You never have to question what to believe.

KRU PETT is lost in thought for a moment.

KRU PETT: Old age changes people, and even a tough bark like me knows when to bend.

(Chuckled) My old self would have outright condemned the music video. Now, I know we can't stop changes that come with progress. I just hope we can slow it down a bit and move forward slowly with caution in our minds.

KRU PETT *stretches his hand around the room and to the centre of the stage where the boys were standing earlier.*

More than half of the boys you saw earlier will grow up forgetting, in time, what they've learned today. The rest will still remember Khon but just as a distant reminiscence. Only a handful will be inspired enough by the memory to do something about it, to create and share something new with the world. To keep the tradition long and alive, people must carry it willingly, with freedom.

MEZ *stares at KRU PETT with wide eyes before he looks down, contemplating.*

MEZ: What should I do?

KRU PETT: No one can tell you that, I'm afraid.

MEZ: (Smile weakly) Change is inevitable, isn't it?

KRU PETT *shrugs. Both MEZ and KRU PETT look around the room with longing in their eyes.*

Queue in the sound of playing children.

Lights dim.

THE END

Go-Kart King

In May 2016, a music video was posted on YouTube to promote the Thai tourism industry. The video portrays an adaptation of Khon, which, according to the Ministry of Culture's website, is Thailand's classical, high art form wherein performers wear masks while dancing to the accompaniment of Thai traditional instruments.

In recent years, I have read more and more about the clash between those who challenge Thai traditional values and practices and those who try to preserve them. As sensitive as Thai cultural issues are, some organisations employ a Thai cultural scholar to oversee their project. Even so, the outcome can be unpredictable, as in the case of this video. Despite what Thai people believed at the time, the Ministry of Tourism did not commission the video, but the lyrics suggested that Thai people fell in love again with Thailand's rich culture and landmarks. The target audience was Thai people, and the video encouraged them by having Khon performers in full traditional costume visiting regional landmarks and doing tourist activities with a modernised version of Thai traditional music and lyrics.

The video did not receive public scrutiny until Miss Ladda Tungsupachai, a well-known official who once held a senior position in the Ministry of Culture publicly condemned the inappropriate use of Khon and threatened to have the video banned. It was her comment on a particular Khon character who, in the video, performed inappropriate tourist activities that sparked a nationwide interest. She identified how Thotsakan, king of the giants from the epic Ramakien, was participating in tourist activities such as using a selfie stick, riding a go-cart, and making coconut pudding dessert. But any art involving the royal institution was sacred and was meant to be put up on a pedestal, not dragged down to be mocked or mimicked by ordinary people.

The public became curious about how offensive the video was and the online views increased manifold overnight. Debates sparked all over the internet and on the mainstream news channels. Opinions were divided among conservatives and liberals. On the one hand, there was the official from the Ministry of Culture who wanted the video banned. She was supported by various national artists working in traditional dance. They regarded Khon as a high art which held a sacred cultural value because of its long tradition and its ties to the royal court. On the other hand, the young lead singer, who was also a Khon performer in the video, commented that he was disappointed by the conservatives' out-of-date notion of freezing Thai culture in time without change or development. In the heat of argument, he posted a statement on Facebook that accused the dinosaurs (i.e. the conservatives) of dragging their dying version of Thai culture into their graves.

I was interested in the controversy surrounding the video. At first, I thought it was just a clash between generations, but the more I read the more I began to see the complexity of the issue. In an online forum, for example, one teacher asked his students what they thought of the video, and most of them said they didn't think it was inappropriate; that they didn't mind if the Giant King rode go carts or made coconut pudding desserts. The teacher then asked the students to picture the Khon mask in their heads and replace it with a mask of their ancestors' faces or of someone they respected. The students' responses varied, but one thing was clear: it had become much harder to determine what was inappropriate and what was not.

After several meetings with government officials, the video's director and lead singer agreed to remove the problematic scenes. In a sense that was the end of the matter. But for me, another better ending arrived when a member of the royal family gave a response to what had occurred, posting a picture of herself on Instagram making the same kind of coconut pudding dessert as the one shown in the video. The image was accompanied by the caption: 'Government officials

should be more open-minded. Why can't Thotsakan make coconut pudding dessert? Why is doing something Thai like this dishonourable? (I forgot that he isn't even Thai!)

Apparently, Thotsakan is a character in Thailand's *The Ramakien* which derived from an Indian epic poem *Ramayana*. So, technically, he is Indian.

Social Meetings

Each time I go back to Thailand, I spend time with groups of people from each period of my life – friends from my elementary school, high school, university, and activity club. Coming home means resting for me but leaving it almost every day to meet tons of people for just a few hours are exhausting. Sneaking back to Thailand without telling anyone is almost impossible in the digital age of Facebook and Twitter where people can announce your whereabouts without you knowing it. When word gets out, it will be rude to refuse people's invitation to social meetings even when the only thing I want to do is to curl up in bed and to ride out the jetlag.

On most days of the meetings, I need to plan ahead. If someone suddenly calls, for instance, to ask for a coffee and a quick chat in half an hour in the city centre during rush hour, I might disappoint him or her. My family is not rich enough to live in the city. It takes a half hour bus, a forty-five-minute underground, and a fifteen-minute wait for a hired motorcycle ride during rush hour to arrive in a chic restaurant with my sweat-soaked dress and ruffled hair.

The meetings I do manage to join are mostly pleasant, reminiscences of good times in the past mostly, but there are odd moments when I am pushed aside and become a temporary outcast. The moments include the time when most people of my generation talk about popular culture and trends: famous Thai soap operas (which I do not watch), Korean boy bands (which I do not listen to), and food crazes in newly-opened restaurants (which I do not have a chance to go to). In those moments where I have no knowledge of the subjects at all, I am forced to be a watcher instead of a listener. I notice the reactions they have with new soap operas (a cringe for the remake of *Nang Tad*, glistening eyes for *Just a Man, Not a Magician*). In the end, I feel lost.

When I was a child, I used to feel more alone in these situations than I ever did by myself. As I grew up, I learned to channel that negative energy into a reflective mood. I have also learned that the little details people give during conversations paint a picture of who they are. It is the only moment to really get to know people when, otherwise, I will have to focus more on my responses and opinions instead of being in the moment. I call it a ghost moment because it is similar to the feeling a ghost might have in a séance – an invisible being floating above and observing the living below.

Miss Kaew Horseface

Most Thai children are familiar with the story of Kaew Na Ma. It is about an ugly woman named Kaew who has a face like a horse. Add poverty and an ungracious manner and a miserable, hopeless life seems inevitable, but like all fairy tales, her fortune changes when she meets a handsome prince (who loathes her appearance at first, of course). He promises to marry her to get his kite back, which has flown earlier to a tree near her house, but later breaks his word when she presents herself at the palace three days later. The king also hates the idea of having an ugly commoner for a daughter-in-law, but he knows the importance of keeping one's promise, especially if one is a king. He sets up impossible tasks for Kaew to prove her worth of the marriage. If Kaew fails, she will be executed to set an example for others to know their place and not to be overambitious. With the help from a hermit who gives her a flying boat, a magic machete, and a spell to take off her horse face like a mask, she succeeds and finally convinces the prince of her love and kind heart. A happy ending.

Imagine having a horse face in the twenty-first century when you are fourteen. Imagine not having a magical machete to fight off bullies, a magical boat to take you far away from the taunts and giggling, or a spell to change an ugly horse-like face into a beautiful one. I live with my grandparents who often say that words are just wind. What they don't know is how a powerful whispers' breeze can nudge you closer and closer to the edge of the cliff and, with a gentle puff, you would fall down, down, down to nothingness. Those dark moments linger in my mind on bad days, but most of the time I just try to motivate myself: if my presence repels certain people, then just being alive is an act of defiance in itself. So whenever anyone gives me the look, the disgusted one, I stare back at them until they avert their gaze. If verbal abuse follows, then my sharp tongue normally silences them. I often compare myself to a survivor on

a deserted island who can endure hardship and a hostile environment. What I'm not prepared for are sweet words and false hope.

'Give it back, Horseface,' the boy shouts from the other side of the wrought iron gate.

'I won't if you don't stop calling me that,' I answer.

'All right, Miss Kaew Horseface, please give me back my flying drone.'

'The "Horseface" is still there, as is the sarcastic tone. Are you sure you want it back?'

'Damn it! What do you want me to do, ha? Get on my knees and kiss your hand?'

'Yeah. I'd really like that. Oh! And why don't you ask me to be your girlfriend while you're at it, too?'

'No way! You know what? I can buy a new one. A couple of new ones, actually. So, screw you!' The boy turns to leave.

'That's what I thought. Run away, you spoiled rich kid! I'm sure money can buy you everything.'

He stops.

'I'm not spoiled.'

'Then prove it. Or should I just get rid of the problem for you?' I am holding a bright yellow flying drone above my head, then I moved as if to throw it on the ground.

'Stop! You must be really desperate, huh? I'll do it, but I'll just lie and pretend.'

'Just do it,' I said.

He composes himself for a minute. Then he gets on his knees and puts his hand in front of him, waiting. In an exaggerated manner, I feign surprise by putting a hand on my gaping mouth, then guide it through a gap between the wrought iron bars until it rests on his hand. He kisses the back of my hand and looks straight into my eyes. Knowing it is just a pretence does not stop

my heart from beating faster or my hand from shaking. I try to pull my hand back, but he squeezes it tightly, so tightly that it hurts. Then he says, 'I'd really like you to be my girlfriend, Kaew. And would you mind giving me back my flying drone?'

Speechless, I open the wrought iron gate and hand him the drone. Swift as an arrow, he drops my hand, grabs the drone, and runs away, both of us wondering if we actually hear the word 'yes' hanging in the air.

For three days, I have thought about the incident. His face keeps haunting me in my dreams, and every time I wake up, I feel terrible. Having my hopes lit up like a candle in the night only to have them snuffed out in the morning sucks.

Now on the fourth day I find myself standing in front of the boy's house. It is not too far from mine. We go to the same school but our paths rarely cross; him in the BMW car with a driver, me in a rickety school bus.

I feel anxious, standing in front of the imposing six-foot-tall steel gate. I press the doorbell once, twice, and am startled by a muffled curt voice that says, 'What do you want?' The female voice comes from a small speaker above the doorbell. I tell her I need to see the boy, and when she asks who I am, I blurt out that I am his girlfriend. There is no sound from the other side of the intercom for a long time. I almost give up, but as I look around to kill time, I see a small camera attached on a post concealed behind a tree on my left. I decide to stay there longer to prove my determination to whoever is watching. Ten minutes drag on to fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes. My performance must have caused curiosity or irritation to someone behind the camera because I finally hear a buzzing sound. Then the entire gate moves slowly to the left, revealing a curved red brick pathway winding around an elegant fountain in front of a massive house. I walk gingerly towards the house and am greeted by a sour-faced, middle-aged

housemaid who guides me inside. She brings me to a room and tells me to wait. As I wait, I can't stop tapping my foot, an abhorring habit according to grandma. Then a woman appears, and she is perfect.

She seems to be in her late thirties, but the way she carries herself suggests the gravity of someone older. I can't help staring at her: she is petite and perfect, as beautiful as the women in the beauty pageants for Miss Thailand World. She is too well-mannered to stare at me directly, but a lingering gaze shows an interest in me, no doubt wondering how an ugly duckling like me has become involved with her son. She apologizes for his absence— a violin lesson with his tutor upstairs – and asks if I mind waiting for two hours. 'Another test' is what I think, so I say that I can wait. We sit together in silence for a while, then, as if her inner core of restraint has broken, she asks how I know the boy and if I really am his girlfriend. So, I tell her what happened except the part when he said it was all just a pretence. She looks surprised when I finish the story and is trapped in her thoughts for a while. Then she says, 'Well, if you are my stepson's girlfriend, we should get to know each other more.' Her perfectly sculpted face does not show any traces of sarcasm. She means it and I believe her. So, we talk for two hours until a housemaid comes in and announces that the boy has finished his lesson and will join us soon.

After the housemate leaves, I turn into a ball of nerves and one of my feet starts tapping again. I am expecting the lady to chide me like other adults for my inappropriate manner, but she just looks curiously at me. Then, I can't believe my eyes when I see her feet start moving. It is as if she is learning how to break the rule of Thai etiquette for the first time. I giggle before I can stop myself. The lady sees me and giggles, too.

When the boy arrives, he sees the lady and I laugh and tap our feet in rhythm. He clears his throat. We both compose ourselves. Then, the lady stands up to leave. Before she goes, she

reprimands him for not telling her about me - his new girlfriend - and says she would like to see me again.

As soon as she leaves, the boy confronts me. 'What are you doing here? What nonsense have you told my stepmother?'

'I just told her the truth that we are dating.'

He cringes. 'We were just pretending. It didn't mean anything. Don't you feel ashamed being a stalker now?'

'A promise is a promise, and I'm holding you to it.'

The look of disgust is apparent on his face. I have expected this, but it hurts nonetheless.

'You should leave now,' he says and walks away.

I keep going back to his house for weeks. He refuses to see me every time, but he can't stop his stepmom from letting me inside the house. I tell his family we are doing group projects or that I am helping with his homework. Most of the time, I end up talking to his stepmother. Despite our differences in age, social class, and upbringing, we get along quite well. She gives me beauty tips while I teach her how to make a stone skip across water or how to let herself go by singing in the shower. I don't know if the boy notices the changes in his stepmother, but there is nothing he can do to stop me from being there, or to stop his stepmother from being my hostess. My desire to see him grows smaller and smaller, and I begin to care less about spending time with him at all.

One day, I arrive at the boy's house as usual, but when the housemaid takes me to the living room, the lady is not there. Instead, a stout middle-aged man is sitting on one of the couches. He is the boy's father. I remember seeing his face in the newspaper – a politician from the Opposition Party. From his surly look, I know my witty remarks or charm won't work on him.

This is a man of power whose authority is indisputable. I wait for him to make the first move, and like an adept politician, he dances around the subject skilfully with small talk to gather information before revealing his intention: I make his son feel uncomfortable with my pretentious ‘girlfriend’ assertion and have created an unnecessary rift between his wife and son. He also claims that my frequent visits have drawn his wife away from her responsibilities and that my ‘unconventional behaviours’ might be a bad influence on his son. He suggests, strongly I might add, that I shouldn’t come to the house anymore for the benefit of everyone, including myself, since going to a boy’s house could ruin my reputation, something that a proper Thai girl should not do. I believe I have done nothing wrong, that everything he says is a false accusation, but my cheeks are flushed. He just wants his son and wife under his control, and it does not matter what my intentions are; it is people’s perceptions of my actions that actually count in this world. I will always be judged and criticised for my appearance and actions towards others. The truth is so depressing that there is no chance for possible counterattacks. As I leave the drawing room, I see the boy standing outside. He has not been waiting to say goodbye to me. He whispers something that I will never forget: ‘The world will be a better place if you just ... die.’

I feel as if someone has punched me in the stomach. My throat tightens and I have to swallow back tears before he can see them. I walk quickly out of the house, and out of their lives.

Driving in Bangkok

After pulling the driver's seat forward, adjusting the rear-view mirror, putting on the seatbelt, I am ready to drive. I put the car into reverse, slowly moving it out of the garage, and missing a hibiscus pot on the left by a few inches. My heart keeps pounding until the whole car is out onto the driveway. The front gate is already open. My cousin is waving his hands, signalling to me to drive out. The front of the car juts out two feet before another car's horn on the road blares, forcing me to reverse back inside. My cousin puts his hands up in apology. I move the car forward again. There is no horn blast this time. I drive on the byroad and take a few turns before joining the main road. I do not know where to go, and drive slowly. The cars that overtake me do not frighten me as much as the bikers, bus drivers, and taxi drivers. The buses slither from the right to the middle and left lane in a heartbeat, sometimes they stop in the middle lane to let the passengers in and out in less than five seconds. The taxis are no better: apart from the lanes slithering, they stop in the no-parking zone to pick up the waving passengers on the sidewalk without signalling.

After driving in circles on the chaotic main road, the constant stress forces me to call it a day. I return home after a ten-minute ride, mentally worn-out. No more driving in Bangkok.

The Grand Exam

1

The alarm beeped. Time had run out. I put down my pen and checked my score against the answer sheet. 74 out of 100. Not good enough. I threw the paper in the overflowing bin and it fell to the floor. Pulling a new stack of paper from the shelf, I set the alarm clock for the next hour and started the process again. The alarm went off, I checked again - 72. Unacceptable. I pounded my fists on the desk in frustration. Time was running out. The Grand Exam was closing in. I needed a higher score.

A knock on the door. Mother entered and put a tray on the table. I gave it a quick glance, and I could already taste the bland flavour in my mouth. The usual healthy stuff – boiled rice with poached sea bass and steamed carrots and broccoli, chopped pieces of apples in a bowl, and a small bottle of Brand's essence of chicken. I put the paper away and started eating. I left the bottle for last, pinching my nose while swallowing the vile, dark brown liquid as fast as I could. Knowing it was good for my brain did not make the swallowing easier. When I finished, we started our ritual.

She asked me what I had learned today at the tutoring school. I recounted my lessons while she flipped the pages on the school's textbook to check if I was making things up. When I paused, she lifted her eyes off the page and stared at me expectantly, giving me exactly ten seconds to continue or risk being punished. I managed to give the right answer and continued my report until she was satisfied that today's lessons had seeped into my brain. She collected the empty bowls and plates, and I put the stack of sheets back in front of me, pen in hand. As

she was about to leave, she saw the crumbled ball of paper on the floor. My heart pounded fast as she unfolded the paper with my pathetic score marking in red pen.

'That score won't get you into a good secondary school, not to mention a medical school. Be more focused, Sakol,' she said.

'Yes, mother.'

The door closed. I clenched the red pen in my hand as hard as possible but it did not break. Damn Uni-ball.

2

Weekdays

06.00 Wake up.

06.30 Dressed, eat breakfast

06.45 Mum drives me to school. Stuck in traffic jam for at least an hour.

07.45 Arrive at Tanompit Primary School (One of the top ten in the country!)

16.30 After-school tutoring

18.00 Picked up by mother

19.00 Arrive home – have dinner – start revising

22.00 Shower and Bed. Dreaming of free weekends.

Weekends

07.00 Wake up

08.00 Dressed, eat breakfast

09.00 Dropped at a tutoring school downtown

12.00 Math class

14.00 English class
16.00 Picked up by mother
17.00 Arrive home – start revising
19.00 Dinner – doing homework – more revising
22.00 Go to bed. Dreaming Monday never comes.

3

Looking back, I wonder how I survived my childhood ritual without turning mad. I remember complaining about not having free time to mother. She told me to be patient and that I must endure; all great men made sacrifices through hard work; quality time spent today led to a quality career in the future, and so on. Before I could argue, she would shut me up with a single sentence: ‘You’re not going to disappoint me like your father, are you?’ I always answered no.

I hate my mother.

4

A To Do List Before I Die

1. Eat French fries, burgers, pizzas, and ice creams, all at the same time, until my veins are clogged with fats. If a heart attack happened then and there, it wouldn’t matter.
2. Watch all Dragon Ball episodes until I know all the characters' names and their special powers.

3. Read silly comic books and laugh as loudly as I can even when the jokes are flat or full of crap.
4. Buy the most expensive bicycle money can buy and name it after my first bike 'Mod' in honour of its loyal three-year-service up until mother discharged it and gave it away to a kid next door (I wanted more time to ride around the neighbourhood and refused to go home in time for supper, thus ruining the day's schedule).
5. Pay a first-grade detective to find proof that mother is not really my mother.

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Khun Ya came to visit today. I was happy, mum wasn't. She bought me a toy car: a red Lamborghini that sprinted forward by itself when you pulled it backward. Like hopping frogs, I kept pushing it backward and jumping forward to catch the car as it wound its way on the floor. Mum told me to stop playing and to do my homework. I said I had finished it but mum told me to read books for the classes on Monday. I hesitated. She told me to play somewhere else; the adults need to talk. So I left, but not too far, just around the corner in the hallway where I could hear their conversation.

'So Jittima, how are you and Sakol?' Khun Ya started.

'Fine.'

'Do you need any helping hands? I can lend you one of my housemaids if you want.'

'I can do the chores myself. I'm not crippled.'

'What about money? Is the job at the university enough to pay the bills?'

'We'll manage.'

‘You know, if it is for Sakol’s education, I am willing to support him as far as he can go. We all want a bright future for him, don’t we?’

‘If you really want him to succeed, you should stop buying him unnecessary gifts.’

‘You mean the toy car? It’s just a little present for my grandson. Where’s the harm in that?’

‘I will not raise my boy like a rich, spoiled child. I don’t want him to grow up and be like his father.’

Khun Ya took a long sigh. I was eager to hear more about father. He had always been a sensitive subject which mum rarely touched.

‘After twelve years and you still can’t forgive him,’ says Khun Ya.

‘No.’

A few minutes passed.

‘I think you should leave now,’ Mum says.

I panicked and ran into the room. Khun Ya stood up and walked to the front door. I followed her and hugged her from behind. I started crying too. ‘Please don’t go. Take me with you.’

Khun Ya just said ‘Take care of yourself and be a good boy, all right. Goodbye my dear.’

I saw Khun Ya again at my secondary school graduation ceremony. She said my father would be proud of me if he was still alive. I told her that mother never told me how he died, and I was too little to remember anything. Khun Ya looked embarrassed when she said, ‘It’s too shameful to say. Better let the truth die with him. Just know that he loves you very much.’ I tried to push her for more information, but she would not speak again.

It was much, much later that I had learned from my drunken mother that my father was ‘a bankrupt businessman who was shot dead in a motel by a gangster in a dispute over a whore.’

Characters - The principal (P), mum (M), me (I)

Setting - The principal's office

Situation – In trouble

P: As you can see, Miss Jittima, we're in a difficult situation here. Sakol and his classmates did not just skip a class. They left the school unauthorized during school time, and we take this kind of action seriously.

I: The class was cancelled. We just wanted to eat ice cream nearby.

M: Be quiet, Sakol. (To P.) And how did the kids pass the entrance guard?

P: It's embarrassing to admit that our elderly guard tends to take a quick nap in the afternoon, but in this case, his drinking bottle seemed to be tampered with. Care to tell me what it is, young man?

I: Alcohol, sir.

M: What? Where did you get that?

I: From the kitchen cupboard.

M: I can't believe this. (To P.) You must understand that Sakol has always been a good boy and he would never do this by himself. Other kids must have forced him to do it.

P: Whatever his intention, he must be punished like the other kids. He will be suspended for two weeks.

M: That's insane! The Grand Exam is coming and he needs those classes.

P: There is nothing I can do. I am sorry.

M: Let's go Sakol.

I: Yes, mother.

Outside the principal's office.

I: So, I don't have to go to school for two weeks, right? Can we go to the beach?

M: No. I'll hire a private tutor to teach you at home. Forget the school. We'll tighten up your schedule. So little time left before the grand exam! Five hours of sleep should be enough.

I: ...

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The day of the Grand Exam began with a throbbing in my head. Little sleep, little food, and too many eye-strained nights on books had turned me into a walking zombie this morning. Our car slowly joined the crawling line of parents' cars dropping kids off. Mum was drumming her long fingers on the wheel and asking the same questions for the millionth time: Had I brought the stationeries, the documents, and student id? Did I have any last-minute questions concerning the exam? My wrist watch, was it accurate? Zombie Sakol could not handle these questions anymore so he told his mother to stop the car. He would walk by himself.

'Are you sure? I could just drop you a little further...'

'No.'

The car stopped. I got out. I don't know if I even closed the door properly, and then I joined a steady stream of students in uniform.

The exam wasn't that hard. I finished it in an hour and took a nap with my head on the table. I listened to a ticking clock, hoping for the end to come sooner rather than later.

Superstitions

One of the superstitions I have encountered in Thai traditional sports like boxing is the offering of food to the spirits of foregone masters. It is not surprising to find boxing rituals dedicated to these spirits, whether it be Ram Muai in the ring or the Wai Kru ceremony. The one I found odd was the act of offering every plate of food to the spirits by lifting up a plate or a glass, holding it for a moment, and set it down before repeating the process once more. The double plate lifting puzzled me when I had my first meal with a group of Thai traditional boxers. We had just finished practising and I felt like I could eat a whole pig. Shortly after we found a table in a local restaurant, the food arrived. I held the soda in one hand while the other dug into the mountain of curry and rice on my plate. Before I put the spoon in my mouth, though, I saw that no one else was touching the food. They had all closed their eyes, holding plates of food in their hands. I stopped eating, unsure what to do. They opened their eyes and put the plates back down. I readied the spoon to my mouth but they repeated the process again. To be safe, I waited until they took their first mouthfuls before I followed.

It felt so surreal like having a séance in the middle of a busy restaurant. It happened another three or four times before I asked why they did it. The first raising of the plates, they explained, was the food offering for forgone masters who had invented and passed on the martial arts. The second was for their own ancestors. The time between each repetition was the eating time for the spirits. After that, I followed their steps. Although my sceptic thoughts stopped me from fully appreciating the sacred gesture, doing something together as a group was good for the bonding process. Whether I believed in ghosts or not, there was no harm in having good thoughts and doing good deeds, which would eventually bring good karma. That was the Thai belief.

Welcome to the Club

Loud grunts echo in the hot evening air under the University's stadium. Sportsmen tolerate any kinds of weather, and Olan admires them as he watches members of various sports clubs go about their things. He can hear thumping sounds of flesh against sports mats and shouting and cheering behind the mesh panels that separate the space under the tiered seating from the rest of the campus.

The sun starts to descend around an hour later. Olan is still sitting at his usual spot: a table in a café opposite the stadium facing Thai Boxing Club, a sketch pad opened and a pencil ready in his hand. There are few people in the café at six o'clock in the evening but at the club – only a stone-throw away – the members are slowly filling in one of the partitioned spaces behind the mesh panels. After warming up, the members are ready to practice their scheduled routines. Lanky and Slanted Eyes, seniors judging by their looks, pair up and run through their routines. They have been doing it for a week now, perfecting the timing of each punch and kick until it becomes part of one smooth motion. In one corner three juniors are practising the basic routines and walks under Plaited Hair's watchful eyes. She never hesitates to point out their mistakes and correct their stances.

Olan pulls out his sketchbook from his backpack and starts sketching them. He used to be just a watcher, at first. They are just people, the same as a million others on the planet, and he thought what they did was ordinary; that it was the same as the one he saw on a tourist leaflet introducing Thai culture. The more he watched their interactions with each other, though, the more he was attracted to them and their art. Now, it turns out that watching people practising Thai boxing in real life is quite different from watching video clips on the internet. He admires

their camaraderie and their efforts to hone their skills. They have become his entertainment and obsession.

He cannot take photos and record videos without asking their permission and revealing himself. Even if he could, he would choose pencils and paper anyway. He likes the less-real look of the real world on paper sketches more than the exact portrait of reality on camera.

When he looks up again, a middle-aged man has joined the group. The club members stop in their tracks and give the newcomer formal greetings, their hands pressed in front of their chests. He gestures at them to go back to their routines and they obey. Olan once heard the members call the man by his nickname, Tob, instead of his first name like other lecturers and then the title 'Kru' instead of 'Ajarn.' The name shows closeness and respect, something Olan has never experienced with any teachers.

Olan flips through the paper on his sketchpad to an empty page. He knows he is going to see the 'real deal' soon. Despite a stout figure and a pair of round glasses, Kru Tob has quick reflexes and his boxing movements are smooth and swift. Olan's previous sketches of Kru Tob's techniques were rough and rushed and he hopes that today he will see enough to improve on them.

After Kru Tob finishes his warm-up, the club members gather and run their routine for Kru Tob to watch. He tweaks some of Lanky's and Slanted-Eyes' movements, adding one or two forms that include bent knees and spring kicks between sequences. Even with very little knowledge of Thai boxing, he can already see the improvement of Lanky's and Slanted Eyes' routines. Then, Kru Tob places himself in Lanky's place and pairs up with Slanted-Eyes. The training sequences in the hand of a master look suddenly real and thrilling. It ends too soon for Olan's liking, but he gets what he needs. While his eyes are glued to the scene in front of him, his pencil-hand sweeps the white paper, filling it with straight and curved lines. He glances

back to the paper only two or three times. It is a rough draft of figures in various positions, but he will fix it at home later.

When Olan looks up again, Kru Tob has moved on to the juniors. He is showing them the basic stances and how to move forward and backward. After striding back and forth for a dozen times, one of the Junior is sloppy and his knees lift up only a little instead of up to the waistline. Olan guesses the bloke is fed up, and even a non-athlete like Olan understands. The way they train fascinates Olan: the specific way they walk back and forth across the room with fists ready on their chests; the repetition of the routine that bored him at first but then fascinated Olan when he saw Kru Tob show the Juniors how swiftly he can attack or defend himself within one step. Patience is what the juniors seem to lack, but it is what Olan has aplenty, coming from his habit of watching.

Olan likes to watch people but never wants to interact with them more than he needs to. He was caught staring at people a few times, and some of them gave him trouble. His unnaturally big, round, deep-set eyes upset people, especially when they know they are the objects of his gaze.

The sky has turned dark now. Olan is the only client left in the café. It is almost closing time and he hears the shop assistant busy himself with tying up bin bags. The intentional clangs of coffee equipment in the sink are signs for him to leave. Olan puts his pencil and sketchpad in his backpack while watching the club members finish their training. He leaves the shop with his back to the stadium and doesn't realise he is followed until a hand touches his shoulder from behind. His shoulder jerks up and he lets out a cry of fear. It is pathetic, he knows, and the worst part is turning back and seeing Plaited Hair. At least she's not laughing at him, but she's not smiling either.

'Am I that scary?' she asks.

‘No, but you scared the shit out of me. No one has sneaked up on me, ever.’

‘Not even your siblings?’

‘I’m an only child.’

‘Your friends, then.’

‘I don’t have any friends.’ Olan means to say, “not many friends,” but it is too late to lie.

A flash of pity runs across her face, but she covers it with annoyance instead.

‘Well, you shouldn't stare at people anyway. Like the way you were staring at us at the club.’

She sees his terrified face and says, ‘Yes, we saw you.’

‘What's wrong with looking?’

‘It's creepy and very rude. People feel uncomfortable and you're invading their space. Need I say more?’

‘I get it. Someone taught me that lesson before.’ Olan’s hand touches a thin line on his right temple.

Plaited Hair starts to say something but changes her mind.

‘You've seen us practise. Why don't you come and see our performance next Friday? On stage at the Guild.’

He manages to say okay but is too stunned to say anything else. Plaited Hair nods and walks away. His head has gone blank and he forgets to ask her name and to wonder why she hasn’t asked his.

Dinner at home usually comes in boxes of ready meals. Texts from Olan’s mother in the evenings bring different excuses. ‘Doing O.T.’ and ‘Dinner with clients’ are the most common. Today, it’s just ‘Busy.’ He should be used to it by now. He knows his mother had worked twice as hard after his father left when Olan was eleven years old. She always says that everything

she does is for him and his future, but it would be nice if she asks what he wants from time to time. He is a grown up now, and he does not need his mommy all the time; well, not all the time, but some time, a moment, a heart-warming second would be nice.

Olan wolfs down a box of rice and green curry in ten minutes, then locks himself in his bedroom. He pulls out his sketchpad from his bag and starts copying the drawings onto several larger pieces of paper. When he finishes, Olan puts the sheets on the wall next to each other until the rows of sheets resemble a storyboard. After looking at the wall with satisfaction, he mimics the punches and kicks he saw earlier. His eight square-metre single bedroom limits him to standing postures, but his short limbs mean he can move around without knocking anything down. He even manages to shout like action heroes do in the movies, which sounds like ‘Rah’ and ‘Phow’, to motivate himself and to make it more believable.

He finishes ten forms fifteen minutes later. Not the full routines they do in the club, but it’s all he can draw and remember so far. Pathetic, he knows, but not bad for an outsider who knows little about Muay Thai.

For a moment, he wonders how silly he looks. The drawings on the wall and his role-playing action sequences are weird. No one would understand how his art speaks to his heart and how it is the only connection he has with the people at the club and their arts.

After taking a shower, he lies on his bed in the dark, thinking about Plaited Hair and her invitation to their performance. Should he go? It was just to look, as usual, but this time they would know he was watching. There are people’s expectations and then there are their reactions. It could go either way: they would think he’s obnoxious and want to teach him a lesson, or they would pity him because of his weirdness, and want to be charitable. He tosses and turns for a long time.

When he has almost drifted into sleep, he is woken up by the sound of an opening door. He looks at his charging phone on a bedside table - a quarter past eleven. The sounds signal his mother's arrival. He hears keys jingle and he pictures them being dropped into the velvet-lined box on the cupboard by the door. Plastic Bags with goods thud on the parquet floor while she takes off her shoes, followed by the brisk, heavy footsteps to the kitchen with the fridge's doors opening and closing. The footsteps come nearer to his bedroom door until they stop. Olan holds his breath, looking at the door with anticipation.

The knock never comes.

The Guild's exhibition hall is packed with people as Olan walks in on Friday afternoon – the club's Open Day. First, he checks the poster next to the stage for the Thai Boxing Club performance. He's got half an hour to spare, so he wanders around. Like a poster exhibition, each club has its own information display to show the club's information and activities' photos. After a few turns, he finds the Thai boxing club at the back of the hall. He sees Plaited Hair talk to a group of first years while Lanky and Slanted Eyes warm up behind the screen. Then, a hand touches his shoulder from behind. At least this time he does not scream.

It's Kru Tob. He asks, 'Care to join the club?'

Olan instinctively clams up. He is always nervous about looking someone in the eye, and Kru Tob's wide smile and steely stare make him more nervous than usual. Kru Tob ignores his silence and introduces himself. He talks about the club's history and its members. He walks towards the club's corner and like a loyal dog, Olan follows.

Kru Tob introduces the present members of the club: Plaited Hair is Pear, a third-year in Accounting; Lanky and Slanted Eyes are Young and Mo, fourth-years in Engineering; the three newbies who have just arrived are Joe, Pek, and Park, second-years in Science. They all look

up and down at him, whether it is to assess him as a potential friend or foe he can't tell. It is not long before they scatter back to their business, and not long after that, they leave the stall for the stage performance.

Kru Tob asks Olan to sit beside him at the stall's table. Olan is anxious to stay, but he agrees to do so out of respect and curiosity. He wonders what it would be like to watch something intently with another person; to see the reactions of a fellow watcher.

A Thai Traditional song playing through the speakers signals the start of the performance. Olan is glad he has stayed with Kru Tob. Kru Tob has an eye for details and is great at explaining martial arts. He explains that their dancing around the stages is a pre-fighting rite called Wai Khru Ram Muay to pay respect to the teachers who have passed on their knowledge to them. Olan is fascinated by their graceful dances that contradict the strong and brutal side of Muay Thai he saw earlier in their training. He had never thought that such lethal and graceful forms could exist together.

Next comes Pear leading Joe, Pek, and Park on their walking routine. This time, each of them carries a metre-long bamboo stick in their hands. Wooden sword replicas, Olan assumes. Then, they get into pairs and take turns at defence and attack. The synchronised moving figures hypnotise him, several minds combined into a single unit through discipline and teamwork. He knows that to achieve order and discipline one must lose part of oneself to merge with the whole, but he envies them. Being individual means being alone, and the more he sees the club members' weightless efforts to merge, despite their backgrounds and differences, the more he wants to let his guard down and go with the flow.

Then the song changes to a faster one and it is Young and Mo's turn. They circle each other with light footwork, almost as though they are dancing but with shorter and quicker steps than what they did in the Wai Khru Ram Muay. They launch teasing swings and jabs for a few times,

then a series of punches and kicks that are followed by the cheering of the crowd. The pain is not real, but the thrill in the air is the same. Kru Tob acts like a commentator, calling out the names of the postures they are using: Salab Funpla, Paksa Waekrang, Jorakae Fadhang, Hakkaw Erawan. The list goes on, but the ones Olan remembers are beautiful rhymes like the epic poem of Ramayana. The names conjure the images of animals battling one another like those in Chinese Kung Fu movies. It is the most impressive stunt he has ever seen in real life. The show ends with a climax of Mo stepping onto Young's lap and kneeling him in the head. Theatrical as it is, the shock still shakes him, a shock not just of excitement but of desperation. All the club members perform better than the rehearsals, so much better that he wonders if he can ever be as good as them. No matter how many hours he spends observing their training or how many pictures he draws, he will never be able to do what they do. And just like that, his bliss is gone like a deflated balloon.

'What happened? Didn't you like the show?' Kru Tob asks when he sees Olan's face.

'The show's great. Everyone's great.' Olan can't hide the bitterness in his voice.

'You seem upset. But I thought you like watching people.' Kru Tob raises his eyebrow.

Olan turns to look at Kru Tob, fearing for the meaning and intent of that last sentence. Olan begins to think Kru Tob's smile is actually a smirk. He knows Olan has been watching them at the club.

'You knew?' Olan asks to be sure.

'Yes, for a month or so,' Kru Tob says. 'They were nervous. Some were angry and wanted to use force, but I told them to wait. You didn't take photos of us when you could, so maybe you were not a stalker. But we still don't know if you are friend or foe.'

Olan listens carefully, and he hears no animosity in Kru Tob's voice. A question pops into his head. 'Did you send Plaited....I mean Pear to talk to me?'

‘Guilty as charged.’

Olan is crestfallen.

‘Look. I just need to know what kind of person you are, so I told her to invite you here. And here you are.’

Olan doesn't know what to say. So Kru Tob changes the subject.

‘Do you like drawing?’

‘Yeah. You noticed that too?’

‘Well, I suspected it. Your hands were moving so you must have been writing or drawing all the while. So, what did you do with the drawings?’

Olan feels like he's been subtly interrogated. ‘I collect them. In a book.’ Olan doesn't say he uses them as a personal guidebook to Muay Thai.

‘That's great. I have an idea or two. Would you let me see them sometime, in the future, when we get to know each other more?’

Olan is not sure what to say. He needs time to think, but then feels tired of being afraid. ‘Yes. I'd love to do that.’

‘That's settled then. I hope to see you next Monday. Inside the club, this time.’

Olan wonders what he has just got himself into.

After over a month of joining the Muay Thai Club, Olan wonders why he decided on this path if not to torture himself. He does not do sports unless necessary. The conversation with his mother usually revolves around his grades and career path. After all, he already knows what to do after graduation: helping his mother's business selling whitening cream. When he told her about the club, she was puzzled at his interest in Muay Thai, but like a fad, he thought she

believed it would go away in time. She said she was not opposed to it as long as his grades were not affected.

A little rest on weekends does not lessen the ache weekdays bring. Olan barely has time to pick up his pencil and sketchbook anymore since he is too tired to do anything but eat and sleep after coming home around ten in the evening. His mother notices his new pattern and is surprised to see him more often.

Olan is put to train in the juniors' group, naturally. Watching and remembering their moves beforehand does not accelerate his progress. Being a Senior does not mean he gets away from Joe's, Pek's, and Park's laughter or Pear's quick slaps on his arms and legs when he makes mistakes. Young and Mo, the two most senior members, act as instructors most of the time. Kru Tob comes in to see their progress from time to time, but not as often as the time before the performance at the Guild. Olan was excited when Kru Tob saw Olan's drawings and mentioned using some on the club's T-shirts, but there has been little talk about it since then. He stops sulking when they start to show him how to use other weapons such as two-handed swords – the wooden ones for practice and the steel ones for live performance – lances, and Khom Faek, a pair of foot-long pieces of wood in the shape of rhombuses. He remembers asking Mo if it is safe to use steel swords, even blunt ones, in a performance. Mo's answer is, 'It is safe to use swords when you're ready to use them. It doesn't matter if they're wood or steel.' Olan can't get rid of the image of sparks flying from swords clashing together, though.

No matter how much he complains to himself, though, being in the club teaches him many things. Most of them, surprisingly, are not about boxing. He learns mostly about the people he has been practising with. And, somehow, he ends up being part of the group without knowing it. After observing them for a long time, interacting with them take some time to get used to.

He manages by imitating them even when they do strange things such as lifting food bowls in the air and pray before eating.

All seems to go well, except for his grades, and with it, his relationship with his mother. It is his fault not prioritizing his studies. He has come to think that grades are less important than what he gains from being in the club. His mother disagrees and believes that the club is going to take away her son along with his future. There are times when Olan nearly says she never seemed to care much about him, so why start now, but he stops himself.

Six months have passed, and his grades do not improve. His mother gives him an ultimatum to quit. He refuses. She almost has a stroke. He gives in but with one condition: he will quit after the club's big performance at the Guild in three months' time. She grudgingly accepts. He plans to secretly visit the club from time to time. To lessen the guilt, he tells himself that what she does not know cannot hurt her.

'I'm not ready. I can't do it.' Olan keeps repeating this while he paces back and forth at the Guild's backstage. Everyone in the club keeps telling him it will be all right, but he always screws up somewhere between the tenth and twelfth movement. Even if he can remember the sequence, he still feels lacking in one area or the other; his right hook needs to be stronger, his pace between movements slicker. A million things could go wrong, but he is not afraid of injuries. The scariest thing is the other club members' disappointment especially from his sparring partner Pear, and from Kru Tob.

Someone is poking his back. It is Pear. With a look of determination, she says, 'It's time.' As he follows her, Olan feels like walking to the end.

'I haven't seen you much lately,' says Pear.

‘Oh, my mother’s been poorly. I can’t be here as much as before, I’m afraid. I have to focus more on my studies, too. I hope you guys understand,’ says Olan.

‘Of course, if that’s what you want.’ Pear hesitates before she says, ‘It’s been three weeks since the performance. How are you holding up?’

‘Fine. Cool. Whatever.’ Olan still cannot bring himself to look at Pear’s face.

‘Look at me when I’m talking to you!’

Pear’s raised voice startles him and his eyes dart to a thin pink line under her right eyebrow. It is a reminder of his failure on that day when he missed his cue and his two-handed steel blade grazed her right temple. No one noticed the seeping blood, and Pear regained her focus so fast that it seemed like only a beat before their sparring went back into rhythm. After the show ended, she kept saying it was all right. He could not break down in front of everyone, so he said sorry and left. He has managed to avoid Pear and Kru Tob for some time. Until today.

‘What’s with the noise, Pear?’ Kru Tob says as he walks in.

‘Olan’s been avoiding me *ka*, Kru Tob.’ Pear crosses her arms. Olan just wants to disappear into thin air right that instant.

‘Is that what you’ve been doing, Olan?’

Olan stares at the floor.

‘I’m sure he has his reasons.’

Pear is about to say something else, but she bites her lips instead. Kru Tob walks closer and his face is close to Olan’s now. ‘He knows there’s no shame in making mistakes. No one blames him for what happened.’

Olan feels heat rushing to his face. He is avoiding eye contact with both of them because he is afraid to see the disappointment in their eyes, but when Kru Tob’s hand touches his head gently he cannot help but look into that pair of eyes. They are not scrutinising him but are telling

him something: not words but feelings; of kindness and warmth. At that moment, he can finally imagine a feeling that is the opposite of abandonment. Being a failure and a weirdo as he is, Kru Tob accepts him wholly. Pear and the others make room for him at the club, a space where he can be himself and more. He cannot control the tears that are running down his cheeks, and he does not want to stop. Kru Tob and Pear are surprised by his outburst because he never lets them see his vulnerable side. He knows now that there has always been a fear in his heart that whoever gets closer will eventually leave him when they see how broken he is. He was wrong about Kru Tob and Pear, and it was too late for him to change anything because he made a promise to his mother, but they deserve an explanation.

Olan uses the back of his hands to wipe away the mucus and tears. Words tumble out of Olan's mouth, but he will not let them fail him this time. He talks about his loneliness, responsibilities, and regrets, and the promise he has made with his mother of not coming to the club again. When he finishes, Kru Tob says, 'You do what you think is right. Whatever path you choose, know that you are a part of us, of the club.' Pear confirms Kru Tob's words by giving him a hug. Olan feels relieved. There is nothing more to be said.

When the grades of his final semester are published online, Olan is dreading his mother's reaction. He prints the grades out, puts them on the kitchen table, and stays in his room. He hears the front door open around half past seven in the evening. His heart beats faster when the footsteps reach the kitchen. A silent pause stretches a moment before the footsteps move again, this time towards his bedroom. He waits for three knocks before he answers, 'Yes, mother?'

'Let's have dinner. Then we'll talk,' she says.

Olan sighs before he opens the door and follows her to the kitchen. He sits on the chair looking down at the paper while his mother takes out two boxes of takeaway food from a plastic

bag, empties the food onto two plates, and puts one in front of him. As they eat in silence, Olan barely tastes the egg fried rice on his plate. Once his mother has finished her meal, she pushes the plate aside and grabs the paper.

‘So, you’ve finished your studies. When is Graduation Day?’

‘The third and fourth of July. I’ll tell you when the exact date and time are announced.’

‘Good. I’ll clear my schedule for both days, just in case.’

‘Great.’ Olan is paying attention to any changes in his mother’s expression. He says, ‘How’s your health?’

She lifts an eyebrow. ‘Nothing a little sleep couldn’t fix.’

‘And your blood pressure?’

‘A little high. Where is this conversation going?’

‘Aren’t you upset about my grades?’ Olan asks, pointing at the paper. ‘They’re not as good as before I joined the club, but I’ve tried my best. I worked hard and put my focus back on my studies, just like I promised. You can start scolding now, if you want, just don’t have another stroke.’

His mother looks taken aback. She is quiet for a few seconds before she says, ‘I’m sad to hear that that’s what you think of me. We’ve all made mistakes and sacrifices, but I know you won’t let me down in the end. Not like your father.’

‘But the grades...,’ Olan says.

‘... are not the end of the world,’ she interrupts. ‘It’s time to grow up. Soon you’ll be working with me, so let’s leave the club and the studies behind and start a new chapter.’

Olan is too shocked to say anything. His mother takes his silence as a cue to end the conversation. She leaves him alone in the kitchen. He sits there for a very long time.

A year after graduation, Olan decides to visit the club. He has not set foot there since his heart-pouring moment with Pear and Kru Tob, but he keeps in touch with them from time to time, at least at first. His surprise visit fails when he sees that another club has taken the space instead. He asks a guy wearing white robes, a Taekwondo player Olan assumes, about the Thai Boxing Club and his simple answer – ‘It’s gone’– shatters Olan’s world again.

This Is Not about My Mother's Death

Let's say this story is not about my mother's death. Suppose there is a girl named Baralee, not Pancharle, and her mother is dead.

Baralee Tantigarn isn't sure why the grown-ups try to cover her eyes. If they think a five, sorry, almost six-year-old girl cannot cope seeing a dead body, they are wrong. She is not like other wimpy children. After all, it is she who found the body.

Baralee remembers waking up an hour ago. It looked like any other morning apart from a small difference. It was the time on the Hello Kitty alarm clock on the bedside table – seven o'clock. Mother always woke Baralee up at half past six, never later than that, not even a minute later however much she begged. It was a good surprise, and she was tempted to go back to sleep. She turned over and saw her mother lying next to her, still lying on her back. Baralee poked her mother's arm, but she did not stir. When Baralee sat up and leaned closer, she saw white foam pooling in the corner of her mother's mouth. Her reaction was far from panic. All she felt was a small surprise of the unexpected. She knew her mother was ill, bad kidneys, and that what she was seeing had something to do with that. She tried shaking her mother again, but she did not wake up. The first thing she realised was that she wouldn't be going to school today. The second thing was that she had to tell an adult to wake her mother. Baralee had always believed that adults could fix any problems and things would be all right in the end.

Grandma's voice brings her back to the present. Right now, things are far from all right. Grandma, still in her nightgown, has put herself between Baralee and the bed and hugs her tightly. Baralee tries to squeeze out of the hug to shake her mother again, but Grandma won't let her. Soon Grandpa, Uncle Joe and his wife – Aunt Meg – all show up, walk around, and

speak quickly to each other. To Baralee, the adults are doing a poor job of fixing her mother, and she is disappointed.

At her mother's funeral, Baralee is surprised to see a large group of people. Many of the adults keep staring at her, which makes her feel uncomfortable. So, she tells Grandma that she needs to pee. But Grandma is talking with her friends, so she asks Uncle Joe to accompany her instead.

When they are in front of the restroom, Baralee tells her uncle that she does not need to pee anymore and that she wants to explore the temple instead. Without waiting for her uncle's approval, she sprints off laughing. The thrill of playing tag, dodging her uncle's grasp, has her screaming with delight as she runs around the pavilion where her mother's casket is on display. The adults are staring at her openly now and gossip – about her no doubt – but she does not care.

It is not long before Baralee is captured by her uncle, which is great because she is beginning to run out of breath. When he takes her back to Grandma, whose face has become red like a tomato. Baralee sits down with a sulky face. Grandma's silence is an indication of a heap of trouble Baralee is going to face when they get back home. Grandma won't be talking to her until she says sorry, and even after that, she will give Baralee the silent treatment for another day or two as a punishment. But Grandma's silence does not stop one of her friends from chiding Baralee.

'Poor child,' the old lady says. 'I know you must be very sad, but it is inappropriate to shout or run around at a funeral. Don't you think your mother would be sad to see you like this?'

Baralee feels annoyed at first to hear a lecture from someone who is not part of the family. Then she grows confused and decides to explain it to the lady.

'I'm not sad. Mother isn't in there anymore.' Baralee points at the casket then she looks up at the sky and says, 'She's up there in heaven.'

The lady looks shocked like she does not know, so Baralee begins her lecture. She showed the lady her two bare hands. 'Body and Soul. Body is here. Soul is in heaven.' One of her bare hands is raised high while the other is lowered down. 'When it rains,' she continues, 'her soul comes down with water drops and voila! My mother is born again.' Baralee opens her arms wide and smiles at the lady.

The lady starts crying and she doesn't seem to stop soon. Baralee is confused, but before she can say anything Uncle Joe leads her away and puts her on a chair in the last row with a picture book on her lap. She was glad of a pleasant distraction from the fact that sometimes an adult, even a very old one, does not get the simple fact of life and death.

Farang and Mia Farang

I hope these letters reach you before your wedding day and that if they do, you will be patient and sympathetic enough to read them. I have written down these thoughts since talking to you in person may not be an option anymore. English is not my mother tongue, and you refused Thai to be yours, so here I am, writing in English to make you understand who I was, where I came from, and how I came to be one of the Mia Farangs, or Thai Brides as you call it.

Dear Lyla,

When you were ten, you asked me once why I married your father who was fifteen years older. I guessed seeing your friends' young parents who were of the same age made you curious. I remember my answer to your question: love knows no boundaries of age. By now you'll know that I lied, but not for the reasons you might think.

I married him for financial security and companionship. Our relationship wasn't full of passion like most young lovers', but I trusted him enough to travel almost six thousand miles from Thailand to the UK.

I met your father through a matchmaking company. It wasn't just loneliness that brought me to their doorstep, but desperation. I remember the day in great detail. I walked into an office building in the commercial district and looked for the company's name in the directory. I noticed that the companies in the building included several visa services for European countries and travel agencies. I pictured a one-stop service for Thai-European couples to meet, get married, apply for visas, and buy tickets to Europe.

When I went into the dating agency's office, the receptionist's eyes scanned me from head to toes and gave me a stack of forms and told me to fill out all of them.

I hated filling out forms.

The questions were not just about my names and contact details, but very detailed ones asking about my physical measurements and sexual preferences. I got paranoid and gave a sneaking look around to see if anyone was near enough to look at my answers. It was during a lunch break with people walking in and out, but no one was paying attention to me.

After completing the forms, I gave them to the receptionist and was told to wait. Not long after that, I was greeted by a woman named Pek who introduced herself as a sales representative. She might have been in her late thirties, the same age I was at the time, but her heavy make-up and tight green dress made her look several years younger. She greeted me warmly, and I guessed she knew what type of client I was. A black pencil skirt and a white blouse suggested a woman working in a respectable workplace, not a bargirl or an escort.

She talked me through the whole process and I was impressed by how practical the company was, transforming a delicate process of relationships, sex, and marriage into a successful business model. She said the security and privacy of both parties were the agency's priority, which was a relief because I had heard about sham agencies where swindlers would pose as agency representatives and trick women into travelling abroad to meet their potential husbands. It was only when the women arrived at the designated country that they realised they had been deceived and were forced into prostitution.

Fifteen minutes after our talk, I paid almost a third of my annual teacher's salary for their services and signed a contract. I thought that was the end of it, but then I was ushered upstairs to get myself ready for the photo shoot. A woman came and tried to fix my look from what I thought was polite and professional into what I would call 'naughty teacher.' She unbuttoned

the two top buttons of my blouse, gently tussled my long, black hair, powdered my face and painted my lips with bright, red lipstick. After that she placed a pair of eyeglasses on my face even after I told her there was nothing wrong with my eyesight. Then, she grabbed a plastic ruler and put it in my hand before she passed me on to a photographer who barked swift orders at me. It was all a blur, and before I knew it the shooting was done.

I walked out of the agency full of unease, trying to reassure myself that it was the right choice, that it was a good investment for my future. Later that week, I found my pictures on the agency's website. A woman with a nervous smile with a-shade-too-red lips looking at a sheet of paper with a ruler in one hand. The background was clearly added later, a blackboard and two shelves of books. I guessed that was one way to make my boring profession look sexy, but I was not sure if it was the message I wanted to send to my future husband. Scrolling down through the pages of the agency's website, the way women like me were presented reminded me of the girls in massage parlours: women sitting in glass rooms, on show like merchandise and ready to be picked by strangers on the other side of the glass.

Dear Lyla,

I don't know what you have heard about me from other people. Was there ever a feeling of shame when your in-laws asked about me and your Thai heritage? I've heard that your husband-to-be is a good man. If he is understanding and compassionate, I'm sure you two can get through any problems thrown in your way. And know this, your father and I always loved you, and whether you remember it or not, so did your grandparents in Thailand.

Your grandfather had always been kind and patient. He was the glue that kept our family together. Your grandmother was the opposite: hot-tempered and cynical, finding faults in

whatever I did. But for you, she had only sweet words. You were a little angel to her: fair-skinned, light brown eyes, curly, brown hair, and pink chubby cheeks. I was always an ugly duckling: dark-skinned, plump and plain. According to my mother, it was a miracle I found a husband who wanted me and had a beautiful baby like you.

You were five years old the last time I took you to see them. The five of us were sitting in the living room on the couch with the television turned on. Your father and grandfather were playing hide and seek with you while your grandmother and I talked about life in the UK. Then, she changed topics abruptly.

‘I need some money,’ she said.

‘What for?’ I asked.

‘I owe some people.’

‘Don’t tell me you’re gambling again.’

‘It wasn’t a lot of money. We just play cards for fun. It is good brain exercise, you know?’

She did not look ashamed at all.

‘You know you could save more money if you spend more time taking care of the shop downstairs than at Aunty Sri’s house for cards.’

‘Don’t lecture me. I’m your mother!’ She raised her voice. You stopped laughing and started crying instead. I tilted my head in the direction of the kitchen, and your father took you there.

When the two of you were out of the room, I hissed back at her.

‘I’m the one who sends money back every month. I’ll say what I want!’

Mum was about to rise but Dad held her hand to his lap. He signalled me to leave the room. I obeyed and stormed out like a fourteen-year-old girl to my old bedroom.

Half an hour later, I heard a knock on my door. I knew it was Dad because Mum never knocked. I let him in. His silence scared me, so I babbled about Mum’s irresponsible money

behaviour; how high the living cost in the UK was; and how ridiculous it seemed to Westerners that a child was expected even after marriage to give money to their unemployed parents every month, like a salary.

Dad did not interrupt. He just stood up when I finished, walked to the door, and said without looking at me, 'If taking care of me and your mother is too much of a burden for you, just say so. Don't cover the fact with excuses. Do whatever you want.'

Lyla, I felt very much alone in the world at that moment.

The next day, I told your father what had happened, and he decided unless there was an emergency, we should focus more on taking care of our family instead of wasting money on my gambling mother. I wanted to protest, but he was the breadwinner, and I believed he knew best.

Before our decision came into action, though, your grandfather had a stroke. He was in the hospital for a day and a half before he passed away. Your grandmother blamed me for his death. When your father informed her of our decision not to support her further, she said I was ungrateful and was no longer her daughter. Your father and I stayed until the funeral and then flew back to the UK. I tried reconnecting with your grandmother, but she would not pick up my phone calls nor answer my letters. I didn't hear from her again until the year before you went to university.

Dear Lyla,

How can I explain what my relationship with your father was like in the beginning? Our communication was not even face-to-face most of the time because I was too shy, and my

English was still very bad. I preferred using chat rooms or computer programs so that I had time to think before committing to words.

Harry and I had been talking online for three months before he finally decided to visit me in Thailand. I am embarrassed to say that I was also talking with two other guys named George and Sam. However, I ended my relationship with the other two long before Harry came to Thailand. Unlike the pleasant correspondence that I had had with your father, Sam's and George's assumptions about Thai women were so outrageous that I had to stop myself from berating them. Once, I even had to tell Sam that not all young Thai women on the street could be bought for sex.

I was tapping my feet on the airport floor when Harry came out through the arrival gate. I sighed with relief when I saw he didn't look that old. Grey hair covered most of his head, but his faded blue jeans made him look cooler and younger. Our eyes met, and he waved to me. I could tell when we embraced each other that he wasn't much taller than me, but he was well-built and in good shape for his age. I thought our conversation was going to be awkward as this was our first meeting face to face, but he was patient when I stuttered broken English. He also did not show any signs of disappointment or boredom like I first feared. It had been more than ten years since I was in a relationship, so I was quite nervous at how I should act around him. He must have sensed my unease for he suggested that I be his tour guide. I refused at first, saying I did not know the tourist attractions well enough, but he insisted. So, I took him into my country and later, into my life.

Dear Lyla,

I wish I could describe to you how beautiful and unique Thailand is. I'm not a poet or a novelist, but I'll try by starting with how I introduced your father to Thailand.

The day after Harry arrived, I showed him the palaces, grand temples, and museums, but I was not really able to tell him the stories of those places. Some historical facts from school textbooks popped into my head, but it was hard and tiring to make a foreigner appreciate the places' ancient past without giving him a full lecture on Thai history. One time I tried too hard to explain the palace's significance to him when he had asked a question simply to break the silence. In the museum, I became muted when he asked me about the artefacts I did not know or care about.

Our awkward morning ended at lunch in a small restaurant that sold simple made-to-order food by Chao Phraya River. He had told me earlier that he wanted to try 'authentic' Thai food and had insisted that he could handle spice. So, I ordered Pad Krapao, a simple plate of rice and stir-fried chicken with chili and basil that appealed to most Thai people. Harry took a mouthful of it and I waited for his response. He smiled after swallowing the food, saying it was delicious. Then he started coughing and his face and ears grew bright red. I ordered another jar of cold water and he gulped it down. The sight of him was so funny that I forgot my manners and laughed out loud. When he was himself again he made a little bow, and said, 'Well, this proves that I still have my charm. You look lovely when you smile. You should do it more often.' I blushed, and he winked at me. 'Now, why don't we go somewhere less touristy? Would you show me your neighbourhood? The places that truly matter to you?'

It was an odd request, I thought, and I was afraid. When he saw the less glamorous side of my neighbourhood, would he think me poor and pathetic? Harry saw my hesitation. 'You don't have to do it if it makes you feel uncomfortable. I just want to know more about who you are, that's all.'

In the afternoon, I showed Harry the fruit market, the wooden bridge across a canal where I had crossed to and from school, and a small temple near my house where I usually went when I was upset and fed the fish in the pond.

I felt more relaxed by the time the sun was starting to set. Harry and I were throwing breadcrumbs to the fish in a canal that ran by the temple.

‘I’ve had a great time today,’ he said.

‘Good, good,’ I replied nonchalantly, thinking it was just a polite compliment.

‘I mean it. I’m glad I got to see a side of Bangkok that I can’t find on any postcards. It’s beautiful. Charming. Just like you.’

He was staring at me intently and I could not meet his eyes, so I looked down at the water instead. A few strands of my long hair fell on my right cheek. Harry reached his arm to tuck my hair behind my ear. My body became tense, and without knowing it, I leaned away from him. He looked hurt and I felt bad for him.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

‘If you don’t feel the same way, just say so.’

‘I have no boyfriend before. Imagine an ugly, fat kid. That’s me.’

‘That’s ridiculous. You’re none of that.’

‘You’re polite. No man wants me. Mother says that every day.’

‘I want you, but if you think I’m too old for you...’

‘No, no. I’m okay. I just need time.’

‘All right. I can give you time. But I’m an old man and God knows how many years I have left.’ Harry winked.

‘Don’t say that.’

‘I’m just kidding. Now you look like a sad puppy,’ Harry teased me, then he said, ‘I’m staying in Thailand for two weeks. We’ll have time to get to know each other more.’

Harry looked at me expectantly, but I did not look at him. Fortunately, he did not bring up the subject again.

Dear Lyla,

I did not marry your father right away, but two weeks were long enough for me to make up my mind. At the end of our trip together to Chiang Mai and Phuket, I realised that it was my last chance of a happy ending. I couldn’t stand seeing myself, a forty-year-old spinster staying at home like a good daughter and spending the rest of my life taking care of my parents.

The trip was amazing. I couldn’t remember the last time I had been on a vacation, carefree without worrying about work or my family. It was as if the weight of all burdens and responsibilities were lifted from my shoulders. Harry was a great travel companion, and over the course of the two weeks, I learned a great deal more about him than from our online chats. The thing I was most impressed by was his gentlemanliness. He treated me like a proper lady and never touched me in a sexual way. Time flew so fast and I regretted having to go back to Bangkok at the end of week two.

Harry and I got out of the taxi in front of my house, a three-story unit sandwiched between a row of commercial buildings.

‘Well, this is it.’ Harry looked at me intently.

‘This is it.’ My voice quivered.

We did not say anything for a moment. Then Harry broke the silence.

‘I really like being with you and I can’t leave without asking if you feel the same.’

He waited for my response. I thought long and hard, weighing the choices in my head. I must admit to you, Lyla, that at that point I did not love your father. On one hand, he had all the qualities I wanted in a man: he was smart, funny, and kind. Marrying him would be my ticket to freedom from the mundane and depressing life of a spinster with my parents. On the other hand, the physical attraction I had always dreamed of was not there. My past relationships had been just one-sided love on my part, but at least with them there were occasional fast-beating-heart moments and sexual fantasies. Also, there was the fear of the unknown; of having to leave everything I knew behind to face life's challenges with a foreigner. Could Harry and I make our relationship work? Could I learn to love him eventually? These were the questions that ran through my head. I needed something to prove that he wouldn't leave me when we arrived in his country.

'I'll take you to see my family before I decide.'

I found Mum and Dad upstairs with the television on showing a soap opera. Their eyes widened when I introduced Harry to them as my boyfriend. They were shocked, but my mother recovered first and asked him to sit down as she took me to the kitchen on the pretence of getting some water for the guest.

'Is this for real? Where did you find him? And isn't he too old for you?' The questions came out of her mouth too fast for me to answer them all, so I just said: 'I met him through a dating agency. We've been talking for a couple of months.' Before she could respond to that, I dropped the bombshell. 'He has asked me to marry him.' In another situation I would have laughed at her transformation; never before had she been speechless and gaped like a goldfish. We looked at each other for a moment, but she didn't say anything, not until we retreated to the living room with glasses of water. She told me to interpret for her.

'My daughter said you want to marry her. Is that true?'

Dad gave a start and coughed several times. I tried to rush to him, but he put his hand in front of him to stop me from helping. I translated mother's question to Harry.

'Yes, and I want her to move to the UK with me,' he said. I raised my eyebrows at him. Harry didn't even blink.

'I need to know if you are serious about her and if you can take care of her. So, tell me. How much money do you earn each month?' asked Mum.

It was my turn to gasp. I felt a wave of shame and anger. I stared at the floor as I translated. Harry took a deep breath. 'Enough to give your daughter a comfortable life. But if you must know I think it's around a hundred and fifty thousand baht per month.'

Dad and Mum were speechless. It was a lot of money – enough to make a down payment on a house. Mum became more enthusiastic and she fired off lots of questions which Harry patiently answered. She finally gave us a blessing and I felt I should end this meeting, so I told them that Harry and I had had a long day and that it was time he went back to his hotel. After we said our goodbyes, Dad came downstairs with us despite his shaking legs. He then held his hand on Harry's shoulder before we stepped out.

'I'm not selling my daughter to a rich man,' he said in Thai and I translated. 'I won't give you a blessing until you look me in the eye and tell me, man to man, that you will love and cherish my daughter.'

'I will.' Harry's stern face conveyed the solid weight of the two words.

Dad nodded and went back inside. I knew then that if Harry could put up with my family, he wouldn't leave me. The pros and cons I had considered earlier flew out of the window and hope rose within me.

'You've met my family. Do you still want to be part of this?' I asked.

'You are in my future, not your family.'

‘But for me, it’s the whole package. They’re my responsibility, and they’ll be yours too if you choose me. That’s my only condition.’

‘Deal. Is it settled, then?’

‘It is.’

We shook hands on our agreement.

Within a year, Harry flew back to Thailand three times before my visa application was completed. I quit my job, set up a bank account to transfer money from the UK to Thailand, and took an intensive English speaking course. Saying goodbye to my father was the hardest. We held each other for a long time without saying a word. I didn’t turn back to wave as Harry and I got into the taxi because I knew I would not be able to stop crying. I had to leave everything I knew to move to an unknown land. The only way forward was in the UK.

Dear Lyla,

If you are still reading what I’ve written so far, I hope you realise that I did not just marry Harry for money. I intended neither to hit the jackpot nor was I eager to sell myself like a prostitute.

All children dread to hear about their parents’ sex life, but in your case, I believe it is necessary to clear up whatever images you have conjured up in your head that led to your judgement of my character.

Since losing my virginity in high school, I had never had a boyfriend until I met Harry. Sex was never a big part of my life, and I believed I would be fine with or without it, which was why I decided to be with your father who was a middle-aged man. I was satisfied with just

being his companion. As long as two people understood each other and lived happily, sex and passion were just small parts of their lives together.

Harry and I had married at the registry office in Bangkok, which was more like a legal convenience than dream weddings most girls dreamed of when they were young. My parents were there but Harry's mother and younger sister were not. He promised I would meet them soon in the UK once the visa paperwork was done.

On our wedding night, I was both nervous and excited. Like other women, I had my fantasies, and at first, everything was as it was supposed to be. Harry was gentle and patient, but he came before I did. He asked if I was satisfied and I lied. I could not imagine saying his love-making skill was bad. With my very little experience, I couldn't really compare him to others. In the end, I just stroked his hair while we both fell asleep. I knew then that I had to set aside my expectations and be satisfied with what I had, which was far better than what the women of my neighbourhood could hope for.

After a month in the UK, Harry took me to see his mother. It was my first time out of the house for a social gathering with someone British. I was too nervous to show my language incompetence to others, but meeting my mother-in-law was necessary. As Harry drove me to his mother's house, I learned that she lived alone. I wondered how a frail, elderly woman was able to live by herself without a carer or family members. I had been raised on the belief that any ungrateful sons or daughters who abandon their parents would end up in hell, which was why I had managed to tolerate living in the same house with my mother my whole life. I didn't reproach Harry for being a bad son, but I did ask him if it was normal for an elderly woman to live by herself. He said it was if that elderly woman refused help from her son and daughter and was too stubborn to live in a care home with the excuse of wanting to die in the house she had

lived in for more than thirty years. Harry assured me when he saw my troubled face that his younger sister, Jemma, lived nearby and checked on their mother regularly.

Your Nan was polite and pleasant during our first meeting. She looked at me up and down but didn't say anything offensive. I thought everything was fine until I offered to make tea for all of us in the kitchen. She insisted on doing it herself, but asked Harry to help her in the kitchen.

I didn't think I would hear their conversation, but I did.

'She looks modest for a Thai Bride.'

'Mum, we talked about this.' Harry's voice was especially low, almost like a growl.

'You asked me to be polite to her and I was. That doesn't mean I can't have an opinion.'

I heard a clattering of mugs on the kitchen top. A kettle was switched on, and while the water was boiling, I stepped closer to hear what they said. But they had moved away from the door and I heard nothing else. The word that had attracted my interest was 'Thai Bride.' I thought it weird to be called a bride when I had already got married. I wondered whether the phrase was the same as a Mia Farang, a Thai term for women who marry Westerners. It was a stereotypical word that put a bargirl, an escort, and a legitimate wife in the same category. It was the word used in Thailand, and I wasn't sure if the new word had different implications.

When the tea was ready, I retreated to my chair and smiled like nothing had happened. We talked about the weather, Harry's work, my adjustment to life in the UK, but eventually ran out of things to say. We left after an hour and she never gave me a smile.

It wasn't until I heard the words 'Thai Bride' again in a house party at one of Harry's friend's that I learned the palpable implication attached to the phrase. It was spoken by a group of women behind my back, but even in my presence, I could sense their disapproving looks and honey-coated sarcasm. I might have had a limited vocabulary, but I knew a subtle,

condescending tone when I heard one. I thought leaving Thailand would make me feel branded less as Mia Farang.

It wasn't just the women that made me uncomfortable, but also the men. It was nice to be desirable in men's eyes, but their lingering stares puzzled and unsettled me at the same time. After the party, Harry asked me what was wrong, and I told him how uncomfortable I felt being looked at by the foreigners. 'You think too much,' was all he said and that was the end of the conversation.

Dear Lyla,

Your hometown, Birmingham, was vastly different from Bangkok. It took me almost two weeks before I dared to step out of the house into the unfamiliar world. The first time Harry took me to the city centre was eye-opening: I had never seen such a mixed crowd of people walking on the main street before. I had always imagined England to be the motherland of white people, but apparently this was a misconception.

I envied their sense of belonging.

Luckily, it wasn't long before I found a community of Thai expats in Birmingham, and the place at the heart of the group, just as it would have been Thailand, was a temple. I was glad to feel like I was back in Thailand again with the authentic food and religious routines that calmed my nerves. Being able to speak Thai raised my confidence and soon I forgot how far I was from my roots.

It wasn't until my third visit to the temple that I saw the divisions within the community. Every fortnight, a large gathering of Thai people in Birmingham and nearby towns took place at Suriya Temple for a religious ceremony. The people were divided into two big groups: the

expats and the students, separated by their attires, ages, and companions. The expats wore Thai clothes with lace blouses and sarongs, dressed up their kids in a similar fashion, and more than half of them were accompanied by their nonchalant, aged, British partners. The students flocked together in brand-name clothing, young and eager to experience Thai culture abroad but aloof from the residents. I was too old to speak the same language as the students, so naturally I was drawn into the expats. They welcomed me into their homes and families, and I was always grateful for their support. But within the group, there was a competitive undercurrent when they talked about how much money they could afford to donate to the temple, their children's grades and talents, how dedicated they were to their roles within the community.

After you were born, I got overwhelmed by the fear that you were going to turn out a full British without any traces of Thai identity. The fear was supported by numerous examples of my Thai friends' children in the UK who turned out to be rude, disobedient and aggressive. I frantically filled your world with Thai culture: forcing you to learn the alphabet, traditional dances and music. I remembered the thing you hated most were the various kinds of Thai traditional dress I put you into. The laced blouse made you itchy, you often said, and I told you to be patient for just a day and to stop scratching your arms. It was when you were thirteen years old that your patience ran out. I was holding a plastic cup of soft drink when someone bumped me in the back. The drink spilled on your white laced blouse, leaving a light brown stain on your chest. The other kids at the temple laughed while the adults swarmed around you to help. Suddenly, you screamed and ran away. I ran after you and luckily caught the sleeve of your blouse before you stepped on to the road. Before I could hit your bottom as a punishment you screamed again and tore away the blouse. It didn't give at first, but you tried again and again until your hand was holding ribbons of the fabric. I tried to stop but you wouldn't let me touch you until Harry arrived at the scene and held out his hand to you without a word. You

took his hand and buried your teary face on his shoulder. Before he took you away, you said, ‘I hate you!’ loud and clear, like you meant every word you said.

Dear Lyla,

We both know you love your father more than me. I accept that, but I didn’t realise that Harry was the one that held our family together until cancer took him away from us. His last three months was the hardest time for both of us, spending lots of time at the hospital and waiting for the inevitable. During that time, I began thinking more and more about Thailand. I had grown to love England, but the prospect of losing Harry frightened me. A husband and child were the only things that anchored me to this island.

A week before Harry’s death, a distant cousin in Thailand got in touch with me about your grandmother. Your grandmother and I had lost contact since you were five. I knew she was still alive, but her condition was unknown to me until my cousin made a call. Alcohol had degenerated your grandmother’s body for years but she had refused help from the cousins and doctors. The cousin’s message was clear – she was gravely sick.

The buried guilt I felt for my mother suddenly resurfaced. It was as if the earth was coming apart under my feet, and I was torn apart. Before I panicked, I took a deep breath and told myself to be reasonable rather than emotional. You and Harry were my priorities. I did not want to upset you at the time since you already had a full plate worrying about your father.

For me, the day we were the closest was at Harry’s cremation. We were holding hands as we watched the pine coffin slowly slid into a hole of open flames. We didn’t say anything but through the warmth of our hands, I felt our connection ran deep in our blood. Despite our

differences, it was us against the world, until a week later when I told you about your grandmother in Thailand.

Dear Lyla,

I was standing at a crossroads: To move back to Thailand to take responsibilities and atone for my sin of abandoning my parent, or stay in the UK to raise my child without looking back at my sick mother. When I talked to you, you said you would make the choice for me: that you were old enough to make your own decisions and take care of yourself; that you could go to Aunt Jemma's house whenever you needed.

The biggest mistake I made was giving in to your demand. In the heat of the moment you also said that you were ashamed of me, that as soon as Harry died I was ready to move on and offer myself to another rich man in Thailand. I was shocked to hear that since you knew about your grandmother's condition. I could not bear thinking how you pictured me and I could not convince you otherwise.

I told myself it was for the best, that I gave you the space you needed to recover from Harry's death without me breathing down your neck. That space of time became a vast gap that separated us, despite the many times I visited you. You picked up my calls less and less, and each time our conversation ended either lifelessly when we ran out of things to say or angrily when our different perspectives made us lash out. One day, the communication just stopped altogether, on your end at least. I'm still hearing news of your wellbeing from Jemma, but I wondered if there is any chance for you to forgive me for what I have done.

Returning to Thailand was harder than I thought. The greatest challenge was to convince your grandmother to let me help her.

In Thailand, children owe their parents a never-ending debt of gratitude. While men can repay their parents through entering the monkhood, even for a short period of time, women's paths are less obvious. One way to judge if a woman is a good daughter is how much she is willing to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her parents. Among certain groups of people, mine included, the most concrete and sometimes outlandish example would be the size of the new house or an extension of the current one, all paid for by the daughter's money.

“No money, no love” was your grandmother's logic and this was the reason why she cut me off when I stopped sending her money after our last family trip to Thailand. It took me almost a month to prove myself that I was worthy of her love again and for her to receive treatment for her alcoholism and gambling addiction. In three years, her condition got better while my relationship with you got worse. I took several trips back to the UK, but they were just short ones because I worried about your grandmother. The last straw was when I promised to go back for your graduation ceremony but failed to show up. Your grandmother was in a car accident two days before my flight. I remembered that you did not say anything the whole time I kept saying sorry on the phone. You just said “goodbye” at the end of the conversation, but it was the way you said it that frightened me: it was as if you had given up on me.

Dear Lyla,

Last month, I heard that you were getting married. I called to congratulate you and had hoped that you would want me there. Your speech was curt and when I asked if you wanted me to be there you said no. That was when I realised that unless I did something, I was going to lose you forever.

These letters are my last chance of making you understand. If you still want me to be your mother, please reply.

Dear Lyla,

I found the invitation among the bills and flyers in the mailbox when I got back from buying groceries. I didn't know how long I stood in the hallway with tears running down my face. I just kept reading and reading until your grandmother shouted from the living room.

'Wan! Could you bring me a glass of water?'

I pulled myself together and put the bags in the kitchen. I brought a glass of water and the invitation letter to the living room. I showed her the letter, and she told me to translate it for her.

'Dear Mrs. Wanwisa Thompson, Please find enclosed a letter of invitation to the wedding reception of Miss Lyla Thompson and Mr Samuel James Taylor at Fazeley Studio on 28th November 2018 at 7 pm. Best Regards, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Taylor'

She smiled, something I had not seen in a while. We hugged each other for a long time.

Party, Taxi, Boy Scout Camp

It is almost midnight at Ann's house party. Such gatherings are common among Thai students; a great opportunity to catch up with others in the Thai students' community in Birmingham and to taste authentic Thai food. It is not a big party when there are only four of us: Ann the host, is the eldest, a big sister for all of us and a star of any parties; Stamp, the youngest, has a kind heart and always a smile on her face; Kona, the same age as me, is a lively force that draws out the fun side of people.

Watching them interact with each other is a joy in itself, and I am content with being the watcher and the listener. The only things I do not want to listen to are ghost stories, which were usually being told whenever there was a gathering at night. They know I fear ghosts and that I try to avoid hearing about them whenever possible, yet the thrill of the storytelling outweighs the fear of one person. They always tell me to just sit with them and, when things get scary, to just close my ears. I am curious in nature and always fail not to listen to stories of any kind, so I face the consequence of paranoia and insomnia at night.

The way Kona is looking at her watch means they are going to do it again. 'It's time for ghost stories,' says Kona. I hate to be right.

Ann and Stamp squeal in excitement before they fill their cups with ciders and sit next to Kona. The three of them look at me expectantly until I give up and sit with them to complete the circle. Then, she begins her story.

'It was almost midnight when I took a taxi home,' says Kona. 'The driver was bearded and bald, and his look in the rear-view mirror made me instinctively clutch at my purse. After I told him where to go, we sat in silence for some time. It is normally an hour ride to where I live on

the outskirts of Bangkok. So, I passed the time by looking at my surroundings in the car. On the console, there were tons of amulets and Buddha necklaces, which were supposed to protect the driver and me from harm, but I didn't feel the sense of security. I was worried about how reckless the driver must be to need all the amulets to protect the people. I can tell you that being tensed from fear for almost half an hour isn't good for one's mental health. When the driver's hand hovered near the grille, my heart skipped a beat because I thought he might try to drug me, like we'd heard on the news about the chemicals that could be circulated through the car's air conditioner. Luckily, he just turned on the radio. Then the weirdest thing happened: he tuned in to my favourite ghost radio station and better than that, DJ Win was hosting *The Shock*, my favourite ghost show! What a coincidence!

Ann and Stamp nod in agreement. I know Kona's obsession with ghost stories on the radio. To her, listening to a ghost show on the radio at night is a habit, so much so that, for some time, sleep comes easier only with the sound of someone telling a ghost story. And when her work routine prevents her from staying up late, she listens to the shows' podcast on the internet instead.

Kona continues her story. 'The driver turned and asked me if it was all right, pointing at the radio console. I told him it was fine since I was also a fan of the show. You wouldn't believe how fast the atmosphere changed at that point. The driver became much more open and friendlier. He said he had been listening to the show for half a decade. It was good, he said, to hear a familiar voice to keep him company during night runs. Ghost radio plays were much better in the old times, he said, but they were a thing of the past, replaced by TV shows. He was glad there was still a dedicated station for ghost stories. We talked for a quarter of an hour, which I knew because we passed Future Park Rangsit. I was halfway home.'

Then Kona tells us about the ghost story she heard in the car, it was about a Boy Scout camp. A typical ghost story is what I think it is: Missing kids lured out into the woods by a dubious character that, in a shocking revelation, turns out to be a malevolent ghost trying to take the kids' lives so it can cross over to the next life. The shocking revelation, in this case, is when the Boy Scout ghost removes a scout rope from his belt and Kona tells us the end of the story: 'Let's hang ourselves.'

When Kona says it, Ann and Stamp scream. I yelp. Kona just smirks at our reactions before saying, 'I cursed at that point, and the driver asked if I was all right. I pretended I was fine and said everything was all right. You know what the driver did? He just laughed out loud.'

'How rude!' says Ann. Stamp nods. I say, 'What happened to the kid? Did he make it?'

'I thought you didn't like hearing ghost stories,' says Kona.

'I still don't. I'm just ... curious.'

'Well, he ran away as far as possible until he fell over a log and was knocked out.'

'That's it. He's done,' says Ann.

'We all know how these things end,' says Stamp. 'A vengeful spirit finds a substitute to take his place and tricks a person into killing himself. Poor kid.'

'Not this time,' says Kona. 'He's saved by other ghosts, the kind that look like grandma and grandpa spirits of a local shrine.'

'No way!' says Ann.

Kona explains. 'While the grown-ups are searching for the missing kid, someone suggests they pray to the local guardian spirits. They agree as they have nothing to lose. The locals take them to the shrine where there's a statue of an old woman carrying a betel basket and an old man with a plough on his shoulder. And guess who the lost kid sees when he wakes up? An old man and a woman who answered exactly to that description!'

At this point, I have become invested in the story. I am still half afraid of what scary images are going to pop up, but the thrill of listening until the end has swept the fear under the rug. Finally, Kona reaches the end of the ghost story: the boy was taken to a temple by the two spirits and was found by the adults in the morning. It is only later that the boy is calm enough to say what happens. He says he is safe within the chapel, but outside, the Boy Scout ghost haunts him all night, repeatedly saying ‘Let’s hang ourselves.’

As soon as Kona finishes, I can sense goosebumps on my arms. Ann and stamp let out a muffled scream that turn into giggles later at their silliness. The cold fear grips me longer than that as my vivid imagination takes me to the scene where I become the boy inside the chapel, hearing faint yet insistent whispers that keep taunting me with no end of death. Kona’s laugh brings me back to the land of the living. ‘You should see your faces right now.’

‘Not funny,’ I say.

‘Relax,’ says Kona. ‘I got goosebumps too in the taxi. Normally I would scream but I didn’t want to show the driver how scared I was. My hands were clutching at my handbag the whole time to my house. The driver cheerfully blabbered on despite my silent response. I thought he would never stop talking since his monologue had already run for fifteen minutes, and I knew because I kept looking on my watch. When I arrived at the house, I just wanted to get out of the car as soon as possible, but the driver said something that made me stopped in my tracks. He said, “Good luck seeing some ghosts tonight.” I was too shocked to ask him what he meant. I just knew that I didn’t want to spend time any longer in the dark. My grandma’s old, decrepit house was next to my parents’ where I was living in. I loved my grandma, but I was praying the whole time until I got into the house that she had already gone to heaven and would not suddenly show herself to me, even out of love.’

Then, Kona pauses for effect before saying, ‘The end.’

‘That’s a great story!’ says Stamp.

‘I agree,’ says Ann. ‘The best one yet.’

My head is full of questions: What did the driver mean? Did he literally want Kona to see many ghosts from then on? Was it something ghost radio fans say to each other? Does listening to lots of ghost stories still make a person afraid of ghosts?

The sound of the chairs moving across the wooden floor takes me back to the moment. I want to ask Kona, but the party is coming to an end. As I help them clear the table I can’t help thinking whether I will ever stop being afraid of ghosts, and fascinated by them at the same time.

Supernatural FM

The show 'Ghost Talk' on Supernatural FM starts with radio jingles comprised of the sound of dogs' howling mixed with haunting Thai stringed instruments. After the jingle, at the stroke of ten in the evening, DJ Win greets his listeners and listens to the ghost stories they have called in to tell. The stories' lengths vary but the highlighted one can take up to an hour with commercial breaks in between.

Today's programme is the same, but the call is important. DJ Win's voice is smooth and calm as usual, but he can't stop tapping his foot under the table.

'Welcome to Ghost Talk with me, DJ Win, as your host. Today we are going to hear the talk-of-the-town ghost story from a first-hand witness. The one who walked into a house and found a three-year-old girl living with her dead mother for three days. My team says the girl's aunt is on the line now. Good evening, Mrs. Wanwara.'

'Good evening, DJ Win.' The female voice is high-pitched with a hint of nervousness.

'How is Kora? Has she talked more about what happened or shown any signs of trauma?'

'She seems fine. She's too young to understand what death is, so when people ask about her mother, she says her mother is in heaven but comes see her from time to time.'

'That's a very chilling thing to hear, isn't it?'

'Yes. I still can't believe it. I just talked to my sister on the phone three days before I went there.'

'My condolences. I know you've told many people about this, but could you give a detailed account of what happened?' Then DJ Win adopts a more sympathetic tone. 'You can stop at any point that makes you feel uncomfortable, okay?'

‘Thank you. But I also have a few questions to ask you, too, since you’re well-experienced with supernatural beings.’

‘Of course! I’m merely a supernatural enthusiast but I always try my best to serve my audience and the higher power. Should we start when you arrive at your sister’s house?’

‘Sure.’ Mrs. Wanwara takes a deep breath before she begins. ‘When I rang the doorbell in the morning, the house door was opened, and Kora stepped out wearing a stained white T-shirt without any pants. I asked her who opened the door for her and she said “Mama.” I then asked her where her mother was, and she just pointed to the house. When I followed the girl inside, I felt something was wrong. The lights were off, and it was eerily quiet. The air was stuffy and strange. I couldn’t find anyone on the ground floor, and the next logical thing was to go upstairs but my legs wouldn’t move. Luckily, one of the neighbours whom I asked earlier for help volunteered. She went upstairs, and I heard her open a door. The foul smell reached us before she walked back down and said, “Don’t let the girl go upstairs.” There was nothing to be done but to call the police and my cousins.’

‘Amazing! I mean terrifying. And I’m sure the great mystery that was on everyone’s mind was how a girl survived for three days without starving.’

‘That’s what I thought. I asked her many times about who gave her milk and helped her get up and down the stairs, and her answer is always “Mama.”

‘Do you really believe her mother’s ghost was taking care of Kora even after she died?’

‘Yes. Why don’t you ask her yourself? Kora is sitting on my lap right now. Say hello to DJ Win, Kora.’

There is a clattering sound of a phone changing hands, then a girl’s meek voice is heard.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello. Nice to meet you, Kora,’ says DJ Win.

‘Tell him who gave you milk in the house.’ Mrs. Wanwara’s voice is distant but is still audible.

‘Mama,’ answers the girl.

‘And who took you downstairs and opened the door for you.’

‘Mama.’

‘Good girl.’ The clattering sound repeats and Mrs. Wanwara’s voice becomes loud and clear again. ‘You heard her. Anyone who thinks I faked the whole thing is wrong. I still keep Kora’s clothes from that day. The stained T-shirt from Ovaltine malted drink is clear. A little girl like her wouldn’t be able to climb a table top to reach the jar, boil the kettle, and made a cup of hot drink!’

‘Good point. Now, if you don’t mind me asking, how did Kora’s mother die?’

‘My sister had epilepsy since childhood, and the doctor said it was because of her congenital disease, but the last time I talked to her she said she hadn’t had epilepsy for years, which brings me to the question I’d like to ask you.’

‘Okay.’ DJ Win’s reluctance is clearly audible. He does not like this turn in conversation.

‘I’m willing to raise Kora along with my son and daughter, but given the circumstances, I need to know one thing. My mother, Kora’s grandmother, died not long before all this, and now my sister. I don’t want to say bad things about the girl, but is it possible, even just a tiny chance, that she’s jinxed.’

‘Before I go further, I have to tell the listeners to use their discretion for what I’m about to say. Like the saying goes, you can choose not to believe in something but don’t insult those who do. My staff has already given me Kora’s and your date and time of birth. I’ve spoken to Master Rong, the great fortune-teller whom I’m familiar with, and he assured me that you won’t

have any trouble from her or her mother's spirit. Both you and Kora were born in the same year, the year of the Tiger, which is what make you equals in luck.'

'I'm glad to hear that, but what about my daughter? She was born in the year of the Dragon. Would Tiger oppress Dragon?'

'Not according to astrological value. They are both strong animals. So, there shouldn't be any problems.'

'Right. It's good to hear that.' Mrs. Wanwara's tone suggests otherwise.

'It's really a noble thing you plan to do, raising her like your own instead of giving her to her father.'

'Huh! I've never seen Kora's father visiting or even sending money. It's true that Kora's mother and father were separated before she was born, but I still think he should have shown his face to Kora from time to time.'

'Maybe hearing this will make you feel better. Master Rong also added that by adopting Kora, which is a good deed, you will bring good karma to your life. Also, her birthday suggested that she would bring fortune to you and your family, which is already true, I presume. People all over the country who sympathise with the girl have sent money to help you raise the girl, haven't they?'

'Yes. And I thank them all for their support. I'm also a single mother with two children of my own, so I really appreciate it.'

'Well, I wish you all the best. Sadly, we've come to the end of the show. Thank you again for telling your story tonight, Mrs. Wanwara.'

'My pleasure. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye. This is DJ Win. At your service on weekday nights at ten.'

The radio jingle is turned on again followed by a commercial break. DJ Win removes his headphones and stretches his arms in the air. His assistant opens the door to ask him about his work schedule.

‘I thought Master Rong was in LA. Did you make an international call to him?’ asks the assistant.

‘He’s still in LA, and no, I didn’t make the call.’

‘But what you said on the radio...’

‘Is what Mrs. Wanwara needs to hear?’ The assistant lifts his eyebrow. DJ Win says, ‘Having that superstitious woman adopt Kora is better than letting social welfare find a stranger’s home for the girl. If a bit of fortune telling helps encourage the aunt to raise the girl, then there’s nothing wrong.’

‘What if Mrs. Wanwara turns out to be cruel. I might be wrong, but I don’t trust her judging by the sound of her voice.’

‘Then at least the fear of her sister’s ghost should be enough to keep her in line. I bet this isn’t going to be the last time we hear about the ghost of Kora’s mother.’

At the Temple

1

Chaiwat Soonthorn had his first major accident when he was twenty-five years old. Everyone in his family had known something bad was going to happen: twenty-five is an ominous age when bad things tend to happen; a road accident, severe illness, a lawsuit, or a break-up, to name a few. Chaiwat's parents had tried to avert this fate by asking a monk to name him. The 'Ch' in his first name was intended to bring wealth and good fortune, and the ending 'Wat' was believed to be good for preventing bad luck. Yet Fate caught up with him eventually.

His parents came to the emergency room when Chaiwat was lying in a hospital bed with a broken rib and a mild concussion. The doctor was good-looking and when he opened the door to let Chaiwat's parents in, he could not help looking at the doctor's butt.

'Are you all right, darling?' his mother touched the places where the bandages were. Her voice would have gone in one ear and out the other if she had not poked at his ribs. He winced.

'I'm all right, mum. It was just an accident.'

'You should know better,' his father said. 'Being twenty-five, the Benjapes age, something bad was bound to happen. Should have been more careful.'

'Don't be superstitious, dad. It was the truck driver's fault, not mine.'

'Listen to your father, Chai. We've all been through the Benjapes. Your aunt had a dengue fever and nearly died. Your father almost drowned in a river. I was heartbroken from an eight-year-relationship before I met your father. Do you see what I mean?' His mother looked intensely at him.

'I'll be more careful. I promise.'

‘That’s not enough,’ his father said. ‘I’ve seen our fortune teller. She said worse things are yet to pass.’ He paused, then said, ‘Unless you give yourself to the Buddhist’s sacred world and become a monk.’

‘What? No way!’

‘Your father’s right. The fortune teller says you’ve had a bad karma from your previous life, and it’s affecting this life despite all the good deeds you’ve done. The only thing that’s powerful enough to relieve the burden of this karma is to become a monk. Think of your cousin, Mech. He was a thin, sickly child until he became a Buddhist novice. Now, he’s healthy, happily married, and has two sons.

‘I don’t know.’

‘We’ll never stop worrying unless you do this,’ said his mother. ‘The Buddhist lent lasts only three months.’ And on cue, his mother’s ultimate weapon – her tears – started to well up in her eyes. ‘Everyone does a three-month ordination for the Vassa all the time. Even if you don’t believe in the Benjapes, can’t you just do it so that we don’t have to constantly be worried about you?’

Then Chaiwat’s father got the last word. ‘Come on, son. You’ve just quit your third job. You don’t have any grand plans for your life right now, do you? You know what? I’ll even buy you a car after this. I’ve always hated that you ride a bike.’

Chaiwat was intrigued by the prospect of having a car. He liked to be independent from time to time, but he knew he was not strong enough to say no. Complying was easier most of the time.

Wichai's parents put him in the nearest temple without hesitation. He was not sure whether they were worried about him or simply wished to get rid of him. It was three days before Vassa, and he was obliged to stay at the temple and learn the prayers and ritual steps before the ordination. It was a slow, peaceful life without distractions from the mundane world, just sleeping, eating, doing chores, meditating, and chanting dharma lines. At the end of the third day, he imagined himself living in that scene, and it did not look so bad anymore.

On the day of his ordination, his head and eyebrows were shaved before he entered an ordination hall. He was given a new Pali name of Pra Mahatee which signified the beginning of a monk's life. A boy named Pong was assigned to him to be his assistant. Pong is one of the Dek Wat, the boys who lived at the temple and assisted the monks in various ways in return for food, sleep, and sometimes education. Pong was a fourteen-year-old, scrawny, shy boy but he was quick and smart enough to help Pra Mahatee adjust to his new life.

On his first day, Pong was the first person to wake up in the morning. He helped Pra Mahatee dressed up with a six-foot-long piece of cloth wrapping around his body. The process was complicated, and he would be at a loss doing it himself. When he was ready, Pong went to fetch the already polished steel bowl for him and came back with a giant plastic sack for himself. They joined a line of monks gathering in the courtyard, then the line slowly wound its way out of the temple on to the road outside. When the monks and Dek Wat returned to the temple with sacks full of food, fresh and dry, and bundles of incense sticks and flowers, they all had breakfast together. Pra Mahatee was surprised to see some of the monks mixing together the food from the morning alms, sweet and savoury, in a single bowl. The taste must have been awful, he thought to himself, but he learned later that that was the point: To be indifferent to the pleasure of eating food and to consider the natural state of food in the mouth in relation to

the natural state of life. It was so zen-like and profound that he began to immerse the monks' philosophy into his thinking and behaviour.

It was too bad that the Buddhist ceremony of Vessa itself was so far away from the calm atmosphere he had expected at the temple.

Pra Mahatee never thought he could be bombarded by so many challenging questions in a single day.

'We are going to get married. Could you find an auspicious date for our wedding day?'

'This is my newly-born baby. Would you mind naming him so he'll have a good life?'

'Please spray holy water on us.'

'Could you tell me tomorrow's winning lottery numbers?'

'Could you perform a ceremony to change my son's bad fortune?'

'These are good quality offerings for you. By the way, are there any sacred amulets for donors?'

It might be hard to imagine a small suburban temple as a one-stop service for all things sacred where problems could be solved with prayers, but most people seemed to believe it to be just that. He was never a great believer in supernatural things, and he didn't feel any different after he was ordained. Certainly, there was no magical power coursing through his veins. If monks' holy abilities lay in the chanting of words, then everyone sprayed with blessings would have lived happily ever after. But they did not see it that way, which was why a steady stream of people kept coming to the temple throughout the day. While he was anxious about the massive crowd, other monks seemed undisturbed. One of them even appeared cheerful and said it was good for business.

At the end of the day, his voice was raspy, and his lips parched from chanting all day. The temple had been given enough candles and fluorescent bulbs to lighten up the whole temple for half a year. The donation money would be enough to build another pavilion and erect a new golden image of Buddha. The people walked away with the comforting feeling of having done good deeds which would bring wealth and fortune in the future. It was a win-win for everyone.

3

After the depressed thoughts in Vassa day, he had doubts for a while. This inner conflict between what a monk was in his mind and what he appeared to be in real life troubled him. He thought he could not last for three months as planned, but eventually his discomfort in himself receded as he thought less of himself and observed more of others. He noticed that after the morning alms round, Pong usually headed for the temple's school nearby. Pra Mahatee would see him again late in the afternoon, sweeping leaves in the courtyard. While other boys played football in the courtyard, Pra Mahatee would see the boy sit on a bench at the foot of the stairs, reading books or doing homework, always alone. He pitied the boy but it was not a monk's duty to get attached to people or things and certainly not to dwell on feelings or emotions. All he could do was to give the boy enough light chores to keep him busy and to take the boy with him wherever he went.

One morning, Pra Mahatee woke up before dawn and routinely prepared himself. He walked down the steps and wondered where Pong was. The boy had never been late before, so he checked at the sleeping building for Dek Wat. It was almost empty except for Pong's body on the mattress. Pong's hands were clenching around his belly, soft moans coming out through his mouth. Another boy followed Pra Mahatee inside and told Pra Mahatee that the other monks

were waiting for him. Pra Mahatee asked him what happened to Pong, the boy just shrugged and said ‘Don’t know. Looks like food poisoning.’

It could be yesterday’s food, Pra Mahatee thought. Leftovers from morning offerings were the main food source at the temple. Monks stopped eating after midday, and some of the food was passed on to Dek Wat for dinner or supper. Curries with coconut milk were the dodgy ones that went bad more quickly than other food. He once saw Pong have a meal of curry oil which he spooned from the top of the spoilt curry and mix it with boiled broken rice. This time the culprit could also be the spoilt curry.

Pra Mahatee thought for a moment then he told the boy to tell other monks that he could not join them. The boy looked at him for a moment before he left. Pra Mahatee went to a wooden cabinet at the back of the room. He rummaged through plastic boxes until he found one with medicines. He took a spoon and a bottle with a thick white liquid and walked back to Pong’s bed. The boy thrashed about but Pra Mahatee held his chin firmly and put the spoonful of white liquid in his mouth before releasing the grip. Pong stayed still for a while, then he acted as if he was about to retch. Pra Mahatee rummaged through Pong’s bedside cabinet to find a plastic bag, and he found one next to what seemed like a stack of paper. He stared at it for a brief moment before he took out the plastic bag and gave it to the boy. Pong heaved twice before uncurling himself and spread his limbs on the bed, exhausted. Time passed before Pong’s chest moved up and down in rhythmic movement, so Pra Mahatee left him there but not before he grasped the thing he found in the boy’s cabinet. It was a magazine showing pictures of naked men.

Pra Mahatee's parents visited him two months after his ordination. After some general inquiries about his life at the temple, the conversations slowly led to life outside.

'Only a month left. Have you thought about what to do after this?' his father asked.

'Not really. Being a monk means focusing on the present moment, not yesterday or tomorrow.'

'Well, maybe you should,' his mother said. 'Your father and I are getting older and it is time for having grandchildren.'

'How can you say that? It's a sin to think of women while I'm still a monk!'

'Just give it some thought, son,' said his father. 'You're our only son. It won't be a sin if you don't think about women sexually. We just need to plan ahead, looking for a suitable woman to be our daughter-in-law.'

The way they planned things was as if they did not consider his say on the matter. A son's highest responsibility was to obey their parents and take care of them, but he was beginning to suspect if he had let them take a complete control of his life. He was not interested in dating women for a long time, not to mention marrying them. Celibacy might be a way out and no excuse is more perfect than the one of monkhood. An image of Pong and his nude magazine inadvertently popped up in his head.

'I don't want to leave the monkhood. I think I might be a monk for life,' said Pra Mahatee.

They waited for signs on his face that he meant it as a joke. They found none, and panicked. Then they protested and argued. After a while they retreated.

Life at the temple was more or less the same every day, but Pra Mahatee could sense the tension between him and Pong. After Pong's recovery, things returned to normal except for some glances that Pong gave to Pra Mahatee when he thought the monk was not looking. They both knew about the missing item from Pong's cabinet but neither of them was willing to acknowledge its existence. The silence between them lasted for a week until one evening when Pra Mahatee caught Pong rummaging through his belongings. They were both stunned and stared at each other. Pra Mahatee stood still and counted his breaths to calm himself. Pong sat cross-legged in front of him. His eyes were staring at the floor and his head was lowering, waiting for his judgement. Pra Mahatee walked into the bathroom, grabbed a rolled-up magazine under one of the ceiling tiles and dropped it in front of Pong. Pong's eyes widened but he remained silent.

'I found this in your cupboard,' Pra Mahatee said. 'Do you accept it is yours?'

'Yes,' Pong said, still avoiding an eye contact.

'Why do you have a magazine of naked men in your cupboard?' Pra Mahatee asked curtly.

Pong blushed and bit his lower lips, but no words came out until Pra Mahatee asked again, 'Why do you have it?'

'Because I like men.'

It was Pra Mahatee's turn to be silent before he asked, 'Does anyone else know?'

'I don't think so,' Pong said. Then he added 'They tease me sometimes because I don't like playing football with them, but I don't think they know.'

Pra Mahatee sighed. Then he said, 'That's a relief. Your life could be much harder at the temple if others find out. I won't tell the abbot about this, but you have to promise me one thing.'

'What is it?'

‘Keep your interest in men to yourself. I can’t stop your feelings for men, but the few thoughts you have about them the better.’

Pong looked up at Pra Mahatee. He could see defiance in Pong’s eyes and he knew that whatever he decided, Pong would never change. He was who he was, and he would not change his way just to be accepted or to fit with society. Pra Mahatee admired the strength of Pong’s will but Pong was his responsibility.

After a moment, Pra Mahatee said quietly, ‘You should leave now.’ Pong stood up to leave, his eyes looking at the magazine then at Pra Mahatee’s face. Pra Mahatee’s shook his head.

The next day Pra Mahatee went to the temple’s abbot and asked for a new Dek Wat. He only told the abbot that it was because of his personal reasons and refused to say more. The abbot finally agreed and sent Pong to serve another monk named Pra Paribut who was renowned for his strict rules and harsh punishment. Jod, Pra Mahatee’s new boy was fat and lazy, and needed to be told what to do twice before the task was done. He heard from Jod that Pong’s life was harder because he was not fast or thorough enough for Pra Paribut and from time to time, others could see red marks on Pong’s calves as a result of his incompetence.

Pra Mahatee felt helpless but there was nothing he could do.

The three-month period of Pra Mahatee’s ordination was coming to an end. It was his last week of monkhood, but he had not decided if he wanted to stay or not. When the abbot called him for a meeting that afternoon, he thought it was something to do with the upcoming ceremony for leaving monkhood. When Pra Mahatee stepped inside the abbot’s room, he was surprised

to see Pong and Jod in the room. When all of them were seated, the abbot brought the issue up without delay.

‘We are here because an allegation was made against you, Pra Mahatee. That you aren’t within the proper conduct for Buddhist monks.’

‘I swear I have never broken any rules,’ Pra Mahatee said confidently.

‘I believe your good intentions but the allegation requires me to investigate your sexuality.’

The abbot held his breath before he asked, ‘Are you homosexual?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure? I have evidence.’

‘Any evidence would be false.’

The abbot pulled an object from his drawer and put it in front of him. It was a magazine with pictures of naked men. Pra Mahatee was shocked. It was the same magazine he had found in Pong’s cupboard.

‘Jod found this in your room,’ the abbot said then turned to speak to Jod. ‘In the toilet, you say.’ Jod nodded.

‘It’s not mine,’ Pra Mahatee said. He was careful not to look at Pong.

‘This is your last chance to confess. Why do you insist on lying even when the evidence and the witness point it out so clearly? If it’s not yours, then whose is it?’ the abbot asked.

Why indeed, Pra Mahatee asked himself. Why protecting a gay boy? The boy who was not his responsibility anymore. Perhaps it was the guilt of sending him away and this was the way to make amends. Perhaps it was about standing up and protecting someone he cared about. Whether it was for the right or wrong reasons, he did not know, but he stood his ground.

‘I can only say that it is not mine,’ Pra Mahatee emphasized each word. Then he kept his silence, but his eyes wandered to Pong.

The abbot turned to Pong and said ‘You were under his care before. Do you know anything about this?’

Pra Mahatee could sense a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions roiling beneath Pong’s face. It seemed like a long time before Pong looked up, and when he did, Pra Mahatee saw a smirk. He said ‘It’s his magazine. I found out his secret, that he was gay, so he sent me away.’

‘Liar! How could you do this? I...’ Words poured out of Pra Mahatee’s mouth, but he was interrupted by the abbot.

‘Enough. Stop blaming others for your sin. I gave you chances to confess but you refused, so I have no choice. You will be defrocked tomorrow morning and you will leave the temple immediately afterwards.’

‘But...’

‘Leave!’ the abbot said curtly. Pra Mahatee stood and left while fighting back tears.

7

Pra Mahatee left the temple the next day after another meeting with the abbot. He became Chaiwat Soonthorn again as soon as he stepped out of the temple. Chaiwat’s father kept his words and bought him a sports car. Six months after he left monkhood, Chaiwat decided to marry a woman of his parents’ choosing. Her family and financial backgrounds were flawless, and both families gained benefits from the union. He saw the bride-to-be once before the date was set and she looked fine. A slender, petite frame and long black hair reminded him of an expensive china doll. She was pretty enough to be taken to social events and his mother assured him that her cooking skill was exceptional. He knew she would be a perfect wife for any man. If only he could love women.

On the morning of his wedding day, his parents insisted that he and the bride offer food to monks in front of his house to bring good fortune. When everything was prepared, the four of them waited for the monks.

As a train of three monks arrived, he spotted the abbot and Pong and they recognised him, too. The monks stopped and waited for Chaiwat's family to put food bags in their alms bowls. When it was Chaiwat's turn, his parents urged his bride to hold his hands while putting the food in the monk's bowl so that their love would last through this life and the next. When she did it, he blushed. The abbot glanced at him and behind him, Pong bit his lower lip. After all the food was offered, Chaiwat and others put their hands together on their chests and bowed their heads for the monks' blessing. When the monks finished their chanting, they slowly continued their walks. The abbot was the last in line and he looked briefly at Chaiwat. His expression was calm, but his eyes showed regret. Chaiwat smiled back as if to reassure him that there was no hard feeling. As Pong followed the abbot, Chaiwat tried to catch a glimpse of his eyes to see how he felt, but Pong just looked at the ground and walked stiffly away. He was thinner than ever and the dark circles under his eyes were visible.

His parents and the bride stacked up the trays that carried the food bags and went back to the house while he was looking at the train of monks that slowly crept through the tarmacked street. Golden morning light was shining on their burnt orange robes, and Chaiwat looked at the sight longingly. The looking turned into the stamping of the scene in his mind. He would describe the scene to his children and grandchildren with the adjectives 'serene' and 'pious,' instead of 'chaotic,' and 'prejudiced.' His voice would be calm and reassuring, yet overlaid with a longing of the life he could have lived.

Bad News in Iceland

Sitting at one of the terminal gates, my best friend and I were waiting for our flight to Reykjavik with dreadful anticipation. Dreadful because of the news of the King's worsening condition. Our eyes were glued to the small screen of our phones, thumbs scrolling down Facebook's newsfeed. The Line application kept pinging notifications for new messages from the group chatrooms of people in our lives: friends from primary school, secondary school, university and colleagues. The news of the King's death came in waves of rumours. The first time the news hit, it was shocking to read about it in one of the chatrooms, then another news item disproved the first one and warnings flew around that sharing a false rumour was a criminal offence. Then an hour later the news of his death surfaced again, this time from a more reliable source: a friend of a friend's cousin who worked for the royalty. The official news release appeared three hours later when our plane landed at Keflavik International Airport.

How can I explain the emotions corked up inside me for the whole journey? On the surface, my body, like an automaton's, responded to the flurry of activities demanded by my schedule. I still felt excited at the duty-free shops, nervous at the immigration checkpoint, disappointed by the windy rain outside the airport. Beneath the outward emotions, it was as if my heart was frozen. I was too numb to cry or even speak about his death. The grief was not as direct as losing someone close to you, but it was more than losing a distant relative.

The shuttle bus from the airport to Reykjavik had Wi-Fi, and I received several messages from my Western friends who had sent their condolences. I did not know what to say other than thank you. Was it enough? I wondered. I had learnt in my time abroad that sometimes saying a few words was better than taking the risk of being misunderstood when I got flustered and over-explained things. If I could not quite understand my current feelings towards the King's

death, how could I explain my experience to others outside Thailand? If I poured out all my distress, would I be thought of as a brainwashed royalist who blindly worshipped the monarch and believed whatever we were told about him? All these thoughts floated in my mind as I looked at the barren rolling hills beyond the bus's window.

After we arrived at our accommodation, an old but cosy studio, we had a simple meal and went to bed. I lay in bed with my eyes open for a long time, waiting for the numbness in my chest to turn into tears, or other feelings. Anything that resembled a feeling. It did not.

The next day, my friend woke up before me. She was sitting on her bed with her back turned to me. I sat up, about to say good morning, when she turned to look at me with tears streaking down her cheeks. We hugged for some time. I kept stroking her back, telling her to let it out. All the while, I was trying to build up to my own tears. Now would be a good time, I told myself, but the tears would not come.

On the night before last in Reykjavík, we took a Northern Lights tour. The local tour guide kept saying that the sighting of Northern Lights could not be guaranteed since there had been clouds and rain for a week, but we could take their future tours until we could see the lights. It gave me hope, at first, but more than three hours later there was still no sign of the lights, even on three separate locations. In the fourth hour, while my neck was getting stiff from staring at the sky, my friend excitedly called me and pointed up. I barely saw it but, if my eyes were not tricked, green, ghostly, wavering lights appeared for three seconds. That was it; they were gone.

Tears were creeping up from inside my chest, and I could not stop it. My friend was surprised and tried to comfort me, saying that there'd be other chances maybe in other countries or later in winter. I just said screw it all and walked away like a sulking child. I did not tell her that I had given up on the idea of seeing the Northern Lights: What good did hoping for something to happen bring but disappointment and heartbreak? I can't have what I can't have, was what I

thought. I couldn't see the Northern Lights, and I couldn't be in Thailand with my family to mourn the King's death.

She found me later but did not ask questions about my erratic behaviour. Our way back to the hotel was silent. While she stared through the window for hopeful glimpses of more Northern Lights, I closed my eyes and imagined myself alone, separated from my family, while the world was ending around me.

Nai Luang

I remember falling, when the news hit:

The King is dead!

I wonder why the loss of a stranger

Hit hard like close relatives.

Even when we've never met

I think I know you, somehow

Through the songs you've composed,

And the ones written for you,

Sung in the kindergarten

The Gilded frame of your picture

Stands proudly by the Buddha statue

On every Father's Day.

Your full name hardly rolls

Off a child's tongue.

'Nai Luang' – He who lives in the Palace

Much easier to say

Lasts longer in memory.

Why do I cry in theatres?

Is it the song that's played

In high-haunting soprano

And rumbling bass?

Is it the poetic words

Strung in majestic fashion?

Or maybe, just maybe,

Slideshows of your charitable work,

Gratuitous by your default privilege,

Inspired us to be

A better version

Of ourselves.

Yellow-Shirt Protest

My first and last political activity happened when I was in year three at Chulalongkorn University. It was in summer 2008 when I enrolled in Fundamental Acting class. Anyone who saw Ajarn Piangdao's surname could see her involvement with politics: it was a surname of a renowned, powerful house of politicians. I didn't know why her passion was geared towards acting but on the day she took the class to the Yellow Shirt's protest at Government House, I knew she hadn't left her political life behind. The protestors called themselves 'The People's Alliance for Democracy, but it was easier to call them Seu Lerng from their yellow shirts. It was the King's colour and by default, it seemed that anyone who was a royalist and was against the puppet government controlled by the ex-prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, could fit into the group. My grandma's generation loved the King and wished things could go back to the age of absolute monarchy. My generation respected him for what he had done for the country but did not cry with joy whenever we saw him on television. Grandma hated Thaksin to the bone because of the rumour current during his term of office that he wanted to get rid of the King and appoint himself the President of the Republic of Thailand. I just saw him as another corrupt politician. But when it came to street protest of the Yellow-Shirts, she forbade me to join them and threatened that she would cut me off if I did so. She almost lost my mother to the national protest in '73 under the dictatorship's reign. I promised her I would not join them because I didn't want to break her heart. I did not add that I could not care less about being part of any protests.

After gathering for a week, the Yellow-Shirts' protest gained a respectable number of followers and grew into a great mass taking root around the Government House. It was a dim memory, visiting the place on National Children's Day when I was ten. But the image became

solid on the day I joined the protest through attending an acting class. Ajarn Piangdao told us she would visit the protestors' camp the next day and if any of us was interested, she would be happy to take us there. We'd have to meet her at the statue near the main auditorium at one o'clock in the afternoon. After we were dismissed, I thought about the pros and cons of going. One thing was for sure: I couldn't tell grandma about this. It was true that she agreed with most of the yellow shirt's principles and demands but allowing me to put myself among them would be too risky. I never disobeyed her, but she couldn't forbid me to do something she had no knowledge of. I was tempted by the thrill of sneaking out, but I was also scared. I had never done anything as risky or as provocative as joining a political protest before. I had a political opinion but like most people, I didn't feel the need to announce my stance or act on it. I decided to make a decision the next day, to see if I felt like going.

The next day I showed up purely out of curiosity at the university's auditorium at ten minutes to one. Also, a tiny part of me had a crush on Ajarn Piangdao. She showed up at one, waited until a quarter past, and then gathered us into two white vans parked nearby. The vans slithered their way through traffic for half an hour before they stopped two blocks away from the protest site. We walked until we saw a group of people with yellow armbands standing in front of a wall of rubber tires. Ajarn Piangdao exchanged a few words with their leader before he let us through. For a moment, I wondered if any of their lead pipes and wood clubs in their hands had crushed someone's skull.

As we walked in, the atmosphere became more jovial, almost as if we were in one of those temple's fairgrounds. I remembered pictures from the newspaper showing well-groomed circles of garden in front of the building and a spic and span asphalt road leading up to the House. Now, people replaced the green space with food carts and tents occupied both sides of the road. Walking vendors carried around flags, armbands, whistles, and other protest gear in with Thai

flag stickers. Ajarn Piangdao bought a yellow flag for each of us, and as we walked passed the crowd I felt as one with the people – pumped up and ready to take down the government. When the people saw our university’s uniforms they cheered for us. Some of them took our hands in theirs and beamed at us like we were part of their families. They all said something along the lines of how grateful they felt when the oldest, most respectable university in the country finally took a stand against a corrupt government. I did not dare tell them we were on our own since officially the university’s political stance remained neutral.

The centre stage equipped with a concert-quality sound system was situated directly in front of the Government House. The person on stage seemed to know how to work the crowd, judging from the loud applauds and cheers from time to time. Our procession stopped behind a line of cameramen from major news channels. I was glad the video cameras were pointed on stage but when one of them panned through the crowd, I instinctively turned my back on it. While Ajarn Piangdao talked to a man with a walkie-talkie, my heart pounded faster. When the walkie-talkie guy led us backstage, I started to panic. I realised we were going to be on stage in front of cameras for something I wasn’t even sure I believed in and grandma was going to see us on TV. Shit.

We were divided and put on the left and right steps leading up to the stage. I tried to push my way to the back of the line, but the other students were just annoyed at my rude manners and stood their ground. I felt helpless and I focused on the voice of the speaker, dreading what would happen next. The speaker came to the end of his hate speech with a series of vulgar comments about the prime minister which made me flinch but pleased the crowd. The picture of friendly uncles and aunts who had welcomed us earlier like we were VIPs twisted into a mob of violent haters who would smile at you for a second before they turned angry and stabbed a knife in your gut. The horrifying image stuck in my head, and I almost threw up when I heard

my university's name announced. People around me moved forward and in a single file. It was like walking towards my death-sentence, or so I thought.

At the last minute, I finally managed to slither behind a dozen people until I was in the last row on stage behind everyone else. I thanked whatever natural spirits and deities that had taken mercy on me and grandma's heart condition. It was the most uncomfortable twenty minutes of my life as I watched Ajarn Piangdao and two other students take their turns delivering their speeches. I clapped when others clapped, but my heart wasn't with them or the cause anymore. I just wanted to go home.

When they finished, we walked down the stage, had a chat with some of the protestors, and then went on our way. The other two people from my class and I walked the path that led to the back of the Government House to find a taxi. We walked past a makeshift tent made of canvas with a strong smell of pee in the air. A few people walked in and out of the tent with colourful loincloths on their hips, some dripping wet. I was depressed to see the degraded state of the Government House, only anarchy could change the officials' entrance into a makeshift lavatory.

After we passed the exit, where protestors carrying large sticks were acting as guards, we reached a kind of no-man's-land. A four-lane road leading to the car-crowded main road was eerily quiet and empty except at the end where a few trucks full of soldiers were parked behind another barricade. All of us walked closely together ahead without knowing it while the soldiers' eyes followed our steps. I was glad we were in our uniforms instead of yellow T-shirts, but I put my yellow wristband in my skirt pocket just in case. The three-hundred-meter walk of sweat seemed like a kilometre but we finally passed the soldier's barricade without trouble. We hailed a cab and left without looking back. I went home and was glad that there was no coverage of my presence on the stage. The evening news just showed a short clip of an uneventful protest day and grandma asked me teasingly, 'Don't you want to join the Yellow-Shirts?'

I just laughed dryly.

The Message

It started with a bang on a roller shutter door, then a shout. Then the voices and the bangs multiplied until waves of people's voices and movements seemed to drown Supiti, Isara, and Sutat. A father, a mother, and a son curled up next to each other, waiting for the angry mob to pull them out of bed and make them kneel in front of the people to receive punishment.

They thought the world was going to end along with the dead king.

Morning came eventually. Supiti peeked through the window's curtain. When he saw the people were gone, he told his wife and son to pack: they would leave in an hour.

Supiti had to call his cousin who lived nearby to borrow her truck. His shiny, white, Mitsubishi pick-up, parking next to his building was vandalised and burned. She came and they moved their belongings into her truck, quickly and quietly for fear of drawing attention. When everything was done, they crammed into the passengers' seats. He stared at the three cardboard signs hung on the electricity post in front of his shop for a long time. It was as if they were shouting in his ears:

'BASTARD! YOU BETRAY OUR COUNTRY (NO ONE PUT DOWN THIS SIGN OR ELSE HE'S A TRAITOR, TOO) BY SOMEONE WHO LOVES THE KING'

'FUCK YOU! TRAITOR! DON'T CALL YOURSELF THAI!

'GET OUT OF THAILAND! STUPID SON OF A BITCH'

'THE LAND WILL BE LIFTED HIGHER WHEN YOU'RE GONE'

At this point, it was too late for him to curse, shout or lash out on his son, the culprit, or to reason with the people who drove his whole family away from the shop house, three-storey, with a soy milk desserts café on the ground floor. The roller shutter door of the café remained

intact despite signs of abuse; of metal scrapes, dirt from shoe prints and a dark brown smudge with foul smell. The sight of his destroyed livelihood was depressing.

A hand touched Supiti's shoulder.

'There's nothing left for us here. Let's go,' his wife said.

He had nothing to say to that, so he started the engine and left with a last thought on his mind – If only the King had not died.

The gap between Supiti and Sutat's age was not that big, but their attitudes separated their worlds. Even so, as a father and a son, they tolerated each other enough to live in the same house and work at the same place: 'Sam Kong Nam Tao Hu EST. 1995.' The people of Phuket knew they could rely on their shop, opening from seven to eleven in the evening, every day (except Saturday) whenever they craved for desserts at night. The shop closed only once a year but not on national holidays when people took their vacations in Phuket.

On 13th October 2016, though, the shop closed without a doubt to mourn the King's death. Supiti and his wife were holding their hands waiting for the official announcement from the Palace. When the news hit, they hugged each other and cried. Supiti looked around for his son and found him sitting at the dinner table with his eyes glued to his laptop. Supiti thought that being obsessed with social media was only a teenager phase, but Sutat had just turned thirty and still his world revolved around computers and smartphones.

'Stop playing the computer for a while and grieve like normal people do,' Supiti snapped.

'I do grieve, just in my own way,' Sutat said with a straight face.

'Bullshit! I know your generation didn't feel close to him as we did, but at least show some sadness. What would others say when they see a smile on your face?'

'Every person dies, even the King. The world didn't end with him. Why should anyone care if I cry or not?'

Heat rushes up to his face and if his wife had not clung to his arm, he would have chastised his son.

He should have done it for he found out what his son had done a few days later.

At first it was just a glance or two from Supiti's customers. Then strangers started to look him up and down as he walked on the street and bought some groceries at the fresh market in town. His wife was treated similarly, but he would learn later that things were worse for his son, and that Sutata eventually spent more and more time at home. It was not until a stranger walked up to him and spat to the ground near his feet that Supiti could not handle it anymore.

'What is wrong with you?' Supiti asked the man.

'Like father like son, right? They should bring back the ancient law of chopping off the King-slanderers' heads.'

Supiti was too shocked to say anything and by the time he recovered, the stranger was gone. He hurried back home with a burning desire to punch his son.

'What have you done, Sutata?' Supiti's voice echoed in the quiet evening air. It was decided that the soy milk business would be closed for a week, perhaps more, so the only remaining people in the shop house were Supiti's wife and his son, while the employees were sent home. As he anticipated, Sutata was sitting in front of his laptop in the living room, as always. The sound of his wife's cooking stopped before her face appeared behind the kitchen door.

'Nothing,' Sutata said. His eyes never left the screen.

'Don't lie to me. A stranger just spat at my feet and said you slandered our departed King!'

‘I did not insult the King. I know the law.’ Sutat said each word slowly.

‘You think I don’t know you when you’re lying? Now I know why people looked strangely at us. What I don’t understand is how? Did you talk shit, act big, in front of your friends?’

‘No, I... you wouldn’t understand. It’s just an online thing. People will forget about it in no time.’

‘How can you be so stupid?’ He walked to his son, but his wife rushed to stand between them.

‘Calm down. He’s just ignorant,’ his wife was holding both of his hands as if to stop them from doing something horrible. ‘They were just silly words posted in the wrong place at the wrong time. Things will die down, that’s what people at the station said.’

Supiti jerked his hands away from hers. ‘What? Do you mean the police station? Was Sutat arrested? How can you keep a secret this big?’

‘No, no. I told you. Someone saw the post and told the police, the police just wanted to hear our side of the story.’ She tried to grab his hands again, but he did not let her. She sat on the sofa next to Sutat who closed the laptop lid and put his hands on his eyes.

When she saw Supiti stand still, she continued. ‘Sutat told the police there was nothing offensive about the message, said he’d already deleted it. He swore in front of the police, a Buddha’s statue, and a photo of the King, that he did not have any intention to insult the monarch and will never do it again in the future. And they just let him go.’

Supiti’s anger slowly deflated, then he sat down next to her. The three of them sat in silence for some time before Supiti asked, ‘What’s the message?’ He did not turn to look at his son. He didn’t trust himself enough not to be angry again.

‘Does it matter?’ Sutat said quietly.

Then, the bangs on the door began.

THE END

4 Part Four

Commentary

The commentary section aims to provide a deeper, more concentrated discussion of the preceding collection of stories. While the critical component in the first section sets out general preoccupations, themes and arguments, this section provides insight into the writing process, the cultural background, and the social contexts of specific stories, and offers some interpretations of some of the pieces, both fiction and non-fiction.

‘Arrival’, ‘Grandma’, ‘Bedroom’, ‘Food Obsession’, ‘Social Meetings’, ‘Driving in Bangkok’

These non-fiction pieces are a set of writings that I accumulated during the “homecoming” trips to Thailand that I made while working on the PhD. They are autobiographical in nature and are written from the perspective of a temporary emigrant. My Thai upbringing clashed with the different lifestyles of those in the UK, which resulted in finding myself in a situation in which my social norms and values were challenged and, eventually, changed. Each visit to Thailand brought on changes in my sense of Thai identity; it is these changes that are the focus of this section.

‘Arrival’ chronicles my first trip back to Thailand after leaving to study in the UK. It captures my initial feelings upon arriving back in Thailand, including my hopes and fears for the future. This piece is put first in the collection because it serves as an effective prologue to the beginning of a journey that aims to discover what it means to be Thai for both the reader and the narrator of the piece. To start the collection, not at the point of departure but at the point of return, suggests that Thai identity is not a fixed quality but rather something that can change

with time and circumstances, to be discovered and rediscovered. Also, by focusing on the return to Thailand and on how strange the experience was, the narration has moved the narrator closer to the non-Thai reader, and this also implies that Thai identity is not fixed.

Starting the collection with this non-fiction piece is one way of convincing the reader of the cultural authority of the narrator, but at the same time, it also questions its absoluteness. Having a Thai native narrator, who has spent time abroad and is capable of communicating to Anglophone readers, writing about Thailand, supports the narrator's authoritative status. However, the absoluteness of this cultural authority is put into doubt by the disorientation that each return brings to the narrator, suggesting that all cultural authority is limited and transient. Also, the piece sets up the readers' expectations that the stories will be of a personal nature, and therefore that changes and transformations are to be expected.

'Grandma' is also an autobiographical piece, which epitomises the inevitability of change. It recounts a reunion with my grandmother on one of my return trips to Thailand. My grandmother is the one who raised me since my mother died when I was six years old. Because of the age gap, seniority played an important part in my relationship with her. In Thai culture, children are expected to obey their parents and not to talk back to adults. This is why my grandmother's tolerant nature is so unusual. The story, therefore, can be read as an exploration of Thai social hierarchy and virtues, in which seniority and obedience predominates in family relationships.

'Bedroom' is the third non-fiction piece in the collection, which has been deliberately placed before the ghost story 'Hide and Seek' because of its haunting imagery. The piece describes the decaying of my childhood bedroom and the memories attached to it. The first few days of going home were very difficult for me as I attempted to readjust to life in Bangkok. Familiar things became unfamiliar, and each interaction was overlaid with memories of my past

self. My bedroom was the most private space I had in the house, and whether I felt ‘at home’ – both literally and figuratively – depended on my feelings in the bedroom. For this reason, old feelings that resurfaced and discoveries I made in Thailand provided the impetus for writing for this piece.

‘Food Obsession’, ‘Social Meetings’ and ‘Driving in Bangkok’ are the pieces I found myself writing as a way of coping with the stress I felt during my visits to Thailand. ‘Food Obsession’, for example, expresses my surprise at the increase in the cost of living in Thailand, and the differences between the UK and Thai culinary scenes. Meanwhile, ‘Social Meetings’ is a piece that captures a moment of alienation experienced while interacting with my Thai friends. The meeting scene is compared to a séance where I become a ghost and hover above them, freezing in time; trapped in the outdated notion of a Thailand that no longer exists. ‘Driving in Bangkok,’ then, describes the tension of driving a car for the first time after several years of not doing so, and how the wild state of road traffic in Thailand made me give up driving in the end. The reasons I picked these topics – food, pop culture, and transportation – were that they are all personal experiences, relatable for tourists and residents alike, and that they are tangible representations of Thailand. These pieces reveal how a Thai native like me, who has been away from the country for an extended period, inevitably struggles to reacquaint herself with life in Thailand.

These autobiographical sketches function as a way of providing glimpses of Thai culture through personal experiences by capturing emotions, thoughts, and memories that together constitute part of Thai identity. The pieces are memoir fragments, suggesting that one way to understand Thai identity is through reliving the small moments which, in one way or another, say something about Thailand or Thai culture. The way the non-fiction pieces are incorporated in the collection is not by grouping them all together, but rather by separating them out so that

it is harder for the reader to recognise the distinction between the fiction and non-fiction pieces. In order to provide the reader with a sense of connection between the non-fiction and fiction pieces, stories with similar themes or subjects are arranged next to each other.

‘To Be a Backpacker (Or Not)’, ‘How to Brew Sunlight in Your Dream’

‘To Be a Backpacker (Or Not)’ and ‘How to Brew Sunlight in Your Dream’ are the only two stories that are told from the perspectives of non-Thai characters. ‘To Be a Backpacker (Or Not)’ is told through the perspective of a British backpacker. The protagonist lacks both the linguistic skills and the cultural context to successfully interpret the scene he witnesses and hence does not know how to act. Through the use of a limited, third-person point of view, the Anglophone reader is put in the same position as the protagonist and is not provided with additional information in the narration about what is really going on. The frustration of the reader emphasises one of the overarching functions of the collection, that is, to highlight possible gaps in communication between the reader and a text that represents certain aspects of Thai culture. The reaction of the Thai reader to the story will likely be different than that of the Anglophone reader because of a greater understanding of the Thai social and cultural context: a Thai reader will likely conclude that the old-lady vendor is actually breaking the law by selling her goods on the pavement and so is evicted by the council police despite her trying to bribe them. The exotic description of Thailand suggests that it is the protagonist’s first trip abroad. This inexperience results in his struggle to comprehend what he witnesses, which shows how little he and the Anglophone reader are equipped to arrive at the same conclusion as the Thai native. Hence, the metonymic gap is created by the narration through the protagonist’s lack of understanding of the Thai social context.

‘How to Brew Sunlight in your Dream’ is part of a fictional cookbook. The story’s introduction suggests that it is part of a series of memoirs accompanying the Thai food recipes of a cookbook written by a female British chef. The narration is metafictional in nature due to its constant use of the personal pronoun ‘you,’ reminding the reader that they are in fact engaging with a textual construct. Furthermore, the reader is not only reminded that they are reading a text within another text, but they are also given advice on how to actually read the cookbook: by not skipping to the recipe at the end of the story, readers will arrive at a deeper insight into cooking Tom Yum Kung. This notion is based on the assumption that by reading the narrator’s life story and learning about Thai culture, readers will gain access to the Thai culinary experience and thus appreciate it more. Nevertheless, the narrator also suggests that there is a limitation to how much access foreigners can have to Thai cultural and social contexts, which makes recreating Thai dishes and replicating the tastes almost impossible. In my experience, the taste of cooked Thai food, including Tom Yum Kung, abroad versus in Thailand is different for a variety of reasons, including the scarcity of some ingredients, the (lack of) freshness of the herbs, and the different variants of the vegetables and fruits. The hardest thing, though, for foreigners to replicate, is the balance of tastes between salty, sweet, and sour. My grandmother is a great cook, and she is the one to judge if the tastes of any of my dishes have achieved this balance. She has cooked Thai food for so long that she hardly needs to measure ingredients or to taste food before serving the family. My grandmother’s unconventional way of cooking, then, inspires the short story to play with the idea of cooking without measurements or strict guidelines.

The narrator’s portrayal of Thai women in ‘How to Brew Sunlight in your Dream’ focuses on an abused Thai woman who became the narrator’s temporary nanny when she was a girl. The cooking scene in the story is, in a way, the reader’s introduction to cooking Thai

food, but because the narration is told from the perspective of a nostalgic memory of a grown-up woman of when she was a girl. Therefore, the narration is exaggerated and based on the girl's pretend play with Araya. Also, it suggests an alternative way of reading cookbooks: sometimes, Thai cultural identity can be accessed through reading about (fictional) cooking processes, including the atmosphere surrounding the cooking, more than reading lists of ingredients and cooking methods.

Both 'To Be a Backpacker (Or Not)' and 'How to Brew Sunlight in Your Dream' illustrate how Thailand can be understood, to a degree, through seeing it from different approaches. For a first-time backpacker protagonist, Bangkok is busy, and dodgy, its people confusing. His exposure to the conflict in the market and the unsettled feelings he experiences after the event because he is unable to fully interpret it, portrays Thailand as an "exotic" country that cannot easily be accessed by outsiders. 'How to Brew Sunlight' conveys the inaccessibility of Thailand through the assumption that unless one grows up eating and cooking Thai food, it is difficult to get the tastes right. Also, it implies a notion, perhaps a debatable one, that to create authentic Thai food, one requires the guidance of a native Thai and needs to be in Thailand.

'Why Dead Fish Go with the Flow, It Asks'

This broadly realist short story utilises a plot structure borrowed from detective fiction and could be read as a whodunit. It fictionalises a real murder that occurred on Ko Tao Island in Thailand in September 2014. The two bodies found were identified as backpackers from the UK, named Hannah Witheridge, 23, and David Miller, 24. The short story's main plot follows the real events quite closely, starting with the discovery of the bodies on Sairee Beach in the early morning and recounting the arrest of two Myanmar workers who are accused of killing the backpackers (the real life Myanmar workers were called Zaw Lin and Wai Phyo; they were

sentenced to death on 24th December 2015). The protagonist is a retired Thai journalist whose longing for his estranged daughter leads him to feel a particular sympathy for the female victim of the murder; this sympathy drives him to investigate the murder, using his journalistic training. The story is focalized through Wichai and told in the third-person; Wichai's interactions with the island residents and the police reflect Thai perspectives of themselves and foreigners. The story not only shows the corruption endemic in Thai society, but it also depicts certain mentalities common in Thai society: that the rich are bullish and the poor are passive, a behavioural pattern that is rooted in the size of the wealth gap between the rich and poor.

According to Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Report 2016, Thailand is the third most unequal country in the world. In addition, Thailand's transparency score of 36 places it in the range of the most highly corrupt countries, and it is ranked 96th in the corruption perceptions index 2017 (Transparency International). As a result, Thailand has gained quite a reputation for corruption, and the appearance of a corrupted police officer and a mafia-like village headman in the short story fulfil western assumptions about Thai corruption. Nevertheless, the story complicates the picture when Lieutenant Mano visits Wichai and argues that his job is underpaid and that he could get in trouble unless he becomes corrupted and obedient to powerful people like the others.

The fact that his daughter distances herself from the narrator and has gone abroad implies the existence of differences in points of view and attitudes towards the West between the narrator and his daughter. She wants to be independent and explore the world by backpacking, while the narrator believes that his daughter is not ready to face a world full of dangers. The conflict between the protagonist and his daughter is not fully explained in the text. However, his motive in coming out of his retirement and seeking justice for the victims can be read as his way of making amends with his daughter. The result of his investigative endeavour

is a dead end, but it brings with it a realisation that the only thing he can try to fix is his relationship with his daughter, and not try to tackle all the problems that come with corruption and class inequality.

‘Naak of Phra Khanong,’ ‘Naak,’ ‘The Encounter’

All three of these short stories are responses to the Thai folktale ‘Mae Nak Phra Khanong.’ These texts, therefore, are examples of intertextuality: being related to each other, they can be read either independently or conjointly, both alluding to and adding further depth and layers to the original folktale. ‘Naak of Phra Khanong’ is my rendering of the traditional version of the story in English while ‘Naak’ and ‘The Encounter’ are freer retellings of specific aspects of the folktale. The three stories might all be classified as ghost stories – an important genre in Thailand – but each story differs in its perspective, tone, and writing style.

‘Naak of Phra Khanong’ presents the story of Naak, a pregnant woman who dies during childbirth but comes back as a ghost along with her dead toddler to be with her husband Maak’. This Thai folktale originates from the era of King Rama IV (late 19th century) and has been adapted many times, becoming the popular subject of many films and TV series.¹ A Thai scholar and historian, Anek Nawikamul, claims that the first written account of the story was a newspaper article from 1899 written by K.S.R. Kularb, a renowned writer and journalist at the time (Nawikamul). However, there is no straightforward correlation between the story in the 1899 article and the Naak myth in the popularised version; e.g. the husband’s name is Choom

¹ The first adaptation was a musical theatre version in 1911 followed by numerous adaptations into movies, radio plays, TV series, books, and an opera up to the present day.

instead of Maak in Kularb's article, and Choom is a Khon performer who played the role of Thotsakan.

The theme of the story, no matter the version, is undying love and a wife's dedication to her husband. The narration in 'Naak of Phra Khanong' follows the same plotline that most versions share, and the theme remains the same: love beyond death. Wifely dedication is a traditional virtue in Thai culture, but it is something that might not have the same resonance outside Thailand. As a result, the Anglophone readers might read the story differently, focusing on the comical side of the story in how Maak finds out Naak is a ghost, which could be read as an unusual combination of horror and comedy. My retelling of the myth does not focus on the horror of Naak's haunting experience, which ghost stories usually do, nor on the romance and family virtues between Maak and Naak. The neutral tone and straightforward storytelling is implicative of my intention to present the story as a baseline, without a biased, suggestive tone, before presenting the changed version of 'Naak.'

'Naak' draws on the same folk tale but resets the action to the present day; it is not concerned with Naak's relationship to Maak but rather considers how Naak's experience has turned her into a vengeful spirit of faithlessness. As the story opens, Naak seems content with her life as a guiding spirit of love. She has her own shrine which people visit to worship her every day. Her attention is captured by a couple named Noon and Ming. Ming attracts Naak's attention because he looks similar to Maak, but Noon turns out to be the one Naak feels more sympathetic towards because Noon's dedication to Ming reminds Naak of her past self. In addition, 'Naak' is, in a way, an extension of 'Naak of Phra Khanong,' telling Naak's story set in the modern day after her banishment by the famous monk. Naak recounts the differences between the myth's portrayal of herself and the events surrounding her haunting of the Phra Khanong area, and how her perspective has changed. However, the ending suggests that

although Naak considers herself transformed from a submissive, traditional wife and a vengeful ghost into an independent spiritual guide, she still haunts people when she thinks they deserve punishment.

The effect of Naak's portrayal in terms of the reader's meeting with Thai culture which my collection is staging is to reinforce the notion that identity is flexible. Naak's praised virtue in the myth lies in her loyalty to her husband, but the Naak of the modern day is independent and is worshipped as a spiritual guide for lovers. Thus, Naak's identity has changed in the eyes of Thai people, from faithful wife, to vengeful spirit, to spiritual guide: all three of these identities are projected onto the same myth.

One of the most controversial decisions I make in 'Naak' is to transliterate Naak's lullaby without providing a translation. This technique of deliberately leaving a 'metonymic gap' is common in postcolonial writing². This decision proved controversial: some of the readers in our PhD writing workshop were frustrated by the lack of access to this portion of the story for the Anglophone reader. Their frustration grew out of their difficulties in connecting with the piece because of the language barrier; they would rather have read the English translation than the transliterated song accompanied by an interpretation provided by the protagonist. The reason for not translating the song, for me, is to retain the oral tradition aspect of the myth. It could be said that the scene, either on television or on the cinema screen, where the ghost of Naak sings a lullaby to the baby in her arms while waiting for her husband to come back from the war, has become the myth's trademark. The benefit of leaving the reader ignorant of the lyrics instead of translating them into English is that it invites the reader to read the unfamiliar words out loud. The reader might not know the song's melody, but they are guided

² See section 2 of my critical analysis for more details.

by the rhymes and rhythm of the Thai lyrics. Like reading poems, the reader can appreciate the aesthetic qualities, such as alliteration and assonance, of a Thai written text, and through them grasp at the meaning of the words.

The reception of 'Naak' turned out differently when it was read out loud at an open mic event where the song section was not just read out loud but sung. In that context, the audience did not seem to mind that they did not fully understand the meaning of the song and their attention was on its musicality instead of its meaning. The different responses of the two groups have implications regarding the readers' expectations and limitations when reading a fictional work of another culture. While the Anglophone readers are inclined to accept the use of foreign words in various places when it does not interfere with the reading experience and the overall meaning of the narration, their frustration occurs when facing a long passage of untranslated words, which create a gap between the reader and the text. This limitation is justifiable, in my opinion, as long as there is a creative reason behind it, and writing this commentary section allows me to explain and justify such gaps in the creative pieces.

'The Encounter' engages with another part of the folktale of Naak. It is a reimagining of the ghost-banishment of Naak by a famous monk of the time named Somdej Toh. The first version of the story was written in the third-person, from an omniscient point of view but was later changed to first-person. The narrator is a superstitious boy who lives in a temple; I wanted his point of view to be one of awe and of naiveté. The boy is someone who, because of his belief in the supernatural, will stop being afraid only if his problem, Naak the ghost, is vanquished by supernatural powers.

Despite following the convention that magic and supernatural powers are employed to fend off Naak, I decided to go against the genre conventions of ghost story writing where the rituals and supernatural elements are usually focused on and narrated in great detail. I omitted

the scene where Naak is supposedly banished, and only revealed parts of the conversation Somdej Toh has with the ghost. This decision changes the story in a way that subverts the reader's expectations. The story is not about the ghost-banishment itself but how rationality and superstition co-exist, which reflects how Thai people mentally and physically deal with supernatural phenomena. The boy's superstitious belief reflects the deep-rooted presence of the supernatural in Thai culture, a presence that is reflected in the enduring popularity and cultural centrality of ghost stories. The story's protagonist insists that the encounter between Somdej Toh and Naak must have involved magic. Somdej Toh's explanation that they simply had a conversation, which convinced Naak to cease haunting the village, is not enough to convince the boy. The ending in which Somdej Toh shows Naak's inscribed bone to the villagers in order to appease them, might portray Thailand as a superstitious country to the Anglophone reader. However, there is rationality in supernatural beliefs: the logic behind the appearance and disappearance of ghosts is that there are natural rules concerning actions and consequences, good deeds begetting good karma et cetera, which is an important marker of Thai culture. Also, the superstitious beliefs of the characters are not meant to portray all Thai people as superstitious. Rather, the story presents a tension in Thai culture between rationality and superstition within which a negotiated middle space exists.

'Game of Khon', 'Go-Kart King'

'Game of Khon' depicts a real-life event in Thailand. It is a creative investigation of how Thai people perceive their cultural identities and whether traditions should be preserved, adapted, or modernised. In the original version, this narrative was written as a realist short story with three third-person points of view. Several problems concerning narrative viewpoints occurred during the writing process, and after careful consideration, the story's format turned

into a play. What the play enables me to do that the short story struggled to accomplish is to present a fair distribution of viewpoints between the two main characters without splitting the story into two separate narratives, and it provides me with an opportunity to play with visual representations on stage that reflect an aspect of Thai cultural identity through a traditional Thai performance of Khon.

‘Go-Kart King’ is a non-fiction piece that provides information on the real events that underpin ‘Game of Khon’ and thus serves to provide context for the play. It narrates the events surrounding the use of Khon characters in a music video and presents my own perspective on the issue. The reason that the piece is placed after the creative piece instead of before, like other non-fiction pieces, is that I want the play to be read without context first. In this way, the piece creates a kind of metonymic gap where the reader fails to understand that I am transcribing something real, something based on real events. The story order suggests that the reader delves into the story’s conflict first without any social contexts explicitly given in the play, and then things become more evident after they read this non-fiction piece that comes after. The piece also functions as an explanation or a clarification of the characters’ motivations and the plot.

‘Miss Kaew Horseface’

This short story is adapted from a Thai folk tale called ‘Kaew Na Mah’, which translates as ‘Kaew Horseface’. The well-known folk tale is included in most published children’s story collections and it can be traced back to a poetic drama of the same name written by HRH Prince Puwanetnarintornrit dating back to the mid-17th century during the reign of King Rama IV. The tale is about Kaew, a low-born daughter of a pair of farmers whose face looks like that of a horse. One day, a prince loses his kite until his horseback journey brings him to Kaew’s house. Kaew tells the prince that she has found the kite, but before returning it she makes him promise

that he will take her as his wife, and he takes her to the palace. The prince promises to do so, but never follows through. After waiting for several days, Kaew goes to the palace to see the king, who is the prince's father, and demands justice. The king gives her the impossible task of moving a mountain before she is allowed marry the prince. With the help of a hermit who gives Kaew magical items, she is able to complete the task and marries the prince.

In an approach similar to my literary encounter with the Naak myth, I have modernised the fairy tale, reimagining the female protagonist from the fairy tale in a modern-day setting. The protagonist in the short story is a girl with a horse-like face who falls in love with a boy who is out of her league. The first encounter between the pair has been slightly changed from the original, however: a drone is stuck on a tree in front of the girl's house instead of a kite, and the promise of marriage is replaced by that of being boyfriend-girlfriend. However, the story diverges from the original tale more conspicuously when Kaew, the protagonist, meets the boy's beautiful stepmother. The relationship between Kaew and the stepmother develops despite their differences in age, manner, and appearance. The moral of the tale of 'Kaew Na Mah' is that one should not judge a book by its cover and never give up, no matter what life throws at you, which is why Kaew Na Mah must prove her worth through seemingly impossible tasks until the prince and others are able to overlook her ugliness and accept her.

Kaew's goal in the story, on the other hand, changes from challenging the boy to take her into his life to having a relationship with his stepmother. The story's ending is also different from the happy-ending conclusion of the tale in which Kaew Na Mah earns the prince's love and lives happily.

In the earlier draft, the story's theme was to show how quick wits and perseverance are able to help Kaew stand up against insults and bullying without the help of magical items to make things easier for her: in other words, it developed a similar moral to the original fairy tale

but without the original character's reliance on magic. As the story developed, my attention turned towards Kaew and the boy's stepmother instead because I wanted to explore and conciliate the opposition between beauty and ugliness. To be perceived as being graceful and well-mannered is to conform to society's expectations, and with them to sacrifice a certain kind of individuality; while to be shunned from society because of one's appearance grants the freedom of not living tethered to the expectations of others. Kaew admires the lady for the conformist qualities she can never achieve, while the lady yearns to be free from the social constraints, for which Kaew seems to be an exception. Since the social constraints acting upon the two women and the definition of grace (and by extension beauty) are specifically Thai, the story becomes an exploration of Thai attitudes towards difference and non-conformity.

'The Grand Exam'

'The Grand Exam' is a short story that started as a piece of flash fiction. The first scene is self-contained and sets up the premise of the whole story. It sketches a relationship between a mother and her son who is preparing for the most crucial exam in a child's school career.³ After the first scene, the relationship between the mother and son is explored through a series of sections featuring several different modes of writing. The point of using different writing modes, e.g. a schedule, a list, a skit, etc., along with standard prose is to convey the sense of the discontinuity of the boy's episodic memory. The story's subject of examination calls for a type of prose that reflects coherence and discipline with a systematic, regimented approach such

³ All Prathom 6 (grade 6) students have to take Ordinary National Education Tests (O-NET), set by the National Institute of Educational Testing Service. The main subjects covered by the test are 'Thai language, mathematics, science, social studies, religion and culture and foreign languages,' and the students are awarded for passing the exam a Certificate of Primary Education. (Michael and Trines)

as the use of a list and a schedule. It can also be understood from the modes of narration that it depicts a boy who, despite a strictly regimented lifestyle, is struggling to focus. The formal approach highlights the boy's lack of time to relax, or to think about anything besides the exam – as well as his yearning for a life of play. The end of the story suggests that the end of the exam does not bring the protagonist joy or gratification despite his high chances of success.

The boy's busy schedule, like those of most Thai students in Bangkok, is the result of pressure from his parent who wants him to get into a good school. Five hours of school per day is what the basic curriculum states, but the highly competitive atmosphere of the education system turns grades and points into the most important thing in a pupil's life. Considerable pressure is put on pupils by their parents and many are made to have extra tutoring classes. Therefore, it is implied in the end, that the exam the protagonist has prepared for will not be his last. The reader can also assume from the boy's realisation that the mother will keep pushing the boy forward, and that the routine is going to continue, and perhaps intensify. There is a possibility of the boy's change of attitude, though, from a meek, obedient boy into an aggressive one. This may be the cost of raising a child while prioritizing grades over social and family values.

'Superstitions', 'Welcome to the Club'

'Superstitions' is a non-fiction piece that talks about my experience of observing a ritual action performed by a Thai Boxing Club, namely the pre-meal offering of food to past mentors and ancestors. The action described to the reader may seem strange and puzzling, and the reader's understanding is limited to the explanation given by the club's members. At the end of the piece, the narrator decides to go with the flow even when she does not fully understand the

gesture because the need to be part of the group overcomes her scepticism (a scepticism that is encapsulated by the title which brands the ritual action a ‘superstition’).

‘Welcome to the Club’ is a realist short story that explores how Muay Thai, a national sport with a long history in Thailand, exists in the twenty-first century. There are two current aspects of Muay (Thai kickboxing): The first is Muay Thai, a national, competitive sport supported by the government. The second is Muay Boran, a collection of non-sporting forms from which Muay Thai originates, of which the techniques are considered ‘too dangerous for the modern ring version of muay’ (Vail 510). The simplified forms of Muay Boran are the ones that are included in some schools’ Physical Education classes in which children learn the forms of Ram Muay, a graceful, traditional war-dance that boxers do before their fights, and basic movements of Thai boxing (510).

In addition, group culture also plays a role in ‘Welcome to the Club.’ The protagonist does not know anything about Muay Thai, but he eventually becomes part of the group. He learns that there is a comfort in being a part of a collective culture, so, in the end, feeling the culture becomes more important than understanding it. In addition, the protagonist’s conflicting relationship with his mother, on the other hand, contrasts with the one he has with the club members. There is a rival pull between the mother and the coach, who substitutes as a father figure. By the end, the protagonist has to make a choice between the family he was born with and the one he has found at the club, and he chooses his mother. Then, he feels betrayed by his mother’s change of heart, and when he goes back to the club for support, he finds out that it has gone.

‘This Is Not about My Mother’s Death’

‘This Is Not about My Mother’s Death’ is closely based on my childhood memory of my mother’s death. It is inspired by the non-fiction piece ‘Her Ghost Mother’ which is about a girl who witnessed her mother’s death and stayed with the corpse for three days. That piece reminds me of my own mother’s death and the naïve perspective I had as a child. ‘This is not about My Mother’s Death’ is written in a style that resembles a fiction piece, calling attention to itself by defining it by what it is not. It suggests truth from the negation made in the story, implying that it is a true story but with the changes of the characters’ names.

‘Farang and Mia Farang’

‘Farang and Mia Farang’ is a piece of short fiction written in the epistolary form. The story is structured as a series of letters in which the narrator writes to her daughter, detailing her life before and after she leaves Thailand and moves to the UK. The story is written in the form of letters to portray the one-sided communication that reflects the estranged relationship between the narrator and her daughter. The effect the form has on the narrative is a direct portrayal of the characters’ thoughts and feelings without the direction from the omniscient narrator, which makes it more personal and realistic, and the monologic form of the epistolary writing (the letters of one person) allows the narrator to address specific issues and serialise her life stages into sections.

The protagonist’s decision to marry an older, white English man categorises her as a Mia Farang, a Thai term that translates as ‘a foreigner’s wife’ which has a negative connotation. The story illustrates the way in which Thai women who marry foreigners – often at least partially to secure their families’ economic futures – are perceived. The protagonist’s point of view shows not only how Thai people view ‘Mia Farang’ but also how foreigners, the British in this case, view and categorise her as a ‘Thai Bride.’ Apart from the cultural and racial biases,

the narration also contains a sense of migrant writing, which is based on my experience of living in the UK. The migrant aspect is inspired by Yoko Tawada's collection of short stories *Where Europe Begins*, translated from German. Her collection explores the sense of strangeness felt in an unfamiliar situation, and the title story particularly portrays the experiences of a foreigner living in another country.

'Hide and Seek', 'Party, Taxi, Boy Scout Camp'

Ghosts are the main subjects of these stories. The belief in ghosts and the presence of ghost stories is ingrained in most Thais' everyday lives, whether one believes in ghosts or not. In my own experience, my grandmother usually told me ghost stories instead of bedtime stories when I was a child. Unlike Aesop's stories or other children's literature in print, the ghost stories appear in the form of oral storytelling. Despite the fact that I have never seen ghosts before, my grandmother tells me not to ignore the possibility that they exist and makes me wear an amulet necklace to ward off bad spirits and to protect me from harm. Those who do believe in ghosts have plenty of access to ghost stories via shows from radio stations, television, and websites.

'Hide and Seek' starts with two children playing a game of hide and seek, when one of them goes out missing. The presence of the ghost is not revealed to the reader until later in the story. So, the focus of the writing is on the relationships between the son, the mother, the grandmother, and the ghost sister, and how they react to or cope with death and ghosts. In this manner, it engages with generational differences within Thai families. The mother, who seems to be the least inclined to believe in the supernatural, is the most anxious of the family. The grandmother, who puts her entire faith in praying, seems to be the most at ease with the tragic

events; she appears to be used to dealing with ghosts. The boy's interaction with his sister is free of anxieties; it is as if he is talking with a real person.

'Party, Taxi, Boy Scout Camp' is a non-fiction piece about the way my friends and I absorb ghost stories and how they are often told in Thai society. It is a ghost story within the telling of a ghost story: at a party, one of my friends tells a story about ghosts in a Boy Scout Camp that was broadcasted on a popular ghost radio show, which my friend and a taxi driver were listening to on the way to her house. The reason for the numerous narrative layers is that I wanted to show the specific contexts that ghost stories are told in, and how this raises questions not just of the nature of ghosts but also of the people who are obsessed with ghost stories. It might be surprising to learn that in some contexts, scary ghost stories could be told at parties as a source of entertainment. In addition, it also shows that people who are obsessed with ghost stories do believe in ghosts and that, despite the people's thrill of hearing ghost experiences, they could still be afraid of ghosts in real life, like Kona in the story, or they could be like the taxi driver who considers seeing ghosts to be 'good luck.'

'Her Ghost Mother', 'Supernatural FM'

In November 2012, there were news reports in Thailand about a four-year-old girl who lived with the corpse of her dead mother for three whole days. It would have been just another sad news story if it was not for the claims made by the girl and her aunt that the ghost of the girl's mother was the one who took care of the girl even after she died. Thai media outlets spread the news for over a week, and the supernatural aspect of the event was the focus of most of the reports. I kept seeing the girl's aunt being interviewed with the girl, who rarely talked but had unblinking eyes that always looked as if she was staring at something no one could see. What interested me was that I felt that the aunt looked like she was a superstitious person, and

was not a reliable source, but the girl looked like she could see the ghost of her mother. I was conflicted by the notion that one has to choose whether one believes in the existence of ghosts or not, but what I felt was in the middle: I did not believe that the ghost of the girl's mother lingered to feed and put the girl to sleep, but I could not deny that what the girl was staring at could be her mother's ghost. The two pieces I wrote, then, represent my conflicting beliefs, which, for the most part throughout Thailand, is a widely shared experience: there is a saying in Thai that goes 'If you don't believe it, don't disrespect it,' which is commonly used in religion and supernatural beliefs.

The non-fiction piece 'Her Ghost Mother' is written to give context to the reader of the event that leads to the fiction piece that follows and to represent part of my own belief that there are things beyond what the eyes can see. The fictional story 'Supernatural FM', on the other hand, represents my inquisitive and sceptical observations about how the media encourages and feeds superstition. It also shows an interdependency between the demand and supply of superstition.

'At the Temple'

Buddhism is an important part of Thai cultural identity. Although Theravada Buddhism, a more conservative branch of Buddhism besides Mahayana, is not technically Thailand's state religion, over ninety percentage of Thais are Buddhists (The National Statistical Office). The story portrays the roles which temples play in everyday life and in the Thai imagination. It shows a conflict between the serene, simple life of monks and the assumed spiritual, or even supernatural roles, that people of the community expect from them.

What is explored, thematically, beyond the obvious, is the juxtaposition between people's beliefs and expectations and their real-world consequences. In the ideal Thai

imagination, temples are communal spaces where certain problems can be fixed, and monks are revered as spiritual guides who live modestly and have overcome earthly needs and emotions. In reality, monks are people with emotions, and they can make mistakes.

‘Yellow-Shirt Protest’

This non-fiction piece is an autobiographical detailing of my first and only experience of joining a political protest. On 26th August 2008, the People’s Alliance for Democracy or PAD had taken control of the Government House. PAD’s symbol was the colour yellow, the colour of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, which was why ‘Yellow-Shirt’ became the name they were known for. They were political protestors who were against Thaksin Shinawatra, the ex-Prime Minister, because of his alleged anti-monarchy agenda. After a military coup had toppled Shinawatra’s government, his influences still shadowed succeeding governments, and the Prime Minister at the time, Samak Sundaravej, was believed to have a conflict of interest with Shinawatra. The protest lasted from 25th May to 3rd December 2008, and their goal of driving PM Sundaravej out of office was successful, when the Constitutional Court disbanded the majority party on grounds of electoral fraud, and the PM had to resign.

My motive for joining the protest besides curiosity was personal. While my mother was studying Political Sciences, one of the biggest and most tragic protests occurred at her university where she took part as an activist. After she died, my grandmother often told the story of my mother’s narrow escape from the authorities mainly to scare me so that I would stay away from politics, but it inspired me to be brave and idealistic like her. So, when the opportunity arrived, I wanted to know if I could fight for an idea like my mother. The result was disappointing because I did not feel involved with the protestors’ causes, and instead of bravery I was mostly feeling afraid most that my grandmother would find out what I had done.

‘Bad News in Iceland’, ‘Nai Luang’, ‘The Message’

The non-fiction piece ‘Bad News in Iceland’, the poem ‘Nai Luang’, and the short story ‘The Message’ were all inspired by a real event – the death of King Rama IX. They constitute my creative response to the incident and also function as a kind of therapeutic writing, i.e. they represent my attempt to understand more about my own emotions at the time and how to cope with them.

The majority of Thai people, including me, are brought up to have a genuine emotional bond to the monarch in a way that is often puzzling to British or American people who assume that a more distanced or cynical attitude would be dominant.

‘Bad News in Iceland’ describes the response I had when the news of King Rama IX’s death struck while I was travelling to Iceland with my best friend. It centres on the issue of my inability to cry when I heard the news, sad as I was inside. The frustration I felt could be read as a reflection of how part of the Thai national identity is formed through the relationship with the monarchy. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who was a public figure, was also called ‘Father of the whole nation.’ When his death was announced on 13th October 2016, the emotions of the masses ran deep, as if the loss were of their real fathers. The fact that Thai people were in a state of melancholy was well-known, so much so that even some of my British and American friends sent supportive texts to me as mentioned in the story. There is a conflict of feelings between the expectations of my friends regarding my reaction versus what I felt. I was still confused and numb after receiving the news of King Bhumibol’s death, and it prevented me from grieving, which was why my replies to my friends’ texts were short, polite, and did not reveal how I really felt. Writing this non-fiction piece helped me to investigate my feelings which lead to a better understanding of my own grief process: it made me realise that when I

was in Iceland, my tears were not for the lost opportunity of seeing the northern lights but for my delayed grief of the King's death.

'Nai Luang' is the only poem that appears in the collection. The reason I include the poem in the collection is because it is a necessary and important part of the series about the king's death – I wrote it in reaction to the news and it represents one of the steps of my thinking through the event. The poem is my attempt to align the public images of the king from my childhood with the private emotional bond I had with him and the degree of grief that comes with it. There is the 'father figure' mentality of the general Thai perspective of the king which is deep-rooted in Thai society. Partly, the attitude is encouraged, especially during the celebration of Father's Day in Thailand, which is on 5th December every year. Since the anniversary of King Adulyadej's birthday is on 5th December, his face appeared everywhere as a reminder of the role given to him as Father of the Nation.

'The Message' is a short story inspired by a real event that happened in Thailand during the mourning period for King Bhumibol Adulyadej. On the night of the 14th October 2016, a mob gathered outside a dessert café in Phuket, a southern province in Thailand. There was a rumour that the son of a Thai dessert vendor had posted some inappropriate comments about the King's death on Facebook. The man was released after he had been questioned that morning by the police who were trying to establish if he had violated the lèse majesté law.⁴ His posts on Facebook were later shared online, and a thousand people gathered in the evening to demand his punishment. The police were able to prevent the mob from hurting the man and his family,

⁴ Section 112 of the Thai Criminal code states that 'whoever, defames, insults or threatens the King, the Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent, shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years' (Thailand Law Library).

and soon after, the family moved out. The accused man did not end up in prison, and the actual message he posted on Facebook was never officially revealed.

This story reflects the short, fragile period in Thailand when people's emotions ran high, and comments on the monarch or an inappropriate way of mourning such as wearing non-black clothes could lead to physical mob attacks and online shaming. It was a culturally-sensitive time that was both terrifying and fascinating, which was why the story was written to explore how one becomes alienated from society, being morally judged due to cultural factors.

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5 Part Five

Reflection

5.1 How to Write Cultural Identity – A Comparison

This section assesses in detail how the writing strategies employed by the authors analysed in the first portion of the critical component influenced my own strategies when putting together my collection of stories. In addition, the following section will also foreground the challenges and opportunities inherent in the writing of the thesis.

S.P. Somtow's *Jasmine Nights*

Somtow's novel *Jasmine Nights* employs various devices to assist the Anglophone reader in orienting him/herself, such as the glossary that explains the terms used in the novel while also allowing Somtow to retain Thai terms in their full 'exoticism.' My collection of stories adopts a slightly different approach. In most of the stories, Thai words are accompanied by immediate descriptions of what they mean, or else they are already translated into their closest equivalent in English, a strategy that effectively masks their true Thai forms (as they are to the characters in the stories, who – for the most part – are Thai speakers). There is an exception, however, when a song in 'Naak' is not translated, and no definition is given to the reader. The narration following the song describes what happens in the song and what it means for the singer but does not reveal the whole meaning of the passage. The withholding of meaning limits the understanding of the Anglophone reader and forces them to focus on the musicality of the lyrics instead. The space of interpretation (or confusion) that occurs when such a technique is used can be explored through that which scholars of postcolonial literature call the metonymic gap, as discussed earlier in the text by Gosh and Kleinberg.

Such a phenomenon affects the text not only on a linguistic level but also in the way the reader perceives the characters. The metonymic gap challenges the reader's traditional way of reading and interpreting a text written in English. In order to appreciate the complexity of the English-written texts of non-native writers who use techniques such as this, the reader is forced to interpret not only the characters and their actions but also the cultural implications of their actions, and to do so with very little guidance.

The cultural in-betweenness and the memoir format of the novel also help my writing of the non-fiction pieces. Although both the novel and my non-fiction pieces are narrated from the first-person point of view, the narrator's age in my collection does not change even when describing past events or childhood memories. The ambiguity of the narrator 'I' in my collection lies, instead, in the way the stories are put next to each other. The first-person narrator is used in some of the stories, and there is no immediate indicator of whether that story is a fiction or non-fiction.

The theme of Thai cultural identity is explored in different aspects of those stories. However, when the stories are strewn together into a collection of diverse forms, genres, and styles, the representation of Thai identity becomes fragmented. The reader's image of Thai identity reading Somtow's novel might be more unified as well as being more accessible, but the discontinuity of the collection's structure offers an alternative way of perceiving culture: perhaps culture is a composition of moments in people's lives that cannot be compressed or abridged into a comfortable version that the reader can digest or even always comprehend.

Rattawut Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing*

Sightseeing's theme is similar to my collection of stories: an exploration of Thailand and its people including tourists, local Thais, and immigrants. In addition, *Thai Myths and Other True*

Stories also uses footnotes and parentheses to explain words, phrases, or historical and cultural background information to aid the reader as Lapcharoensap does. Like *Sightseeing*, the majority of the short stories in my collection are realist stories about Thailand with Thai-based characters who are broadly similar to Lapcharoensap's. There are thematic similarities, too. Thus, 'Farang and Mia Farang,' 'How to Be a Backpacker,' and 'Why Dead Fish Go with the Flow' deal with issues about the tourism industry and cultural differences. However, while Lapcharoensap's realist stories focus on character-building, and the characters' interactions with each other and the world around them, in a manner that conforms to the modes of Anglo-American short fiction in the tradition of Carver, Munro, etc., my own collection is somewhat unrulier, with its variety of tones and styles. The three stories in my collection vary in style and tone, ranging from a slice-of-life story in 'How to Be a Backpacker' to epistolary writing in 'Farang and Mia Farang' and a detective story in 'Why Dead Fish Go with the Flow.'

Salman Rushdie's *East, West*

Like *East, West*, my short story collection consists of characters and settings from both (a version of) the 'East' and (a version of) the 'West' – Thailand and the UK in this case – but the way the stories are arranged is very different and hence, by implication, the rhetoric of the collection, as a whole, is different. While the nine stories in *East, West* are separated according to the characters' origins and settings, my stories are not neatly grouped by theme, geography or genre. The only strict principle of order is that non-fiction pieces are inserted between fictional ones. Other than this principle – which is implicit rather than being made explicit – there are no formal indicators of whether the stories are fiction or non-fiction. The portrayal of Thai identity is not framed by any arrangement that would provide any help or instruction for the reader on how to read or decode them; nor are they authenticated by the categorisation of

fiction/non-fiction. Instead there are sudden shifts in setting and perspective that suggest a kaleidoscopic view of Thai identities.

Nathan Englander's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*

Thai and Jewish identities are vastly different. For one thing, Jewish identity is not tied to a nation state or territory in the same way as Thai identity. Also, Thailand lacks a unifying experience such as the Holocaust that has come to function as such a central point of definition for Jewish identity. Nonetheless, Englander's mode of exploring Jewish identity offers a fruitful place of comparison to my own exploration of Thai cultural identity. As we have seen, Englander's strategy is not to give the reader any concrete definition of what Jewish identity is but to present a heterogenous collection of stories that explore different aspects of Jewish identity. Some of his stories also test the boundaries of how much 'Jewishness' a story needs to contain for it to still be defined as a Jewish story.

The strategies of my own collection are similar to Englander's collection in the way that various writing styles and techniques are used to portray the complex notion of Thai cultural identity. Although the various stories differ from each other in terms of themes, genres and formal approach, it is hoped that they add up to something larger than their parts without becoming reductive, i.e. without simplifying the concept of cultural identity, or giving a sense of completeness or coherence. The goal of the collection is to help Anglophone readers to understand what it means to be Thai through storytelling, of providing a series of small moments that show what Thai people believe in, how they live their lives, and how they perceive the world around them – without making any claim that this understanding can be complete, nor that Thai culture can be fully represented. Like Englander's work, the theme of my collection is identity, but the way my collection of short stories portrays Thai culture and

identity is even more fragmented than Englander's. Also, the portrayal of Thai identities in some of my stories is at times put in opposition to the perspectives of Westerners and of other Thais, e.g. across different generations and genders.

5.2 Challenges and Opportunities

Having revealed the ways in which I drew on the strategies of fellow transcultural authors when working on my collection, I now wish to articulate some of the other challenges and opportunities I encountered over the course of the writing process.

One of the challenges I faced while shaping the collection is that I felt an obligation to the Anglophone reader to write about common preconceptions and tropes concerning Thai culture such as Thai food, Muay Thai, elephant-trekking, Buddhism, and so on. When I started writing this thesis the traditional images of Thai culture that I grew up with and was taught in school – Thai dance, Thai food, Thai music – were very much on my mind; I felt like I needed to represent these images in order to represent Thailand. But as the project progressed, my focus shifted from representing the ‘official’ images of Thai culture to individual characters and their personal responses to such markers of Thai identity. The responsible feeling towards the Anglophone reader comes from my anticipation of the reader’s expectation that the images of Thailand in their mind should be something recognisable at first, like a hook that draws their attention to a Southeast Asian country they may know very little about. Once they were hooked, I thought, then I would be able to introduce unseen aspects of Thai cultural identity. Incidentally, one of the goals for writing about these tropes was to correct some misconceptions about Thailand or to offer different viewpoints of well-known stereotypes of Thai people (e.g. about Thai brides).

In addition, my short story collection is an interrogation of what genres are best used to tell ‘the story’ of Thailand. While Anglophone readers might be more familiar with certain genres of writing about Thailand such as travel books, realist stories – such as those of Thai authors – provide an easily accessible introduction to Thailand in a mode that guards against orientalism. Still, I feel there are missing things in the depictions of Thailand – myths, folktales,

and supernatural elements – that are central to this (as to any other) culture. These forms contribute to developing portraits of various mental, spiritual, and psychological aspects of Thai identity on different levels that realist stories might not be able to capture. There is a risk of orientalising Thailand by overusing ‘exotic’ tropes or overrepresenting ‘superstition’. Nevertheless, the risk of losing a vital aspect of Thailand and Thai cultural identity is greater if these aspects are not included in the stories.

During the process of writing, though, my focus changed from ‘How Thai do the story and characters need to be for the reader to understand that it is saying something about Thai cultural identity?’ to ‘How best can I portray the narrator’s frustration with his situation?’ I focus less on the themes and subjects of the stories and more on the development of characters and narration. Thai cultural identities became the frame of the collection but not the subject. Most of the characters in the collection are Thai, and the way they interact with other characters and the situations they are in represent Thailand more interestingly than the occupations or cultural tropes that they were meant to represent.

Conclusion

This thesis is a creative and critical exploration of Thai cultural identity in the form of English-language short fiction and non-fiction. The creative component – a collection of stories titled ‘Thai Myths and Other True Stories’ – presents a complex portrait of Thailand and its people, beliefs, and history, through a range of themes, perspectives and genres. The intention is to complicate the reader’s relationship with the reading experience of the collection by the inclusion of non-fiction pieces. The readers are to decide what is true and what is fictionalised and how accessible the different forms are to them.

The critical component questions the nature of identity and language and the interplay between them. The first section includes theories and terms that help understand the writing situation of non-native writers in English-written fiction, including writing strategies related to postcolonial theories, contact literature and exophonic literature. This thesis aims to show the advantages and disadvantages of using these three areas of study and how they are relatable to the project. The second section discusses how the themes and narrative strategies of four writers – S.P. Somtow, Rattawaut Lapcharoensap, Salman Rushdie and Nathan Englander – explore issues concerning identity and cultural representation. The commentary, which is the second part of the critical component, discusses the details of the writing process and the purposes of using various themes and forms in the stories. The reflection section refers back to the four writer’s strategies and writing styles compared to the ones used in the creative collection.

This thesis proposes answers to some of the questions concerning identity, authenticity, and the English language, which is stated in the introduction. The first question is about the significance of Thai cultural identity and why it needs to be explored. The process of writing the collection of stories has made me come to the conclusion that Thai culture is not a permanent

fixture, unchangeable and frozen on a shelf, and ready to be picked up and shown to tourists whenever they request it. The pre-set images of Thai culture in the past may not be able to represent Thailand in the present completely. Rattawut Lapcharoensap's short stories in *sightseeing* – all realist tales based in Thailand – offer an easily-accessible image of Thailand. *Thai Myths and Other True Stories*, however, takes a different approach. A variety of genres and perspectives used in the collection are vital in finding the best outlet for representing Thailand and its culture today. This is why the exploration of Thai national identity is best achieved in an amalgamated collection of short fiction /non-fiction experiences. Nathan Englander's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* is another example of a heterogeneous collection of short stories that explore different aspects of an identity, which is Jewish in Englander's case.

When it comes to an understanding of another culture through an account of that culture's native, the question of how authentic the experiences are arises. The inclusion of the non-fiction pieces, then, challenges the reader into asking whether the non-fiction is any more real or more accessible than the fiction, especially when there is no clear indicator between one and the other. This effect is achieved by the placement of the non-fiction pieces in-between the fiction. The blend of memoir and short story format is also influenced by S.P. Somtow's *Jasmine Nights*. Despite the novel format, *Jasmine Nights* is semi-autobiographical. Its narrative arc and poetic language help to create more nuance in the non-fiction pieces.

'Why is the creative component written in English?' is also a question that needs to be answered. The decision to write in English could be explained by political and personal reasons. The political reason is to offer another source of English-language fiction and non-fiction about Thailand apart from the ones written by non-Thais. The personal reason is to overcome the fear of writing in a non-native language and to find creative ways to engage with the Anglophone

reader. The opportunity of using English as a medium to portray Thai culture in the creative collection brings out the frustration and insights into the differences between English and Thai language, not only at a grammatical level but also the conceptual level, i.e. the connotation behind words and phrases. In addition, the notion of cultural clashes, between the so-called 'East' and 'West,' interests me. Salma Rushdie's collection of short stories, *East, West*, tests the boundaries of how the 'East' and the 'West' are perceived through its structure and its various writing styles, highlighting the interchangeable nature of cultures which one might otherwise associate with either the East or the West.

The portrait of Thai cultural identity might be impossible to paint in a grand, single image, but perhaps the gleam of it could be captured in small moments: the slices of a Thai woman's life and her perspective of her motherland and beyond.

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