Rebirth (จุติ)

By Uthis Haemamool

Translated by Isaraporn Pissa-ard

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Foreword

Rebirth (จุติ) can be seen as a metafictional text that advocates the liberating function of literature. The metafictional strategies employed crucially function to foreground the relationship between fiction and 'reality' and to underline the need for different literary modes that can better reflect contemporary concerns and crises. By directing the reader's attention to the fictionality and authorial manipulation of literary narratives, the novel helps shed light on the possible fictionality of the everyday world and the fact that, in the world outside fiction, individuals also mediate their experiences and make use of narratives in a way that resembles the construction of imaginary worlds in fiction. Furthermore, the employment of oral storytelling devices for a counter-hegemonic purpose serves to destabilize and denaturalize dominant ideologies and grand narratives of contemporary Thailand, particularly the ones that sustain the hierarchical power structure.

About the author, Uthis Haemamool (1975-) is a well-recognized Thai writer whose novel *Lap Lae Kaeng Khoi* [*The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi*] won the 2009 S. E. A. Write Award. In 2018, he was also honored with the Silapathorn Award in recognition of his notable contribution to contemporary Thai literature. In addition to *Lap Lae Kaeng Khoi* and *Juti* [*Rebirth*], his other novels include *Rabam Metoon* [*Gemini's Dance*](2004), *Krajok Ngao/Ngao Krajok* [*Mirror/Mirror*] (2006), *Lak Alai* [*The Mourning of a Scribe*](2012), and *Rang Khong Prathana* [*Silhouette of Desire*] (2017). Uthis's narrative techniques embody creativity and sophistication, and his works often offer insightful critiques of contemporary Thai society and mainstream Thai culture.

Book I: The Miraculous Grandmother

What is high gets lower and what is low rises up with the passage of time

Look at you! You are all sitting there looking at me with that innocent look in your eyes. Your parents don't have time to look after you as they are so obsessed with work. They like to leave you with me when opportunities allow. Anyway, make yourselves at home. You can play anywhere as it is very spacious here. I will have some cool water, food, and maybe even sweets ready for you in case you get hungry after so much running around. And take a nap anywhere when you are tired, ok? You need to look after yourselves, children. I'm not going to spoil you. If you want to have fun, you have to entertain yourself, and if you choose to cry or get upset, it's your problem, not mine. Look after yourselves and make sure you clean up after your own mess. I don't want to promise you that I can do this and that stuff for you, and I don't want to be hassled. I only do things on my own terms. Don't you forget what I have just told you, children.

It does not bother me if you start to imitate my unsophisticated way of talking, even though your parents might see it as impolite and get upset at me. Those parents of yours pamper you too much and they have forbidden you to do so many things—you are not allowed to eat such and such a thing, you can't use such and such a word, you can't touch this and that, etc. etc. You have parents who are overprotective and want to control the way you eat, how you talk, and even how you think. It seems to me you can't even think on your own now. When you become a grownup, I bet you will be no different. Even after you get married with children and your hair turns all gray, you might still be the same—can't stand on your own feet. Like I said, parents nowadays are overprotective and they might even spend their lifetime looking after their children. Well, you could say you are so lucky to have such wonderful parents, and you have only yourselves to blame if you turn out to be a good-for-nothing type, right? Ha ha!

Which house are you from? How many of you are here? Five? And who are your parents? That one is my own great-grandchild and that one lives next door. What about the others? Ok, you are all friends? Do you know why your parents left you here with me? I bet you don't because they don't want you to get involved with what the adults are doing, but I know what they are up to. Do you want me to tell you what they are doing at the moment?

What? All you do is keep looking at me. Do you understand what I've just said to you? Oh, well, perhaps I can't blame you because your parents brought you up this way, making you lack curiosity and having no desire to question anything. You can't think by yourself because you have been overly protected by them. But it will be different with me because I will let you do whatever pleases you. I have no fear if your parents dare to criticize me for making you misbehave. You know what I will do to them? I will give them a lengthy lecture! Or maybe I should ask the guardian spirits to possess them and that would scare them to death! Good idea, don't you think? Now I see you are nodding in agreement. I also feel it's a very good idea myself!

Now children, forgive the way I talk, ok? This way of talking has been part of me for so long and I can't change it. In fact, it might be better to replace your ears with new ones so that when you listen to me, what you hear gets more pleasant. Don't you think it's a good idea? I will just pluck off your old ear and immediately replace it with a new one, and it won't hurt one bit, believe me. Come closer and let me do it for you, won't you? No, you are not interested? Ha ha! In that case, you will have to bear with me then.

When I was your age, I could do everything, you know. I got things done by myself and I could decide things on my own. Do you believe me? Of course, you have to say yes, otherwise I will kick you out. It sounds like I want to get rid of you, and actually I do, but only as a way to make you go out to explore the world and learn things by yourselves. That was what I myself did to acquire knowledge. It's not because I see myself as the owner of this place that I think I can kick you out. In all my life, I have never owned anything. And this house is not mine. It is my son's.

Do you see the wrinkles on the skin of my arm? You can come closer to have a look and if you want, you can touch them. I touch these wrinkles every day because they remind me of the ancient time, the time before I was born—when I was merely a soul with awareness and memories of the ancient world. In those days, the earth was virtually connected as one whole piece and on it were some dented parts, holes, and small hills. Some were closer to one another and some were far apart. My soul was under the earth, in its womb, and I had been slumbering there for billions of years. One day, there was a thundering and shattering noise, so loud that it appeared as if there was a big explosion nearby. Then there were screams that went on for a while. My soul was full of curiosity about what was happening but there was nothing it could do as it was under the earth. Then all went silent and still again, and I went into a slumber for another million years.

During that time, there were passionate and lustful movements all around me and the air was filled with fiery heat and shivering pleasure. Then the molten lava was released from the volcano and flooded all over the plains. The fiery air became freezing cold and puddles and holes on the earth were flattened out. Parts of the earth that were oceans were transformed into land, and land became oceans. The movements taking place before the earth conceived naturally triggered extreme heat and cold. Later, however, I could feel a cooling sense of peace and calmness when angels from heaven travelled down to the earth with transparent magical blankets of fine material that they used to sweep over a towering hill of about 16,000 metres high. The angels did this once every 100 years and they continued doing it until the towering hill was flattened down to the ground level. The sense of peace and calmness brought about by the angels' sweeping was totally different from nature's movement. Because of the angels' action, what was once towering above the ground was flattened down while the lower areas were transformed into hills and mountains. Miraculously, the lower ground and holes on the earth gradually became hills. My soul that was once beneath the earth thus came up to its surface where I could see light and know what the surface of the earth looked like. The first thing I saw were thousands of angels spreading and sweeping their magical blankets over hills all around me. Those angels seemed to be pleased with what they were doing.

Can I claim that I have existed for a long long time? I guess I can, although I cannot really tell where I was exactly when I was under the earth. After I came out of the earth, I noticed that all around me were fossil fusulinids. You don't know what they are? Your teachers need to teach you about them. It's not my job to teach you about that kind of thing. Anyway, you know corals, sea weeds, shellfish, and stuff like that, right? At that time, I saw the fossils of those things all around me and because such things can only be found in the ocean, I'm confident that I had been under the ocean before.

My soul resided in the core of a Thlok tree on the surface of the earth and as each year passed by, my vision of the world increased with the height of that tree. The world I saw was so fantastic. I could hear thunder and lightning strike and I could feel the heat, the cold, and the rain. Sometimes I heard the sounds of rising floodwaters, of the echoes of the jungle, of wildlife looking for food, and of rocks splitting apart. All around me were lush plants and fruit trees, and I could see monkeys hanging on to and climbing tree branches and young deer skipping past. There were also bears, boars, rats, crabs, turtles, fish, and nāgas. In the sky above me were all sorts of birds flying here and there.

The sky at night was full of glittering stars and in the morning the sunbeams shone everywhere. The jungle looked freshly green and was covered in dew and mist. The jungle released both delicate and strong fragrance and in some places damp smells of various degrees were emitted. The open fields, hills and plains were carpeted by sparkling things that looked like diamonds and other precious stones, although they were actually layers and layers of salt that spread over the earth. The mountains and cliffs were also covered with glittering and shiny metal ores and all sorts of minerals. The earth was so abundant and fertile in those days.

Not long afterwards, the first few groups of humans showed up in the area where my tree stood. Some of them merely passed by, while others preferred to settle down there and started to live under an overhanging cliff, in a cave, and near a river. They started to fish and hunt and, unlike other animals, they made a lot of noise whenever they ran into one another. From inside my Thlok tree, I overheard them talking about a lot of things and, as time passed, I was able to understand their conversations. Even though

their noises annoyed me, what they talked about became part of my memories. Those humans were not only noisy, but also possessive of the plots of land they occupied. They argued and quarreled a lot and their thoughts were preoccupied with a desire to hurt and harm others. Why do I say such a thing about them? It was because I was harmed by them myself.

Those humans carved out and dug up cliffs and mountains for stones and rocks, which they later modelled and shaped into tools like knives and axes that they used for their hunting and killing. One day several of them formed a circle around my tree and one of them struck the lower part of the tree trunk with a bronze axe. There was nothing I could do but watch them trying to destroy my host. They had damaged and broken many of their axes in their attempt to chop down my tree, but they didn't give up. They kept making new axes from stones and rocks and, one day, they eventually succeeded in destroying my tree. The groaning of the collapsing tree could be heard for several days and nights to come. Other trees, which were home to other souls, were also cut down, and I could hear them collapsing all around me.

Having lost my tree, I was totally devastated. At that time, I was merely a soul that could not go anywhere on my own and had to reside in other beings, even though I was fully aware of things happening around me. Out of deep sorrow, I prayed to the higher beings to grant me a body that was movable and promised that with that body, I would seek out the most enlightened being on earth, which was the Lord Buddha. As soon as I finished praying, a miracle happened. A nāga who was on the run after being injured by a hunter's spear suddenly appeared next to the log of my Thlok tree. A second later it dropped dead out of exhaustion, and I could see its soul leaving its body and vanished. My soul immediately found a new host in the lifeless body of the nāga and life and energy returned to it. Since then the body of that nāga belonged to me. Once my soul was in the nāga body, I gathered all my energy and willpower in order to crawl through the jungle as fast as I could. While I was adjusting to the unfamiliar feeling of having a new body that moved the way I wanted, I felt a sharp pain on the left side of my body. After I got to a place that looked safe enough, I stopped to investigate that part of my

body and found that it was soaked in blood. I licked the blood and the injured skin and discovered that they had an unfamiliar sweet taste. I also felt the rapid beating of something in my chest. At that point, I realized that I had a new life, but that life also came with a wound.

Such is life, children. Birth and existence are never perfect.

What is it, my little one? You seem very curious about something. You want to look at that wound of mine? You can't see it now because it faded away a long time ago. Also, that wound was on my nāga body, not on my soul. I let you have a look at my arm not because I want to show you that wound, but to make you pay attention to those wrinkles. See those deep channels, mounds, folds, and zigzags. Take a look closely and tell me what you think they look like.

I look at those wrinkles every day so as to be reminded about the earth. The surface of the earth in the days I resided under and on it was like the wrinkles on my arm.

The Arrival of the Lord Buddha

While residing in that gigantic Thlok tree, I overheard humans talking about the miracle performed by the Lord Buddha and how he could travel through the air from India to Mount Kaattaka, whose other name is Mount Patawee. In order to do that, the Buddha meditated and gained complete awareness of all his movements and senses. As hunters walked past my tree, they came up with various versions of the Buddha's miracle and I didn't quite know whose versions were more reliable. Nonetheless, I remember three versions that start differently but end more or less the same. Let me recount those three versions to you.

According to the first version, there was a city called Parantapa located not far from this area. In this city, there were two brothers, whose names were Maha Boon and Jula Boon. Both were merchants and they often conducted their business with foreigners. Maha Boon, the elder brother, did his business deals on shore, while Jula Boon, the younger one, preferred to do his at sea. Thus their business routes didn't overlap. One day, Maha Boon travelled over a long distance with 500 ox carts to Sawitee City to conduct his business, and once there, he encountered a big crowd that seemed to come out from everywhere and overflowed all the streets. All of them were carrying offerings such as flowers, candles, incense sticks, and a number of other things. They were heading towards the Chetawan temple and they were chatting excitedly among themselves about their eagerness to listen to the Lord Buddha's sermon. Having seen such a big crowd, Maha Boon could not resist following them out of curiosity.

Once he reached the temple, he saw the Lord Buddha seated there with two of his principal disciples, Moggallāna and Sāriputta, on his right and left side. Maha Boon later witnessed a strange incident in which a Brahmin's son, whose name was Pintola, was so deeply moved by the Buddha's sermon that he asked to be ordained immediately after the

sermon had finished. Seeing how the Buddha's sermon was able to affect the young man, Maha Boon was impressed and invited the Buddha to visit his caravan of oxcarts so that he and his men could give him alms.

The next morning, the Buddha and his monks visited Maha Boon's caravan and after receiving alms from them, he gave them a blessing. Maha Boon's heart was filled with bliss and admiration for the Buddha and he expressed his wish to enter monkhood and become one of the Buddha's disciples.

After he became a monk, Maha Boon stayed at a temple in Parantapa city. As the name of this city is so hard to pronounce, I will refer to it as Khitkhin, which is another name for this city. Not long afterwards, Maha Boon was able to attain the highest level of spiritual state and became the Exalted One. One day in a rainy season, Maha Boon's brother, Jula Boon, invited him to have a meal at his place. Jala Boon needed to make another sea journey for his business soon and he was worried that his ships would be damaged or destroyed by strong winds and heavy rains. Out of anxiety, he asked Maha Boon if he could help him and his men if they were caught in a dangerous situation during their sea journey, and Maha Boon assured his brother that he would help him.

Jula Boon and his men travelled with their ships for a week and because their food and other supplies were getting low, he ordered his men to prepare to anchor their ships when they approached a mysterious-looking island. They soon discovered that the island was full of highly valuable Red Sandalwood trees and they decided to cut those trees down and replaced their goods with them, hoping to make much higher profit from the Red Sandalwood logs. However, the demons who lived on that island got very upset at them for cutting down the trees so they created a big storm that viciously attacked Jula Boon's ships. Desperate, Jula Boon prayed for help from his brother, Maha Boon, who immediately came to their rescue. Jula Boon was deeply grateful for his brother's help so he offered all the valuable logs to him once his ships arrived in Khitkhin city. Maha Boon, however, rejected the logs and reprimanded his brother and his men for stealing the Red Sandalwood logs from the island. Wanting to make them realize that greed had led them to thieving and that they should feel guilty, he asked the Lord Buddha if he

would kindly travel to Khitkhin city to impart his teachings to them and the people of Khitkhin.

In order to welcome and celebrate the Buddha's arrival in Khitkhin, Jula Boon built 500 pavilions using the Red Sandalwood logs. Around that time, a hermit named Sajjapan happened to be in Khitkhin and had a chance to listen to the Buddha's teachings as well. Before he left, the Lord Buddha had performed a miracle by leaving his shadow and right footprint on Mount Patawee for people to worship and remember him by.

Another version told by some of the hunters starts out with the story of a new monk called Pintola, whom the Lord Buddha had put under the tutelage of Moggallāna, one of his principal disciples. After being assigned such a responsibility, Moggallāna asked Pintola to stay with him so that he could closely observe him and figure out a way to help him attain the highest spiritual level. As time passed, Moggallāna realized that Pintola needed to practice mediation so he travelled with him to jungles and mountains throughout India, hoping to find quiet places for Pintola to meditate. Nonetheless, even after they had mediated in those places for a long while, Pintola was still unable to reach the highest level of spiritual state. Eventually, Moggallān came up with a new idea to help him. This time he would take Pintola to the faraway land of Suvarnabhumi. After telling Pintola about his plan, Moggallāna used his magical power to transform Pintola into a small Indian gooseberry and tucked him into a seam of his robe. Together they travelled through the air towards Suvarnabhumi.

When he reached Suvarnabhumi and caught sight of Mount Kaattaka, which looked so lush and peaceful, he felt that this mountain could be suitable for Pintola's meditation practice. On this mountain lived a tribe whose chief was a hunter named Kaattaka. Moggallāna thought that it would be quite good if those tribesmen could be persuaded to follow the Buddha's teachings. He therefore descended from the sky and landed on the mountain. Once on the earth, he used his magic to transform Pintola back to his original self and they both headed towards the place where Kaattaka, the hunter who was the head of the tribe lived.

It was already dark by the time they reached Kaattaka's house and the hunter had just come back home from his hunting trip. He was resting and his bow was leaning against a wall. Moggallāna cordially greeted the hunter: "Sir, we lost our way and it is getting dark so we are looking for somewhere to stay during the night. Do you think you can kindly let us stay at your place for just one night?"

Kaattaka was startled to see the two monks as he had never come across spiritual figures before. He also noticed that there was some kind of aura radiating from the two monks so he was quite concerned, thinking that they could be spirits in disguise or beings with ill intentions towards him, he thus yelled out at them:

"Hey, you demons! You must have sneaked past my guards! How dare you intrude into my house like this! No one has introduced you to me. You act as if you are fearless, and even have the guts to ask me to accommodate you. Aren't you asking too much of me? Well, if you really want to stay here for the night, you have to ask my bow to see if he wants to give you permission to stay here or not."

In response to Kaattaka's challenge, Moggallāna calmly said:

"Sir, we are monks so we are always careful not to hurt anyone through our action, words, and thoughts. We didn't mean to intrude into your house or insult you in any way. We see honesty and kindness as our core values and we want to enlighten others about the nature of happiness and suffering and their causes. It is kind of you to allow us to ask your bow whether he wants to let us stay here or not. I will now ask your bow if he is willing to let us spend the night here."

Moggallāna turned to the bow and said: "Loyal bow, you have always served all your masters well. Can you kindly do something for us? If you agree, this will earn you great merit. I want to ask if you could transform yourself into a raised platform with a piece of cloth laid on it and a roof above it so that we could rest on you and spend the night here."

Upon hearing that, the bow miraculously transformed itself into a sleeping platform.

Moggallāna then asked Pintola to sit on the platform to resume his meditation practice. He also sat next to Pintola in order to teach him the right way of meditating until late into the night.

Having witnessed the miraculous transformation of his bow, Kaattaka was quite shaken and he became convinced that Moggallāna and Pintola were demons in disguise. He was restless and could hardly sleep all night, and his wife, children and servants were all quite disturbed and intimidated. They kept talking about the two strange visitors and this soon attracted others living in that area to come and have a look at the monks. Pintola had been meditating throughout the night and became very exhausted. When dawn broke, he began to lose his balance and fell off the platform. Seeing that, Moggallāna reprimanded him for losing his concentration and told him that it was important to keep his mind focused. Kaattaka saw this as an opportunity to get rid of the two monks. He strode towards them and accused them of disturbing him and bringing with them bad luck:

"Hey, you villains! I know you will bring bad luck to my place. It's nearly dawn now, so why don't you two get out of my sight? I want to use my bow now."

Hearing that, the two monks got down from the platform and Moggallāna transformed it back into the bow. They thanked the hunter and headed towards the tranquil top of Mount Kaattaka. They spent a day and a night meditating there and Pintola eventually attained the highest spiritual level before they departed and journeyed through the air to India together.

Once they arrived at the Buddha's abode, Moggallāna recounted to the Buddha what had happened and told him about an unrefined and ill-mannered hunter named Kaattaka, who would greatly benefit from the Buddha's teachings. Moggallāna also added that it would be good if the Lord Buddha could personally impart his teachings to the people of that area so that they could attain peace and happiness. After listening to him, the Buddha decided to take a journey to Suvarnabhumi on his own to help reform the brute Kaattaka with his Dhamma and to impart his teachings to others living there.

The next morning, the Buddha travelled through the air to Mount Kaattaka and once there, he gracefully descended onto the mountain and a beautiful aura radiated from him and spread all over that area. Miraculously, the trees there became healthily green, the fruits ripened, and the animals no longer suffered from hunger and were able to live together harmoniously. Then he made his aura recede and put on an identity of an ordinary monk before heading towards the place where Kaattaka lived.

The hunter was relaxing in his front yard when he saw the Buddha approaching. He was not at all pleased to see another monk and he muttered in displeasure:

"Two of them showed up yesterday and now there is one more! I'm quite certain that these monks are here to bring me bad luck."

When the Buddha got to where Kaattaka was seated, he greeted him:

"Kindly man, could you let me stay here for a night?"

"No way, you villain! Yesterday two of you were here and caused a lot of hassle. I couldn't even get a good sleep. I won't allow you to disturb me again tonight!"

"If you don't want to let me stay here tonight, can I just find somewhere to sleep near that mountain?"

"In that case, it is up to you," said Kaattaka.

The Lord Buddha therefore walked to a spot near a cliff where he planned to spend the night. In order to teach the unkind hunter and his men a lesson, the Buddha used his power to command the clouds to cover all over the sky and soon there was a heavy rain that poured incessantly for three days and three nights. To protect himself against the rain, the Buddha employed his magical power to make part of the cliff expand like a cobra's hood flare and hang over him like a roof. Thus, he was not bothered by the rain at all. On the other hand, the heavy rain created havoc to the hunter and his people, as it triggered flash floods from a nearby jungle that destroyed and wiped away houses and people's belongings. The hunter and his men were all rushing around in panic trying desperately to salvage their possessions and supplies.

When they noticed that the Lord Buddha was residing near the cliff and that part of the cliff had been transformed to shelter him from the rain, they were amazed and shocked and they imagined all sorts of things that had brought about the transformation. Some believed that it was due to the miraculous power of the monk seated in front of them while others imagined that the monk would bring disaster upon them. As for Kaattaka, he was deeply frustrated and upset, and he yelled out at the Buddha:

"You devil! You brought with you this bloody rain that won't stop even after three days and three nights. And how dare you distort the shape of my cliff like this! You told me you only wanted to spend a night next to the cliff, but you have been here for three nights already. Get out!"

"Kindly hunter, it is true that I had asked if I could stay here for one night only. However, it has been raining so heavily so I could not leave. The rain seems to stop now but everywhere is flooded so it is impossible for me to go anywhere now. Can you kindly let me stay here for just one more night?"

By then the hunter was too upset and annoyed to argue with the Lord Buddha and he walked off with his men without saying another word.

That night, the Lord Buddha decided to perform a miracle by inviting angels and gods to pay him a visit, and they soon assembled around him. Their glorious aura lit up everywhere as if the sun was shining at night. The hunter and his people got woken up by this brightness and they initially thought a forest fire had broken out. However, when they looked around them, they noticed that there were angels and gods everywhere – among trees, on treetops, and on the hill. Suddenly, the hunter realized that this miracle took place because of the meritorious power of the monk who had come to see him.

When dawn broke, he and his people visited the Buddha to show him respect and asked about many things they were curious about. They all became deeply impressed with him and vowed to follow his teachings by not harming or hurting other living beings. Kaattaka's admiration for and faith in the Buddha led him to express his wish to enter monkhood. The Buddha kindly granted him his wish and ordained the hunter. Then the Buddha gave guidance to Kaattaka with regard to the path towards enlightenment.

Kaattaka was highly receptive to the guidance and he was able to attain the highest spiritual level immediately. He then exclaimed:

"I have lived in ignorance for so long and I have killed a lot of animals, but now that I understand and appreciate the great Dhamma, I no longer live the way I was used to. I'm finally freed from all kinds of suffering and I'm truly at peace."

Not long after that, the Lord Buddha told Kaattaka that he would have to return to India as he had accomplished what he intended to do. Kaattaka asked if he could follow the Buddha there, but he was advised to remain on Mount Patawee to impart Buddhist teachings to those living there and help them abandon sinful ways. Kaattaka acquiesced and asked if the Buddha could give him something to remember him by. The Buddha therefore left his image on the cliff before leaving for India.

The third version has a simpler plotline than the previous two. In this version, the Buddha simply chose a region he believed could serve as headquarters from which his teachings could be successfully disseminated. While meditating, he was able to see a small mountain called Patawee through his special sight and he was convinced that it would be the most appropriate place for his purpose. Hence, he travelled through the air to that mountain.

When he arrived there, there was a raging storm and heavy rain so he decided to shelter near a cliff. Because of the Buddha's meritorious power, not a single drop of rain fell on him. The Buddha later performed a miracle by surrounding himself with a glorious light and permanently let his image be imprinted on that cliff.

When the rain stopped, the Buddha travelled further to Mount Suwan, and once there, he stood on a flat piece of stone on top of the mountain. Coincidentally, a hunter named Sajjapan, who was on a hunting trip, walked that way and saw the Buddha with the glorious aura surrounding him. He was amazed to see someone so uniquely charismatic and was filled with admiration. He then respectfully approached the Buddha and politely asked him to leave his footprint on that piece of stone so that gods, goddesses, and humans could worship his sacred footprint forever. Before agreeing to

leave his footprint there, the Buddha advised the hunter to quit hunting because it involved killing and the latter willingly obeyed him. The Buddha later imprinted his right footprint on the flat piece of stone to be worshipped by his followers until eternity.

After that, he went to an area a short distance away from Mount Suwan, and there he performed a miracle by appearing on a treetop and spending some time there doing his walking meditation, sitting, and sleeping. The angels and those living in that area were in awe of what they saw and they all gathered together to show him respect, to offer him food, and to listen to his sermon.

On that day when a big crowd of angels and humans were gathering under that big tree, a goat was seen grazing not that far away from them and the Lord Buddha smiled upon seeing it. Anon, one of his disciples, was sitting by the Buddha's side at that time and he was curious to see the Buddha's smile. He therefore asked what brought about that smile. The Buddha replied that he smiled because he could foresee that the goat would be reborn as a great king of this region who would ensure the long-lasting influence of Buddhism and look after his image and footprint imprinted on Mount Patawee.

Those were the stories I overheard from the hunters. When they chatted among themselves, the hunters also mentioned how some of them were affected by the sacred power of the Lord Buddha and some were too intimidated to approach his footprint and the imprint of his image on the mountain. Kaattaka and Sajjapan were among those who were totally transformed by the Lord Buddha's power.

While I was residing in the Thlok tree, I pondered over the three versions told by the hunters again and again. To me, it didn't seem possible that three different people namely, a hermit named Sajjapan, a hunter named Kaattaka, and a hunter named Sajjapan came across the Lord Buddha at the same time but on different occasions. Also, how come all of them asked him to perform the same miracle —leaving his footprint and image imprinted on Mount Patawee? I therefore came up with the conclusion that the three people referred to with three different names were actually the same person.

I believe that Mount Kaattaka and Mount Patawee were the same mountain, and Kaattaka, the hunter of the Mount Patawee was also referred to as Sajjapun. Whether he was a hunter or a hermit no one can tell. After all, my assumption is based on the things I overheard from those hunters so you can't blame me if I got it wrong. It was possible that Sajjapan was a hunter before he became a hermit. If you really want to know the truth, you have to go ask him yourself. Perhaps you can perform a ritual inviting his spirit to come and answer your question. You know, he is still in his abode in the Temple of the Buddha Footprint and you can ask your parents to take you there in order to pay him respect.

After listening to those stories told by the hunters, I was in awe of the Lord Buddha and hoped that one day I could be one of his followers. That was why, after occupying the body of the nāga, I was determined to travel to Mount Patawee to look for his footprints.

I eventually got to Mount Patawee. In fact, it was the extraordinary sense of peace, calmness, and tranquility that flooded over my heart that let me know that I had finally arrived at the mountain. I kept climbing until I got to the top of the mountain. The Buddha footprint was on a flat piece of stone and it was about 150 centimetres long, 50 centimetres wide, and not very deep. I crept closer to it and noticed that there was crystal clear water in the footprint and beneath the water one could see the image of the Wheel of Dhamma in the middle of the footprint. Having travelled over a long distance, I felt quite thirsty so I poked my head into the footprint. I saw my reflection on the water and I started to drink with great satisfaction.

The wonderfully sweet taste of the water spread throughout me and filled me with happiness. The pain on the side of my body also miraculously disappeared and the wound started to heal rapidly. I felt refreshed, energized, and all my muscles were full of strength. I remained in that blissful state for hundreds of years.

A Wandering Life

The sacred water in the Buddha's footprint had made me able to live for hundreds of years—in other words, I became immortal. You might imagine that being immortal means knowing no pain and living forever. You are only correct about the living forever part but I did experience a lot of heartaches throughout those hundreds of years of my life.

The first painful experience happened to me after I discovered the Buddha's footprint. At first, I wanted to hang around near the footprint, hoping to seek its protection from danger. However, it turned out that there were humans who wanted to claim sole ownership of the footprint and the last few times I went there to drink the sacred water in the footprint, I was chased away by those who were assigned the task of keeping an eye on the footprint. Farmers and hunters also tried to scare me away by throwing stones and sticks at me. Unable to go near the footprint during the daytime, I secretly crept there during the night, trying my best to avoid the watchful eyes of those guarding the footprint.

One night, without any prior arrangement, a big group of angels gathered on Mount Patawee, and the entire mountain was lit up in heavenly light. The angels were there to bid farewell and pay homage to the Lord Buddha who had left this earth. I was heart-broken when I heard about his passing. I had been waiting near the footprint, hoping that one day I would be fortunate enough to see him on his next visit to that area. I had also made a vow that once I occupy a new body, I would follow the path led by the Lord Buddha. I eventually acquired a new body but I was no longer able to pursue that noble goal I had cherished for so long. I suffered from a devastating sense of loss for many days, then one morning I set my heart on a new goal; I would travel all over this region following the trails left by the Lord Buddha. Having made such a decision, I raised my head and headed down Mount Patawee.

I intended to travel to a place where the Buddha once performed miracles on a treetop but before I arrived there, I could see from afar that the place had been transformed

into a busy and bustling area with people everywhere, like a town centre nowadays. Being a nāga, I didn't want to go near humans and be captured by them so I changed my route and headed towards the city of Khitkhin instead. To my disappointment, I discovered that Khitkhin had also changed into a crowded city with more people living there than the first place I intended to visit. Not knowing what to do next, I went back into the jungle once more.

I crept along the Pasak River, feeling lonely and dejected. It was then that the ancient guardian spirit of the mountains appeared before me and asked why I looked so forlorn and miserable. I told him what happened and out of pity for me he advised me to head east until I got to a cave on a mountain. According to him, that cave was called the Cave of the Exquisite Buddha because it contained an exquisite stone carving of the Buddha that would be memorable to have a look at. He also told me that when I reached the foot of the mountain, I didn't have to hide from villagers living there as those people were the Mons who were devout Buddhists and always treated animals with kindness. He advised me that when I get to the entrance of the cave, I should spend a few minutes composing myself then prostrate before an ancient hermit who was the guardian of that cave and tell him that the purpose of my visit is a good one. This would give me a chance to be close to the Lord Buddha.

I thanked him for his kind advice and started my journey towards the Cave of the Exquisite Buddha.

It took me a long time to get out of the jungle because forest spirits enjoyed playing tricks on me, knowing that I was unfamiliar with that part of the jungle. I wasted a lot of time in the jungle and I could feel that my physical strength had significantly diminished. My youthful skin had also become loose and my immortality was severely affected.

Afterwards, I had a short break from travelling and went to swim in a swamp. Suddenly, I felt that I was being dragged down to the bottom of the swamp. It turned out that the one pulling me down was the Lord of the Swamp who wanted me to live with him in his underwater palace and become his wife. In vain, I tried to beg him to release me, telling him that I had not been living on the surface of the earth very long. I also struggled

and fought hard to free myself but it didn't work. In the end, I stopped struggling and stayed still and the Lord of the Swamp seemed to stop pulling me down. Then I heard footsteps of a big group of people, perhaps hundreds or even thousands of them, and I saw them walking through the jungle that lay further ahead. One of them was making a loud noise with a bamboo stick and yelled:

"Whose kingdom is this?"

The people who were walking loudly responded in unison: "It is the kingdom of the great Khmer people!"

As they marched through the jungle, those people kept making a lot of noise and shouting about the greatness of the Khmer and the defeat of the Mons. They claimed that the Khmer's power had reached this region and the people living there should submit themselves as willing subjects of the Khmer's newly established Lawoe kingdom and help make it prosperous. According to them, the new kingdom also aimed to promote Buddhism. Upon hearing those people proclaiming that the region now belonged to them, the Lord of the Swamp got quite annoyed and exclaimed:

"What the heck is going on? I have lived here for ages and I have never claimed that this and that thing belongs to me. All of a sudden where I live now belongs to the Khmer!"

The next moment, I managed to escape his grip and jumped onto a nearby earth mound, leaving the enraged and disappointed Lord of the Swamp behind.

I continued with my journey and I prayed to the higher beings to help ensure that there would be no more obstacles to disrupt my plan to reach the cave and to defeat any wicked spirit or demon that might want to harm me.

After travelling for a while, I heard some kind of muffled noise full of frustration coming from a bush that shook violently. Then it appeared to me that the one who made that noise was also eating something and while eating he was also expressing his fury. Out of curiosity, I yelled out to ask what was going on and whether he was a harmless or dangerous being. There was a moment of silence before a voice answered that he was a good person but I'd better stay away from him because he was worried he could harm me. Upon hearing that, I backed off a few steps:

“Where are you heading to?” I asked him.

“I’m going to the Lawoe kingdom. My father didn’t want me to stay with him and told me to go there.”

“That was quite odd. How could a father banish his own son from his home?”

“Don’t ask too many questions. You’d better get away from me quick otherwise you might get seriously harmed by me.”

“But you said you were a good person so why would you harm me?” I asked.

“You are so inquisitive. Who are you?”

“I’m a nāga and I’m travelling to the Cave of the Exquisite Buddha to admire the Lord Buddha’s grace.”

“Oh it seems to me that we have the same goal in mind even though we are going different ways.”

He then told me that his father intended to send him to a palace in Lawoe, and I noticed that his voice from behind the bush became much friendlier. According to him, his father was the God Shiva, who one day gave birth to him during a boiling rage. He sprang out from between the eyebrows of his father and fell to the ground. Once he woke up, he was full of fury and started to swallow everything around him all day all night without a moment of pause.

A day came when he started to feast on his own body and his father realized that the rage that gave birth to his son was extremely self-destructive.

“My dear son, please take a journey to the city of Lawoe and remain in the front of the palace to remind people that they need to contain their rage and hatred.”

Being thus told by his father, he set off on a journey to Lawoe.

“And what is your name?”

“My father called me Kala,’ he said, ‘Now you overly inquisitive nāga, please leave me alone. You have wasted the time I should be spending on eating.”

“Are you feeding on your own body?” I asked curiously and, unaware of what I was doing, I moved closer to him, lifted my head up, and peered through the bush. What I

saw was Kala sitting up and eating the middle part of his body. Then he lifted his face up and yelled at me:

"Get away from me! You poke your nose into everything!"

Almost before he could finish what he was saying, we were staring at each other.

Kala had an extremely ugly face. His face was flat with bulging eyes and a very wide mouth that stretched almost to his eyes. He grimaced and I could see his scary teeth. He had eaten up all of his body except his face and two arms. Once he saw that I was looking at him, he gave out a painful and miserable howl and said to me:

"My dear nāga, you have brought harm upon yourself and there was nothing I could do now to help you. Whatever will be will be."

Panicking, I asked him: "What are you going to do?"

"You have seen my face. I have to devour your time!"

I was extremely frightened and I screamed at the top of my voice while trying to run away from him. He gave out a scream before he devoured my time and flew through the air in another direction.

After I managed to emerge out of the jungle, I was extremely tired. What was once vivid in my memory had become obscure and what was once a dim memory altogether disappeared. Things around me also looked different and unfamiliar. I realized afterwards that while I was trying to escape from Kala, I had lost 700 years of my time.

I’m the Goat of the Lord Buddha’s Prophecy

As I was staggering out of the jungle, the view of a vast plain stretching out to the horizon before my eyes appeared so unfamiliar to me. I had never seen something like that before in my life. The plain was divided by earthen dykes into crop fields that grew things like rice, vegetables, and many other types of crops. I was famished and found those crops very tempting. I crept down to the fields and just as I was starting to nibble on some of the crops, some of the locals came out intending to scare me away. When they realized that I was a nāga they yelled out to their men to come out with spears and bows to catch me. I ran away from those unkind people, and before I knew it, I got to the foot of the mountain where the Cave of the Exquisite Buddha was located.

There were some human communities located here and there on the forested area near the foot of the mountain. Still, I felt more at ease as I could see paths and routes that made it possible for me to hide myself. I headed up the mountain and soon got to the big opening of the cave. I carefully crept into the cave, which was very damp but quite bright inside. I could see marvelous stalagmites and stalactites all around me, but even more splendid was the image of the Lord Buddha carved on the cave wall. I believed the name the Cave of the Exquisite Buddha originated from the extraordinarily beautiful image I was gazing at. Its beauty mesmerized me and I was completely spellbound as if I was sitting in front of the Lord Buddha listening to his sermon.

The Lord Buddha of the carved image was sitting on a big lotus and there was an aura around his head. Both of his hands were raised in a preaching pose as he was delivering a sermon, and around him were angels and humans who came to listen to his sermon. I recalled the account about the Lord Buddha’s visit to Mount Patawee to convert Sajjapan the Hunter to Buddhism, and it occurred to me that the image on the cave wall depicted the night when a big group of angels gathered on Mount Patawee and the whole area was

illuminated by a glorious light. I gazed at the image and my whole being was filled with peace and calmness. I moved closer to it and curled there. Eventually, I fell asleep.

I awoke when I heard someone muttering and reciting, and when I raised my head up to look, I saw a hermit sitting cross-legged and engaged in chanting. I didn't want to interrupt him so I lay still gazing at him.

A moment later he spoke to me even though his eyes were still shut: "What were you running away from?"

I ran away from the Khmer to seek the Lord Buddha's protection, I answered him in my mind.

He nodded to show that he understood and said: "You don't have to be scared anymore. The Lawoe kingdom was long gone."

Again, in my mind I responded to what he said, that as I was trying to escape from the jungle I saw a big group of Khmer people marching through it.

"That was over 800 years ago, my dear," he said, "A vision occurring to me during my meditation has let me know that your time was devoured by Kala. Right now there were hardly any Khmer people left. There might be a few of them among the people who live at the foot of this mountain but those people have also run away from harm."

Was this region reclaimed by the jungle after the Lawoe Kingdom was gone? I asked.

"All the jungles and the mountains now belong to the heavenly Ayutthaya. There were wars going on for hundreds of years and when they were over, the locals were told that it doesn't matter who they were before because now they are living on the land that belongs to Siam. Everything on this land belongs to Siam, be they mountains, trees, streams, religious places of old, and human lives." He paused before joking: "You are now Siam's creature, you know?"

You also belong to Siam as well. I acted smart.

"You are witty with words, you know?" He laughed in good humor. "Let me ask whether you know how territories were colonized and ruled over?"

I had no idea so I didn't say anything in response.

The hermit treated me kindly, and that night he told me many stories.

One of his stories was about what happened shortly after the Lord Buddha's visit to Mount Patawee and his trip to Nong Sanoe area to perform a miracle on a treetop. On that day the Buddha saw a goat grazing nearby and smiled in satisfaction. Anon, one of his disciples, was curious and asked him why he smiled. The Lord Buddha told him that in the distant future that grazing goat would be reborn as a powerful king who would ensure that Buddhism's influence in this region would never wane.

In those days, the Lawoe kingdom was not the only powerful kingdom around. There were others such as the Hariphunchai kingdom and the Tambalinga kingdom. Hariphunchai was the kingdom of the Mons and it had exerted power over this region before it was defeated by the Khmer. Later on the Mons gathered their strength and staged a war against the Khmer, hoping to reclaim the territory. The Tambalinga kingdom of the south sent their troops up but didn't participate in the war. Instead, the troops waited until the opportune moment when the two warring kingdoms were severely weakened by the war to attack both in order to seize control over the region. When the war ended, Tambalinga emerged as the victor and a new kingdom was established to replace the Khmer's Lawoe. The new kingdom was ruled by Prince Kampote, the son of the king of Tambalinga, and the Tambalinga dynasty exerted power over the region for years to come. During the reign of King Srithammasokkaraj, however, there was an epidemic outbreak in the capital city and the king decided to evacuate his people to Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south to establish a new kingdom there.

The city that was once the centre of the Khmer's Lawoe kingdom was thus abandoned. However, around the same time, new kingdoms emerged in Suvarnabhumi region namely, the kingdoms of Sukhothai, Lanna, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Pipeli. The latter was located in an area that becomes today's Petchaburi province.

The Srithammasokkaraj dynasty was on friendly terms with the U Thong dynasty of the Pipeli kingdom and they had established many trade agreements together. It was believed that the kings of the two kingdoms were both of Khmer origin.

The kingdom established by the Srithammasokkaraj dynasty in the south was prosperous and powerful. King Srithammasokkaraj was feared by all and he ruled over 12 southern cities, whose names derived from Chinese zodiac signs. The king was also a staunch supporter of Buddhism and he had been granted the honor of transporting the Buddha's bones to Nakhon Si Thammarat city to be kept there.

One day, King Srithammasokkaraj arranged for a meeting of all his courtiers, advisors, spiritual gurus, and monks, and announced that he was the reincarnation of the goat of the Lord Buddha's prophecy. Not long afterwards, the king passed away and his viceroy ascended the throne.

During that time, agreement about territory demarcation had also been made between the Nakhon Si Thammarat kingdom and the Pipeli kingdom. It was agreed that the former would occupy the southern region whereas the latter would control the northern region, and royal marriages of the members of the two dynasties were arranged to cement their relationship. When the king of Pipeli passed away, a new king whose name was U Thong ascended the throne.

Not long afterwards, the capital city of Pipeli was struck by a famine. Then there were illnesses and many deaths among people and animals. All these were signs of epidemic outbreak and bad omen, and people who were still alive were planning to flee the city. King U Thong therefore considered looking for a new location for a new capital city and called for a meeting of all his courtiers to seek their advice. His wise advisors told him about a place situated in the northeastern direction not far from the city of Lawoe. That place was where Mount Patawee imprinted with the image of the Lord Buddha was located. Mount Suwan on which the Buddha's footprint was discovered was also in that area. Nearby was an area called Sanoe Swamp where the Buddha once paid a visit and performed miracles on the treetop. There the Buddha sighted a goat and prophesized that that goat would be reborn as a great Buddhist king. On hearing that, King U Thong proclaimed that he believed he was that goat of the Lord Buddha's prophecy. With such a conviction in his heart, he journeyed there with his army and many of his subjects.

During the journey, the king had paid homage to many sacred sites that registered the Lord Buddha's greatness. While the king and his men were taking up temporary residence near a river in the district of Sanoe Swamp, a Bagrid catfish suddenly jumped up from the river. At that moment, it was as if an invisible hand had struck a gong with a mallet, as the gong and the fish miraculously cried out: "This place is a good location for the royal city." Everyone there heard that and the king saw it as an auspicious sign for him to make a decision to build a new city in that area. He set his heart on finding the right place for the new city by appealing to the higher beings for their help. Then he threw his sword in the air and made a vow that wherever the sword fell, he would build a new city there. It so happened that the sword landed on the area that was part of the district of the Sanoe Swamp.

Suddenly the king's men cried out aloud and in unison that only a person who had accumulated the greatest merit could build a city in the Sanoe Swamp area. Anyone claiming that he had acquired the greatest merit had to prove himself by showing that he could eat iron and that he had the ability to retrieve an arrow he shot out without having to go fetch it. The king heard what his men said and believed that they had been possessed by the gods of the Sanoe Swamp who wanted him to display his moral legitimacy and greatness. He therefore said: I'm the reincarnation of that goat the Lord Buddha prophesized to be reborn as a great king. I could eat iron and an arrow shot out from my bow returns to me by itself without me having to go fetch it. Then he ordered his royal cooks to grind iron into fine particles and mix them with all his dishes before eating them in full view of others. From then on, he had taken to having fine particles of iron with his meals and he claimed that they enhanced the taste of his food and helped him to be physically strong against illnesses.

After he finished eating the fine particles mixed in with his food on that day, he went to his riverside residence, picked up his bow, and shot an arrow towards the beginning of the river. Once the arrow fell into the river, it floated down with the current and eventually reached the king's hand. On seeing what happened, the king's men were all

impressed by his wit and resourcefulness and they enthusiastically expressed their admiration of him.

From that day on, a new capital city was built along with palaces, temples, and monasteries. The new city was given the name Ayutthaya, which was derived from the Khmer language.

After the new capital city was established, the kingdom became prosperous, powerful, and free from outside threats. King U Thong later felt that his coronation was not done properly as it was not presided over by a Brahmin of pure blood. The king therefore sent an ambassador to the king of Varanasi (Benares) in Central India to ask for his permission to allow Brahmins of pure blood to visit his kingdom and perform the coronation ceremony for him.

The kingdom of Ayutthaya thus came into existence and it was able to form friendship with neighboring kingdoms such as Lawoe and Suphan Buri. Ayutthaya also exerted control over 16 colonies, and king U Thong's greatness was known to all. The king was able to expand his kingdom by waging wars against other lands and colonized them. Ayutthaya hence emerged as the most intimidating force in Siam and neighboring regions. His subjects enthusiastically referred to him as the supreme owner of the kingdom, the term that replaced the title rajah.

You see, children, these are a part of the change that keep evolving. Many kings proclaimed that they were the reincarnation of the Buddha's goat and they waged wars against one another to seize control of territories and establish their own kingdoms. They also referred to people living in their kingdoms as subjects, and they issued laws and regulations to keep things in order. However, the truth is that in the ancient time things were very different, as in those days rajah was the term people used to refer to a person who was highly respectable and just, and brought happiness to his people. He got the title rajah from his people, as described in the Sutta Pitaka, which is one of the three divisions of the Tipitaka or the Pali canon. The three divisions of the Tipitaka are Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka, and Abhidhamma. The Sutta Pitaka itself was divided into five collections

and one of them is Digha Nikaya, which contains the account about the creation of the world.

According to this account, in the ancient time when the world was still in its pristine state, things were not classified or grouped. They simply existed and there was no time, no daytime, and no night time. There were gods who resided in heaven and could fly through the air. Those gods had beautiful complexion that radiated light and they didn't need to eat as happiness had made them full. There was no male or female and there was no evil. As time passed, milky liquid was released from the earth and this made it possible for lichens and other plants to grow and multiply. Out of curiosity, the gods ate them to see what they tasted like and they got hooked on the smell, taste and color of those plants. They searched for those plants high and low and after eating them, their heavenly bodies began to have flesh and they needed to eat to survive. The light emitted from their bodies was no longer radiant and because of this, the sun and the moon were created to give out light to Earth. Daytime was differentiated from nighttime and different groups of stars came into being. Time also originated and was divided into days, months, years and seasons. Gods became humans of male and female genders with their ageing process determined by time, and they were driven by lust to copulate and procreate.

From finding just enough food for each meal from what was available in nature such as plants and rice, humans started to store food to ensure that it lasted for days for the sake of their children and those close to them. When what was available in nature was not enough for consumption, humans started to look for and take possession of land that they could use to grow crops. While some were successful in finding and owning land, others missed out on it, and this was the beginning of evil. Humans started to cheat, steal things from others, and compete with one another. Then there were punishments and those who feared they would be punished told lies while those who were punished got angry and wanted to take revenge. Killing and hurting others became part of human society.

When things got worse, people had a discussion among themselves and decided to look for a respectable and just person to help solve human conflicts. It seemed that a person most suitable for the job belonged to the second highest caste, or the caste of

kings, so he was asked to be the one who had the final say in solving human conflicts. As he brought justice to a community, he was referred to as rajah, meaning a person who made his people happy. People rewarded him for what he did for them by sharing with him their food and their land, and this was how the concept of rajah or king originated.

But power is addictive and once a person has power, it is hard for him to give it up. This is also the case with rajahs. Most of them didn't want to lose their power and they tried to strengthen and increase it by invading other lands and colonizing them. To ensure that the power they had remained with them and their family, they made their children heirs to the throne. Sadly, power was evil and those who were children of kings often fought and killed one another to seize the throne for themselves.

During the Ayutthaya period, Khun Luang was the one with the greatest power. Since the Sukhothai era, people used the term Khun Luang to refer to their king. (My dear, your memory about this period had already been eaten up by Kala.) Before that people of the Sukhothai kingdom referred to their ruler as the Great Father or Por Khun, as the governing system was modelled on father-children relationship, or paternalism. This kind of system was different from the Khmer's absolute monarchy, which emerged from Brahmin influence. The Khmer regarded their rulers as god-kings who ruled over their subjects like a master rules his slaves. Whichever land they colonized, the Khmer rulers built monasteries and other religious structures to display their power. In the Khmer's belief, the Bodhisattva image represented both a god and a king, who was seen as the reincarnation of god.

Even though the Siamese saw Sukhothai as their first kingdom, things were not that clear-cut because many customs of the Sukhothai era were still modelled on those of the Khmer. Monks and religious people recorded the names of the Sukhothai kings in ancient Khmer language and royal terms were also in ancient Khmer language. Those royal terms were very popular in the Ayutthaya court, but commoners found them too difficult so they preferred to use the term Khun Luang to refer to their king. Khun Luang was seen as more powerful than Sukhothai's Great Father or Por Khun because Khun

Luang refers to a king who, through his greatness in war, successfully expanded his territory and made his kingdom a much larger one than before.

Thus, absolute monarchy replaced paternalism, and the king of an absolute monarchy not only looked after his subjects, but also looked after his land. Land ownership became more significant and Siam asserted possession of the land it occupied, referring to it as Siamese land. This recognition of the importance of land ownership was evident when king U Thong ascended the throne as the king of Ayutthaya and issued a law stipulating that:

"The land within the kingdom of Ayutthaya belongs to the king and even if he allows his subjects to live on that land, it does not mean that they are granted ownership over the land they live on."

Since then, the king was seen as having absolute power over money and properties, over his subjects' lives, and over the entire Siamese territory.

Naming the City

The hermit continued talking until dawn arrived, as if he had been longing for a chat with someone for a long time. His stories fascinated and mesmerized me and they revealed to me that during the period of time I lost to Kala, what happened was not merely the demise of one kingdom but also Ayutthaya's first defeat.

The kingdoms of the Suvarnbhumi region namely, Hanthawaddy, Lanna, Lan Xang, the Khmer Empire, and Siam had regular contact with one another and with the Chinese kingdom. Cordial relationship was established among them but they were not always on friendly terms. At times, they engaged in a war against one another. Siam itself was not a single entity without internal conflicts. In fact, when a conflict of interest occurred, Siam's colonies such as Phitsanulok, Nakhon Ratchasima, Myeik, and Nakhon Si Thammarat did not hesitate to proclaim their independence and refuse to submit to their colonizer. This often led to war. In order to strengthen control over its colonies, Siam kings often sent their children and members of their royal family from the capital city to rule the colonies. Nonetheless, even among members of the royal family, the competition for the throne sometimes led to bloodshed.

Before Ayutthaya suffered its first defeat, it experienced several crises and among them were the two military attacks from Hanthawaddy. The first attack occurred because Hanthawaddy was displeased that the Mons from Chiang Kran (Ataran City) had vowed their loyalty to Ayutthaya and asked for its support in a war against Hanthawaddy. The second military attack took place because Hanthawaddy got wind about Ayutthaya's internal conflicts that had weakened it, thus providing Hanthawaddy with an opportune moment to invade it. Ayutthaya was able to put up resistance against Hanthawaddy's invasion, but only because it got help from Phitsanulok, its northern province, that sent troops down to help protect Ayutthaya city. That war, however, caused the death of Queen Suriyothai who sacrificed her life for her king. Because of that war, King Maha Chakkraphat of Ayutthaya sought consultation with his generals to find a better way to

fortify Ayutthaya by setting up more cities around it in order to put up better resistance against further threats from Hanthawaddy.

Generation after generation of humans had occupied the area we currently live on. In the beginning this area had no name and those who lived on it were villagers who earned their living by reaping benefit from the land's fertility and abundance. When epidemic outbreak or war took place, villagers could flee to the nearby jungles and the mountains. Later on, the king got interested in this area because it was highly suitable for growing rice and other crops, and therefore could serve as an important source of food supplies during wartime. A route connecting Nakhon Ratchasima and Cambodia also passed through this area. Because of all these advantages, the king established it as a new city named Saraburi and expanded its territory by adding to it parts of Lop Buri, Nakhon Ratchasima and Nakhon Nayok. According to his plan, Saraburi would be a place that grew crops and provided other areas with food supplies. It was also seen as the city in the forefront that was assigned the task of keeping an eye on what was going on in Nakhon Ratchasima and Cambodia so as to pass on tidings to the capital city.

And now you children know that before this area was named Saraburi, the earth had to be cut up simply for the sake of imposing a name on it.

I'm getting bored of telling you accounts about Ayutthaya. If you want to know more, you can read about it. You can also ask your teachers to tell you more about it, but do tell them it's not right to keep saying we should hate the Burmese, Mons, Lao and Khmer. We have been in contact with these people since the old days and their kingdoms were among the greatest ones, even greater than ours. They are also Buddhist like us. Actually, I should say we are Buddhist like them because the Khmer adopted Buddhism and Brahmanism before us and it was through the Khmer that we were introduced to both religions. Our royal titles and terms were also borrowed from them. Regarding Lao people, we had a close relationship with them in the past, and if you want to know how beautiful their Emerald Buddha is, you should ask your parents to take you to Bangkok to see it. About the Burmese, we had been friends even though there were times when we fought and hurt each other. So you couldn't say that the Burmese treated us badly

because at times we treated them badly as well. That is how you should be taught about our neighboring countries. Make sure you let your teacher know about that, will you?

You might wonder how old the hermit was. I myself wasn't sure even though I lived with him for a long time. It seems to me that he witnessed those things he recounted to me with his own eyes so I assume that he must have been at least 400 years old. He lived alone in the cave and spent a lot of time meditating and practicing his mind with the goal of achieving enlightenment. He had a strong determination and his mind was truly a master of his body. Every morning he either did some yoga or walking meditation and some mornings he left the cave by flying through the air and returned with a hand of bananas, wood core, and herbs. He liked to stay alone muttering something that made him become invisible or turned into a stone. He could also build a fire by simply muttering incantations. Sometimes he disappeared from the cave all day long and returned with news about unprecedented change within Ayutthaya city such as about how Hanthawaddy had enthroned Maha Thammaracha as Ayutthaya's king. One day he returned to the cave and announced that the Black Prince had become king, then years later he proclaimed that the White Prince was enthroned. When he announced what he had discovered, he didn't address anyone in particular, although I was the only one in that cave anyway.

Like what I told you before, even though I'm immortal, it is only my soul that remains intact; the body my soul resides in deteriorates with time. After three or four years living with the hermit in that cave, my nāga body became much weakened and all day long I couldn't do anything much but curl up in the cave. The hermit felt sorry for me and one day he returned to the cave carrying a dead tiger with him. He asked me to move closer to him and performed a ritual to help transfer my soul into the tiger's body. Once it was done, the body of the nāga was miraculously turned into fine particles and soon vanished into thin air.

"My dear, you have a sad plight…" he said softly "You have an immortal soul but you don't know what you live for."

Upon hearing what he said, I realized that I wanted to devote myself to serving him by letting him sit on my back during his meditation trips through the jungle. I told him so, and he smiled in satisfaction. The hermit agreed to sit on my back for a little while to give me a chance to express my thanks to him. He didn't really need me to carry him though, as he himself had the power to do all kinds of things.

As I told you before, the hermit had collected the lifeless body of an old tiger for me to reside in. He didn't kill a living being to get the body. After a while, the tiger body deteriorated further and I could hardly see or hear. Out of pity for me, the hermit went out to look for a new body for me and he thought it would be a better idea to find the body of a very young animal, especially one that died immediately after leaving its mother's womb. Eventually, he found the body of a young doe and he took it to the cave so that I could use it.

"Don't you feel disheartened that you have to continually depend on the discarded bodies of other beings?" he asked me.

I didn't really how to respond to his question.

"Do you want to have your own life?"

If I have my own life, can I continue living with you? I asked.

"You have to live for yourself. Why do you feel the need to live for me?" He asked.

I want to show my gratitude to you for looking after me, I said.

"You don't have to do anything for me. I don't want to impose such an obligation on you," he told me. "I look after you because I'm happy to do so and that's already good enough. It's better not to impose obligations on each other because it will unnecessarily complicate things. If you want to show your gratitude to me, you can do so by being a giver who happily helps others without expecting anything in return."

In that case, I don't want to have my own life anymore, I responded.

"Your heart is still clinging to attachment and full of worries and concerns and the body you reside in does not suit such a heart," he said, "I won't be here much longer. Do you know what you will do when that time comes?"

What you said worries me a lot. If you aren't here, my only wish is to go with you.

"That wish of yours cannot be granted because you are immortal. Being immortal means that your soul won't depart from this world and you have to remain here forever. I'm going to a place where my soul enters nirvana, but you can't go with me because your soul lasts forever and knows no end, you understand?"

What must I do to be able to depart from this world?

"First you have to die in order to be reborn," he said. "Before you die, you have to make it clear what the purpose of your rebirth is and set your heart on it. Your rebirth will be successful only after you have done this."

The hermit told me that he had a bundle of herbs with him and when I was ready, I could ask for it from him. He said the herbs would set me free from the suffering of immortality by allowing me to be reborn and join the cycle of life. However, he didn't want to give me the herbs right away because he wanted me to spend time figuring out the purpose of my rebirth and come up with a clear idea about it.

During those years of living with the hermit I didn't contemplate that matter much because I was quite happy the way I was. It gave me satisfaction to be able to live with the hermit in that cave and I had no problem with the deer body I resided in, so I didn't give much thought about the future. As time passed, my attachment towards the hermit grew. When I looked at him walking briskly and getting hold of this and that conveniently with his hands, I started to imagine that it would be good if one day I resided in a human body because having a human body would allow me to serve the hermit better. My only wish at that time was to be reborn as a human and given a chance to serve the hermit forever.

One day, as I was looking for food in an area next to a stream not far from the jungle, I experienced a very strange kind of feeling. At first my heart was filled with happiness but all of a sudden a deep sense of loss and trepidation occurred to me. I stood near the stream trying to think about what I had lost but I could recall nothing; still I was filled with the worry about losing that which was dear to me. The sense of loss and fear I experienced at that moment seemed to stem from my concern and anxiety, and it made

me unwell and not quite myself. I was soon overwhelmed by sadness and, as I stood by the stream, tears streamed down from my eyes. Looking back, I can tell you that it was the love I had for hermit that brought about those emotions in me.

That feeling of concern and trepidation remained with me for quite a while. It destroyed my appetite and kept me awake most of the time. I never left the cave and kept looking at the hermit all the time. Even his small movements made me peer at him anxiously for fear that he would leave me.

Then one day, without warning, the hermit vanished from the cave. At first, I was still hopeful that he would return to the cave like what he did before, but after many days without any sign of him, I became devastated. Days became weeks, months, and years, and still there was no sign of him. One day, a forest monk showed up and I ran away to hide in a nearby cave, even though I tried to keep an eye on the monk. After a while, other monks joined him and they started to build a temple that is later referred to as the Temple of the Bodhisattva's Cave.

I still hung around there after the monastery was built. There were some hidden crevices within the caves that provided me with shelter while I awaited the return of the hermit. The monks saw me but they were kind enough not to chase me away, so I lived that way for a while. I often sat huddled near the cave entrance, looking forward to the day of the hermit's return.

Not long afterwards, the locals started to walk uphill to the monastery to give alms to the monks and to listen to their sermons. They noticed that I hanged around there and they found it unusual that I often sat still like a piece of stone at the cave's entrance. Soon word was spread around about the Temple of the Bodhisattva's Cave with a deer hanging around nearby, and people invited others to come up and have a look. Since then that area was commonly known as the Sub-district of the Awaiting Doe (Thap Kwang)*and the name originally referred to me sitting at the entrance of that cave.

One night the hermit visited me in my dream to let me know that I should not keep waiting for him because he had departed from this world. He saw me waiting for many years and was filled with pity, so he appeared in my dream to explain that he had

achieved enlightenment and would not return to this world. He told me that during his meditation trip to Mount Suwan, the light of enlightenment suddenly occurred in his mind, enabling him to leave his physical self behind and depart from this world. He advised me that I should learn to lead a life of my own and reminded me about the bundle of herbs he had hidden under the base of the Buddha image in the Bodhisattva's Cave. He suggested that I should look for that bundle and when I found it, I should set my heart on what I wanted to be in my next life and why I wanted to be that being. Then I should eat the herbs and that would make me reborn and join the life cycle. This is what I want to tell you, my dear, he said.

I startled and woke up from my dream. Immediately, I gave out a heart-breaking wail that reverberated throughout the jungle. I rushed down from the entrance of the cave and headed towards Mount Suwan in search of the physical remains of the hermit.

*People nowadays believe that this area was later called the Sub-district of the Lao due to the influx of Lao people forcibly relocated from Viang Chan after a war fought against that city. That war started because the King of Thonburi ordered Prince Maha Kasatsuek to defeat Viang Chan with his army and take possession of the city's Emerald Buddha. Later on, during the reign of Rama V, the Sub-district of the Lao had its name changed back to Thap Kwang, its old name before the Thonburi era. The name change was ordered by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the then defense minister, who wanted to alleviate ethnic conflict among the Lao and the Thai inhabitants.

Concealing

I ran without stopping for two days and two nights following the trail left by the smell of the hermit until I got to the foot of Mount Suwan where the smell seemed to vanish. I stopped running and turned to look around me. When I saw that it looked safe enough, I crouched down. At that point I was seized by an extreme fatigue that nearly paralyzed me. My legs were shaking and soon, before I knew it, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, I felt that I had a bit more energy so I got up and walked around a small empty yard surrounded by gigantic tall trees. I sniffed an earth mound here and there and scattered piles of leaves to see if I could detect the stronger smell of the hermit under them. Then I got to a big stone base and felt certain that the physical remains of the hermit were beneath it because his smell was the strongest there. It was a faint fragrant smell like that of a lotus flower, and I was convinced that it was there that the hermit had left his body and departed from this world. I used both of my front legs to dig up the earth, hoping to see his body once more.

I continued digging and managed to make a small hole of about 50 centimetres deep into the earth when I suddenly jumped because of a sharp pain in the side of my body. I turned to look and saw an arrow stuck to my side with blood streaming down from it. Who is the cruel hunter who has terribly hurt me? (That was what I wanted to ask at that moment.) I ran at full speed into the jungle until I got to the edge of the mountain where I found a small pond. It was as if I had been guided to that place by a miracle, and I felt it must have been the hermit who gave me that guidance. When I approached the pond to have a quick drink from it, I realized that it was actually another of the Lord Buddha's footprints, similar to the one on Mount Patawee. I became convinced that the water in the footprint was sacred, like the sacred water on Mount Patawee that had cured me from my injuries and enabled me to live for hundreds of years. Before I drank the sacred water, I prayed that my two wishes be granted. For the

first wish, I wanted my wound to be healed. For the second one, I wanted to be given a new body that wouldn't put my life in too much risk and that the body should be truly my own so that I no longer had to rely on other creatures' bodies. After expressing my wishes, I bent down to drink the water in the footprint and I noticed that this footprint had a much more elaborate and extraordinary pattern than that of the footprint on Mount Patawee. A sip of that sacred water was enough to fill my heart with happiness and provide me with much more strength than before. I felt totally energized and quickly jumped into the bush that I had passed through on my way to the footprint. Before I got out, however, I ran into an ugly-looking hunter with an arrow in his hand. He seemed to be following me and I was quite sure that he was the one who had wanted to kill me with his arrow.

Upon seeing me leaping out of the bush, that ugly hunter looked quite stunned. He was probably at a loss for words when seeing me still alive and much stronger after being injured by his arrow. His puzzlement seemed to make him lose interest in me and he disappeared behind the bush and focused his attention on the footprint instead. At that moment, I felt braver than before and was no longer afraid of the hunter so I hid behind the bush tree and kept an eye on him. He looked puzzled still and he seemed to be lost in thoughts. Then he squatted near the footprint and sprinkled the sacred water on his arms, legs, face, and body. Miraculously, his skin, which had been plagued by skin diseases, became very healthy-looking and unblemished. The hunter was extremely pleased and before I could see what happened next, an extraordinary change happened to me. It was as if I was struck by some kind of waves. The first wave made me full of energy while the second wave, which was much more violent than the first one, made me feel hot and dizzy, and before I could make the first step to get away from that place, I fell unconscious.

When I opened my eyes again, I was not fully awake yet. I was lying on a timber floor in a small hut. I felt I could move all parts of me easily; I could move my head and lift my hands, and my hands looked exactly like human hands. My dear children, because

of the miraculous power of the sacred water in the Buddha's footprint, I was transformed into a beautiful young woman.

Then I noticed that there was another human in that hut and he was busy cooking something. When he saw me trying to move, he turned to look at me and said there was no need for me to fear anything as he was a good man and his name was Boon. He told me he was a local hunter and he found me lying unconscious while he was on one of his hunting trips. As my face looked unfamiliar to him, he assumed I was not a local. He explained that he carried me to his hut in the middle of the jungle because he wanted to look after me. Soon he gave me some herbal medicine to drink.

The hunter was a good-looking and friendly man in his prime. It appeared to me that he probably was not a bad man. I took the herbal medicine from him and drank it. The bitterness and warmth of the medicine startled me and I nearly choked. Then I felt the warmth in my stomach, a sensation I never experienced before. At that moment, I told myself that this had to be how human sensory perceptions worked. After finishing that medicine, I remembered the Buddha's footprint and told the hunter about its miracles, but he seemed to find me odd for coming up with all sorts of miraculous stories. I tried to convince him that the things I related to him did happen, and told him about another Buddha footprint on Mount Patawee. He seemed to be lost in thoughts for a while then he tried to change the topic of our conversation. He also advised me to confine myself to the hut and avoid meeting other people. I did as I was told, believing he meant well.

The hunter came and went and sometimes he disappeared for many days before returning again with food and clothes for me. I lived in that hut with him as man and wife, and he was my first husband.

Nonetheless, I found out later than the hunter was a shrewd and untrustworthy man. He already had a wife and children who lived in his house in another area. The hut where I lived was merely a place he stayed during his hunting trips. I also learned that he was later promoted and granted an honorable title and a higher position, making him quite an important figure in his community. After the promotion, he quit being a hunter

and he visited the hut simply for a secret liaison with me. I got to know all this from gathering bits and pieces of information from here and there.

One day I visited the footprint on Mount Suwan and found that the place had drastically changed. There was a lot of development at the foot of the mountain and various administrative staff had been appointed to look after things. The footprint was covered by a pavilion and it had become a site of royal significance. I heard from others who visited the Buddha's footprint to pay homage to it that a hunter named Boon was the first one who discovered the footprint while he was chasing after a deer. After he had informed Saraburi authorities about it, the authorities soon passed on the information to the royal city of Ayutthaya, and King Songtham, the then king, travelled to Saraburi with his troops to investigate it. The hunter volunteered to help the king and his men find the footprint and he was amply rewarded for that. After the king saw the footprint, he ordered that a pavilion be built over it. There was also a special ceremony to celebrate the discovery of the footprint and people were assigned the task of keeping watch over it. Later, experts from Holland were recruited to survey the area with their binoculars in order to build a road leading to the footprint. A palace was also constructed as the king's residence when he visited the area. Overall, there was a lot of fuss over the footprint.

After listening to those visitors, I felt very curious. I knew that there were two Buddha footprints, the left one on Mount Suwan, and the right one on Mount Patawee. No one seemed to mention the latter, so I asked the locals about it. They said they had never heard about it, and told me that Mount Patawee had only the Buddha image imprinted on it.

I didn't inquire any further and decided to take a journey to Mount Patawee so that I could investigate things. Once I got there, I discovered that there was a lot of change there as well. To find out what had happened, I went to see a monk who resided in a solitary abode in the back of a temple. The monk appeared to be an Exalted One who preferred a solitary life. I paid respect to him before I started to inquire about the Buddha's right footprint on Mount Patawee. I also told him that I had seen that footprint before. The monk said that footprint was still there but it was hidden beneath a man-made

footprint, and there was also a pavilion built over it. He explained that they wanted the right footprint to be hidden from view so as to make people believe that there was only one Buddha footprint—the one on Mount Suwan. As Mount Patawee already had the image of the Buddha imprinted on it, they claimed that that was enough. That was why they decided to conceal the right Buddha footprint beneath sand and cement and put a fake one on it so that it would not overshadow the other footprint on Mount Suwan. Having done that, they probably felt somewhat guilty for treating the Buddha's footprint that way so they decided to build a pavilion above it to give it at least some glory. Because the locals agreed not to say anything about the concealed footprint, it was easy for historians to record in their accounts that there was only one Buddha footprint. That was why it was as if the right Buddha footprint had never existed on Mount Patawee. As the left footprint was discovered by the king, I suppose it was natural that it was accorded with more greatness and honor than its right counterpart. It was also possible that the king's courtiers and the hunter took it upon themselves to hide the right footprint from public view without the king's knowledge. Still, gold remains gold and fake things or things created to conceal truth will erode with time. Truth will sooner or later reveal itself. Such wise words were what the monk said to me.

If I remember it correctly, the Buddha's right footprint on Mount Patawee was rediscovered 400 years after its first discovery when authorities from the Fine Arts Department were renovating the pavilion above the footprint. You see, their initial plan was to renovate what was on the outside that was not that important but, in the end, they found something really important concealed under it.

Looking back, at that time I was quite naïve about humans and their tricks because it wasn't that long after I was transformed into a human being. Also, I was not that interested in the way people manipulate or distort things in order to seek favor from those in power. At that time I told myself that getting to know about human affairs made things much more complicated, but later it was from my relationship with the hunter, who was someone close to me, that made me realize how untrustworthy humans could be.

Regarding the Buddha's right footprint, as I was certain that I had seen it before, in those days I tried to tell other people about it but they wouldn't listen to me. They thought I was mad and said to claim that I did see that footprint, I must have been living for thousands of years. So I told them: Of course, I have lived for thousands of years. I once resided in a gigantic Thlok tree. Then I occupied the bodies of a nāga, a tiger, and a doe before I was transformed into a human being. On hearing that, they laughed at me and said: You must be really mad, woman. And you have the guts to show off that you know things! They also said they believed I was a Khmer who had experimented with black magic until I went mad. They found whatever I tried to tell them both amusing and frightening but, in the end, they dismissed the things I recounted to them as lies and made-up stories.

They accused me of inventing my own legend by making use of some parts of age-old legends passed on by the older generations and put down in written accounts of old. According to them, I distorted things in order to make myself look good. You can see that I did try hard to let people know the truth, but no one listened to me. Later on, when there are recorded accounts of important events of the kingdom and books of history for the younger generations, written words are seen as more credible than what was passed on orally. I know that young people of your generation believe in whatever is mentioned in books and laugh at accounts told by old people. The younger generations like yourselves also put a lot of faith in accounts put down by well-known people or those in the position of power. When they wrote that the Buddha's footprint was discovered by King Songtham of the Ayutthaya kingdom, you immediately believe in that without any doubt. To you, once a king 'sees' it, you see it too, and if he does not see it, you never see it or believe in its existence. When it was written that the Buddha's footprint was found on Mount Suwan and the imprint of the Buddha's image was discovered on Mount Patawee without any mentioning of another footprint on Mount Patawee, it was as if the footprint on Mount Patawee never exists. You know, sometimes I feel that the footprint on Mount Patawee might have been mentioned in an account somewhere, but, as time passed by, that information might have been erased or reinvented somehow. I noticed that

whenever a new king was enthroned, there was a lot of revision of historical accounts, and people nowadays believe in a kind of history that has actually been repeatedly erased and reinvented.

Take the footprint on Mount Patawee as an example. It was rediscovered in 1994 and they simply regard 1994 as the year the footprint was first found. The truth is that footprint had been there long before 1994. If one does not know much about certain things, it's not a big deal because one can always research for more information and knowledge. What gives me a headache is when people don't know what really happened but then they mix and match this and that in order to come up with a new account of things without proper knowledge. If you don't know what I mean, you'd better ask your parents to help you gain access to the history and legend of the two Buddha's footprints. Do you know that the two footprints actually share the same written legend? According to this legend, the Buddha had visited the area and left his footprint there (just one footprint, mind you) then there was a gap and the legend simply continues by saying that a hunter named Boon led King Songtham to the footprint. Later, another gap appears before the legend goes on to say that a pavilion was built over the footprint and it had been well-looked after by successive kings. Those gaps in the legends trigger puzzlement because it seems like something was missing.

I told you about this written legend because it makes me want to ask which footprint is referred to in this legend.

Those puzzling gaps are probably the reason why the two footprints have to share the same legend and historical account. Do you feel that something is missing in the legend and history about the footprints, like a line is not even but dotted throughout? Maybe it was partly eaten by Kala, like clothes being gnawed by a cockroach.

The history and time in your life tend to be obscure and full of interruptions. Your memory and life are tied to time, and because of this, you have a very short life. Let me tell you this: I have witnessed how humans' life cycle becomes shorter and shorter. A thousand years ago, humans' life cycle was about 200-300 years and it got shorter and shorter, and now most of you do not live to be 100 years old, am I right?

I'm a living being like you children. At a basic level, humans, animals, the earth, and plants have different lifetimes, and the earth has the longest lifetime. Initially, my life was part of the earth and it was only later that I was transformed into a human. That is why my lifetime is longer than yours, and now you understand why I have lived this long, do you?

Now let me tell you more about that hunter. As I told you before, at that time I went to several places in Saraburi and discovered that there was a lot of change happening and that there were more human communities. Then I listened to what the locals and the monk recounted to me. All these made me wonder whether the hunter they mentioned was the same person as the hunter who was my husband, and how come they shared the same name. The hunter's wife, children, and servants all assumed that I was either a slave or a serf when I later stopped by at their place. I remember that soon after I was transformed into a human being, I told the hunter about the Buddha's footprint on Mount Patawee. I also remembered that the sacred water from the Buddha's footprint that had transformed me from a deer into a human also helped cure that hunter from his skin diseases. If the sacred water could transform me into a human being then, no wonder, it could also change an ugly-looking hunter into a good-looking one. It was then that I felt certain that my husband was the hunter those people mentioned.

That realization came with a shock and made me doubt even further about his real identity, family and other background. At that time, I also got more knowledge about what it meant to be a slave and a serf and how it was different from being a wife. If I continued staying with him as his secret mistress, I would be used by him even more. The more I thought about it, the more upset, disappointed, and dejected I became. However, I was tough enough to pull myself together and make a decision to leave him. Hence, I quietly whispered: We had nothing more to do with each other now. Then I left that hut of his.

The Rebels and Time

Like I told you before, my time was different from yours. The other difference is that my ties and attachment are different from yours. Human nowadays have ties with their parents, siblings, relatives and they are attached to their home, governing system, way to earn a living, money, and so forth. In other words, the life and time of today's humans are tied up with those people and things.

Things are different with me, who was transformed into a human not that long ago. I do not tie myself up with that kind of stuff the way humans do, and because of this, my time is more free, more flexible, and lasting much longer. My life is tied to nature, to jungles, and mountains. This is the main thing that makes me different from other humans, who left the jungles a long time ago to set up human communities, establish rulers, and issue rules and regulations for their communities. In constructing those things, humans have generated a different kind of time. Recently, humans have increasingly invaded and intruded into the mountains and the jungles to make the time there, which is still that of an ancient world, move as fast as the time of the human world with all its rules and stipulations. Your ancestors are known to be keen on wanting to dismantle and change the world's time. If I remember correctly, King Prasart Thong of the Ayutthaya kingdom did try to change the traditional division of time, but the change was only adopted within his kingdom because neighboring kingdoms like the Mon Kingdom and the Burmese kingdom rejected the change. The Ayutthaya king was quite upset that his newly invented division of time was rejected.

To make it easier for you to understand, I can divide my experiences of time into two different kinds based on two types of space. The first kind is the time I experience while living in town and the second one is my experience of time in the jungle. In these two types of space, time travels at different speeds for me. Imagine when you go back to town to live with your parents, you often feel that time moves fast, right? On the other

hand, when you stay with me here in a quiet rural area, you tend to feel that time moves so slowly. This is what I was trying to explain to you about my experience of time, and I think you can probably grasp the gist of what I want to tell you, even though it is something unfamiliar to you as it is the remnant of the past.

I told you about all this because I want you to understand that when I lived in the jungle, my experience of time was different from that of those living in town communities. A night in a jungle for me could be equal to a year for town dwellers. Of course, at first I didn't know this. It was only after many events had taken place that made me able to realize that time travels very fast for those living in town. One hundred and fifty years had gone by and during those years the Ayutthaya kingdom gave way to Thonburi, and eventually Bangkok, as it is now.

I'm going to tell you about how those 150 years passed by and how I got involved in them.

After leaving the hunter's hut, I headed off towards the Pasak River and after travelling for a while along the river, an earthquake took place all of a sudden. I saw this as an auspicious message sent by the angels to let me know that I should take up residence in that area. Thus, I built a small hut just enough for one person to live in near the river bank and relied on the river as my main source of food and nourishment.

One day I heard loud noises from the edge of the jungle and went out of my hut to have a look. I saw an army of thousands of people marching towards my direction and they were also making a loud noise with bamboo sticks and gongs. Among them was a spectacular elephant on whose back was a charismatic and dignified man with a beautiful umbrella open above him. I had never seen someone like that before and I imagined he had to be a person with meritorious power, perhaps a king. I noticed that something rather unusual was going on, as if they were trying to gather as many people as possible to join their march. The locals abandoned whatever they had been doing and grabbed things nearest to them like scythes, swords, and spears before running to join the procession. There were also many who ran empty-handedly to join the army.

When the army was moving close to where I was standing, those people beckoned me to join them and, out of curiosity, I asked where they were heading to. They said they were about to reclaim the kingdom and when I asked from whom, they said from the present king. Then they urged me to come with them and help them with their cause, promising me that once the war was over, I would be amply rewarded and have a much better life. When I asked who the person on the back of the elephant was, they replied that he was Prince Phra Khwan, the late king's son, and he wanted to fight to get his throne back. According to them, he was someone with great power and they promised to tell me extraordinary things about him if I joined them. Persuaded by what they said, I travelled with the army.

They told me that the greatness of Prince Phra Kwan the son of the late king, was revealed since the day he was born. On the day of his birth, the earth violently shook to welcome him, and people in the palace believed that this was an auspicious sign indicating that he would be the next king. As he grew up, he was accorded with great respect by many. When Prince Phra Kwan's father was about to pass away, the king's viceroy wanted to claim the throne for himself so he came up with a plan to get rid of the Prince. According to this plan, he would ask the prince to come see him and when the latter was off his guard, he would beat him to death with a log. Then he would proclaim himself a new king. However, the plan was not carried out successfully, as the prince survived and was taken away by angels who looked after him and taught him many potent spells. Later, the prince returned, intending to reclaim his throne. He succeeded in convincing many of his late father's old courtiers to be on his side. After that, he set up an army and was able to persuade many commoners like us to fight for his cause.

That was the story I heard from those people who had joined the army before me, and throughout the journey, I spent a lot of time with them, eating and resting together. When we got to Nakhon Luang Palace to have a short break there, around 2000 more people joined us. They were from various places, such as Nakhon Ratchasima, Nakhon Nayok, Lopburi, and Saraburi. The miraculous story about Prince Pra Khwan was not the only story I heard while travelling on foot from the jungle to the capital city with the rest

of them. People also talked about the extraordinary power of the present king, whose name was Pra Chao Suea, or Tiger King. They told me the king got that name because he was notorious for his ruthlessness, and it was believed that this king's power was no less than that of Prince Pra Khwan. Rumor had it that he was the illegitimate son of the late King Narai, and like his father, he was equipped with the power to cast potent spells, to fly through the air, and to tame rebellious horses and wild elephants. He was also known as a virile lover who had many affairs, and as a ruthless ruler who was keen on catching sharks and let them feed on the people he wanted to punish. There was also a story about how, as a small boy, he humiliated a foreign courtier, whose name was Chao Phraya Wichayen Pitchayen or Constantine Phaulkon by kicking him in the head. This foreign courtier was King Narai's favorite, but he later betrayed the late king. The humiliating treatment he got from the young Tiger King was later interpreted as a foreshadow of his betrayal. Towards the end of King Narai's reign, there was the fear that Christianity would replace Buddhism, and King Petch Rajah, who was King Narai's successor, banished virtually all westerners from his kingdom. And, like what I recounted to you before, when King Petracha fell ill, his ambitious viceroy (later known as Pra Chao Suea) regarded Prince Phra Khwan, King Petch Rajah's son, as a rival for the throne and cooked up a plan to kill him.

When I was with those people who told me those stories, I felt at one with their anger and their enthusiasm to fight for Prince Phra Khwan. We kept such enthusiasm going among us and it was as if we belonged to one harmonious entity, and the next morning our army moved towards the capital city of Ayutthaya with the strong intention of defeating the enemies within the city.

When we got to a bridge leading to the city gate, things were very quiet and calm as if they were not aware of our invasion. Prince Phra Khwan and his advisors had some discussion about what to do before pushing the troops forward through the gate. His supporters then rushed across the bridge shouting a war cry in unison intending to break through the fort gate into the palace. Suddenly, we heard a loud cannon being fired from a fort near the city wall, and Prince Phra Khwan fell from his elephant to his death.

Havoc ensued as people were panicking and didn't know what to do. Even though there were those who were still crowding at and pushing through the city gate, people who hadn't cross the bridge yet hesitated and some panicked and ran away. At that moment, the palace soldiers rushed out to capture the elephant and the main leaders of our troops. Some villagers who came with the troops tried to fight back with their swords but they got killed. Others laid down their weapons and gave in.

At that time, I hadn't cross the bridge yet and I heard people who were in the middle of the bridge yelling out that Prince Phra Khwan[1] was killed. Then I saw palace soldiers rushing out and people standing next to me flee for their lives in different directions. At first, I wasn't sure what to do, but in the end, I ran after them.

I ran until I got to the jungle and once there I felt a sense of peace spreading all over my heart. The jungle was a totally different kind of world from the city. I had had a quick glimpse of the city of Ayutthaya and was mesmerized by the beauty of its palace and temples. But then I was terrified by its soldiers and the ensuing havoc and casualties. Believe it or not, that frightening experience had turned my hair all white and it took a long while after I returned to live in my hut in the jungle before my hair became black again. I remember the day my hair turned black clearly because it coincided with a strange phenomenon that transformed the western sky into a blood red color all day and all night. It was so eerie and it felt like the sun was burning the whole city up. Red sparks could be seen floating into the sky, and soon the jungle was flooded with people who had fled from the city with their young children, utensils, and other belongings.

Those people were in fear and they wailed about the destruction of everything and about having nowhere to live. They also wept over the damage done to the pavilion built over the Buddha's footprint on Mount Suwan by 300 Chinese robbers from Klong Suanplu village. According to them, those Chinese ethnics took advantage of the situation by going up to the mountain and robbing the pavilion of its silver and gold cover before burning it down. They saw this as a sacrilegious act that would lead to the destruction of

[1] This fictional event is based on a historical event in which Prince Phra Khwan's former close aide disguised himself as the prince in order to gather support and forces so as to stage a rebellion against the ruling monarch.

Buddhism. I asked them why the authorities let them do such a thing, and they said none of the authorities were around as they had been recruited to help fight the Burmese troops. In the end, however, Ayutthaya was defeated, the king was killed, and the city was burnt to ashes by the Burmese troops. See that blood-red sky in the west? The Ayutthaya kingdom was reduced to a sea of flames, they said.

Looking at those war refugees, I felt very sorry for them. Before the war, they all had a home but now they were homeless. From leading a peaceful life, they now had to suffer havoc. Many wives lost their husbands who had been recruited to fight for the king and died fighting for him. Losing the men of the families meant that other family members no longer had the pillar they could rely on. When there was a war or a fight to restore a kingdom, commoners suffered a lot because they were the main strength in any battle. When a war was won, commoners honored their king with the victory and hoped that his meritorious power would protect them. The death of a king often resulted in havoc and chaos.

After a while, those people left the jungle and returned to the city once more. They told me that a new king with unsurpassable meritorious power had defeated the Burmese troops, forcing them to flee to Burma. Siam had become a united land again and the new king had established a new capital city to the south of Ayutthaya and this city was referred to as Thonburi.

Not long afterwards, there was an enormous Siamese army passing through Saraburi. This event was a very important one as it later brought about a drastic change to Saraburi. The army was led by the two brothers, Prince Kasatsuek and Prince Surasi, and it was heading towards Viang Chan to wage a war there. After the princes' victory in that war, they returned with many precious items, including the Emerald Buddha and Phra Bang. They also brought with them the Lao royalty and their Lao subjects from Viang Chan. Many of the latter were ordered by the Siamese king to settle down in Saraburi and as time passed, the Lao communities became prominent in Saraburi. The Lao there were of various groups and their population kept increasing because each time the Siamese king won a war against the Lao, he brought back with his troops Lao prisoners of war and

let them settle down in Saraburi. Later on, he also appointed Lao people as governors of Saraburi and there were other positions of power occupied by Lao people.

Later, towards the end of King Taksin's reign, rumor had it that the king highly valued the Emerald Buddha and believed that it was a great honor for Siam to be in possession of it. The king arranged for an extremely grand ceremony to be performed in honor of the Emerald Buddha and it caught the attention of all his subjects. In Saraburi, however, some felt hurt that the king paid all his attention to the Emerald Buddha and didn't seem to show any interest in the Buddha's footprint on Mount Suwan. Unlike the previous kings, he never visited the footprint to pay homage to it and after the pavilion above the footprint was burnt down, he merely ordered a roof to be built above the footprint.

Listening to them, my mind wandered off to another Buddha footprint located next to the imprint of the image of the Buddha on Mount Patawee. That Buddha footprint had been ignored but no one seemed to think that it was an issue. As the area where that Buddha footprint was located was not well-known, I imagined it had to be quiet and peaceful there. I felt I would like to visit the enlightened monk whom I once had a chat with and it would be good to stop by at the Cave of the Bodhisattva. Ever since I was transformed into a human being, I seemed to have much less time for Buddhism because I was often caught up in a fight for this and that, in a struggle to earn a living, and in all sorts of desires within my heart. These things took priority in my life and gave me strange feelings I had never experienced before when I resided in the bodies of other living creatures.

My wish to visit the Buddha footprint and the Cave of the Bodhisattva gradually grew in my heart. It might have been because I was disturbed by all sorts of trouble happening around me at that moment. The area where my hut was located had attracted many new settlers and it was transforming into a human community. I didn't trust humans and was intimidated by them. No matter what their ethnicity was- Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, etc.—I didn't feel comfortable being near them. I felt I was still unable to tell what they were up to so I told myself that it was better for me to stay away from

them. Then one day I told myself that I had had enough and I didn't want to stay there anymore. I wanted to look for a more peaceful and quieter place to live. But before finding a new place to live, I wanted to visit those sacred sites on Mount Patawee first. Having made such a decision, I started my journey to the mountain.

To get to Mount Patawee, I had to travel south and it would take me two days and two nights to arrive at my destination. Before I got to Mount Patawee, however, I came across something that made me stop and decide to observe from afar. Where I stopped was in a forested area called Khao Noi and I had spotted a group of 7-8 people who seemed to be in hiding. They didn't look like ordinary villagers but more like people with power, as they had elephants and horses with them. Some of them looked like low-ranking soldiers, but there were two men who appeared to be the leaders. One of them in particular seemed to receive a lot of respect from others, and people referred to him as Prince Chui[2]. The whole group, however, seemed to be scared of something and didn't want to be seen, and it made me suspect that they could be up to something. It was possible that they were conspiring against the king. Due to my past experience with Prince Phra Khwan, I had come to the realization that, of all kinds of humans, royalty was the type of people you should stay away from the most. After looking at those people for a little while, I resumed my journey to Mount Patawee.

When I got to the mountain, I found that the enlightened monk was no longer there. Still I felt much better after I paid homage to the imprinted image of the Buddha and his footprint before heading down the mountain.

As I was approaching the area where I saw that group of people, it was not possible for me to get through it anymore. The area was occupied by a big army with thousands of soldiers who were spreading everywhere blocking anyone from passing through. There were also elephants and horses, and all the soldiers looked intimidating as

[2] Prince Chui or Price Inthraphithak was the eldest son of the King of Thonburi. The above fictional account is based on what happened after the execution of the King of Thonburi and many of his male heirs by Somdet Chao Praya Maha Kasatsuek and Chao Praya Surasi, who had returned to Thonburi after their war victory and later seized power from the King of Thonburi. After Chao Praya Surasi got wind that Prince Chui was hiding in Khao Noi, he led his army there so as to capture the prince and his supporters in order to bring them back to the royal city to be executed.

they were fully armed. One of the low-ranking soldiers waved me away and told me that the king's viceroy and his troops were capturing Prince Chui and his men. Upon hearing that, I hurried away. This time the king didn't wait for those who conspired against him to gather force and approach the palace. Instead, he sent his royal representatives and soldiers to surround and arrest them before they could take action. As I was trying to get away from the scene as fast as I can, it occurred to me that no one could escape the consequence of their karma.

Encasing the Wooden Core in Gold Leaf Sheets

I changed my route and decided to head north to visit Khitkhin, the ancient city I was not allowed to explore when I was a nāga. Now that I had assumed a human form, I wanted to see that city again.

I walked for two days and a night passing through jungles, villages, fields, and groves. When I got to the village of U Tapao, I found that there were centipedes everywhere. One day, one of them bit me and as I was moaning in pain, a villager who passed by helped me by putting some crab roe on the bite. He had fetched the crab from a nearby river and he opened its shell to get the roe that he used for my bite. It did help a lot and my swollen leg soon returned to normal. He then asked where I came from and where I was heading to, and I told him that I journeyed from the Village of the Buddha Image and intended to visit Khitkhin city. It seemed to me that he had never heard about the city before but he didn't quiz me about it. As I was about to continue my journey, he gave me another crab and said I should keep it with me until I was out of the village to protect myself against centipedes. According to him, centipedes in U Tapao village were extremely scared of crabs and each house had a crab hanging from it to scare away centipedes.

He also recounted to me that years ago where I was seated was part of a big river. As time passed, the river got shallower and shallower and was populated by weeds and plants until it became a piece of land. He gestured towards the pointed top of a pole stuck to the ground and told me that it was a mast of a trading ship carrying cargo that had sunk at that particular spot. When the river dried up and was covered by the earth, all that can be seen of the ship was the mast. According to him, the ship sank because it was attacked by a big group of crabs and he related what had happened as follows:

Long long time ago, the area was the kingdom of crabs but later it was invaded and occupied by centipedes, forcing the crabs to flee to the river. When humans arrived,

they chased away and killed many centipedes but they also got bitten by them. Not long afterwards, humans discovered that centipede bites could be healed by crab roe and they started to catch crabs to get their roe. Because of this, the crabs got extremely mad at the centipedes and wherever they saw them, they would attack and kill them. One day a merchant sailed his ship along the river and the crabs living at the bottom of the river looked up and mistook the moving paddles of the sailors on both sides of the ships for the legs of the centipedes. The crabs then joined force to attack the ship until it sank. The centipedes were terrified by the fury of the crabs, and knowing this, villagers always kept a crab with them when they travelled to protect themselves against centipedes.

After listening to his account of the war between the crabs and the centipedes, I thanked him and resumed my journey to Khitkhin city. Once I was out of U Tapao village, I released the crab into the river where it belonged.

I kept walking until I got to Pasak river. It was overflowing and impossible to walk across unlike in the dry season when there was hardly any water in the river, making it easy to cross to the other side where Khitkhin city was located. I decided to walk by the side of the river towards the Village of Small Bamboo Fence (Pai Lom Noi Village), now known as Old City Village of the Weeping Log district. In those days, that area was Saraburi's administrative centre but later the town centre was moved to what is known today as Saraburi's Muang district. Regarding the Weeping Log District (Sao Hai district), you kids wait a little and I will soon tell you the history behind the name Weeping Log.

After walking for a while, I came across a man with a ferry who offered to help me cross the river without asking for any fee and he appeared to me like a kind person at first. Soon, however, he started to flirt with me. He said things like how come a young woman like me got to know about Khitkhin city then asked if I was married or had children. He clearly wanted to seduce me and after being in the ferry with him for a little while, I realized that he could not be trusted. He said he wondered whether a young woman like me felt lonely travelling by myself, then offered to wait for me so that he could ferry me back to the Village of Small Bamboo Fence, claiming that a young

woman couldn't possibly cross the river alone. I was not interested in his offer at all, and once we reached the opposite side of the river, I rushed out of the boat, thanked him, and hurriedly walked away.

Arriving at Khitkhin city, the city I observed from afar when I was a nāga, I realized that it had completely changed until it was hardly recognizable to me. In the old days, it had been a crowded place but now it was scarcely populated and what was left of buildings from those days were mostly ruins and debris. The city was transformed into villagers' fields, groves, and houses. The past had returned to the earth and it was buried, covered, and changed by the livelihood of the present. The old city was reduced to a small shrine amidst the fields and groves of the villagers.

Such is the nature of change…and change will never cease.

My visit to Khitkhin at that time was during the reign of King Rama I of the Rattanakosin kingdom, and Saraburi in those days was a town populated by prisoners of war who were forcibly transported from cities like Lan Xang and Chiang Saen after those cities were conquered by the Siamese kings. Saraburi became home to Lao people of various languages and the Vietnamese Thais, not to mention the Mons and the Khmer who had lived there before them, thus the city's population was a mixture of people from various ethnicities. As time passed, the locals married those who arrived after them and their children are of mixed ethnic origins but all are ultimately considered Thai citizens nowadays. People do not just have ethnicity; they also have nationality as recognized by the country they live in. As they live in Thailand, they are considered Thai.

The same earth has witnessed generation after generation of humans and has seen kingdoms being expanded, diminished, and annexed. On this same old earth, change has been ongoing and it will persist forever.

Like I already said, I visited Khitkhin during the reign of King Rama I, and as I was walking back and about to reach the bank of Pasak river, I noticed that temples, creeks, ponds, hills, mounds , small communities, villages, sub-districts, and towns all had names that signified the identity of the Lao people who were living there. But names are not permanent and they change with the passage of time. Names that indicate Lao

identity were later changed into those that sound more Thai. For example, the temple of Sanom Lao became the temple of Thai Grace (and later the Temple of Graceful Tree), the village of Sanom Lao became the Village of Sanom Pond, Sala Ree Lao Sub-district became Sala Ree Thai, Mueng Lao Sub-district became Mueng-Ngaam Sub-district, and so on and so forth.

There were different motives behind the constant change of place names, depending on the social and political context of each period. Sometimes local people who were of different ethnic origins got into a minor conflict but the conflict was somehow exacerbated until it became entangled with ethnic antagonism then in an attempt to end the conflict among the locals and to prevent ethnic discrimination, place names were changed in order to make them sound more Thai. To be honest, I have no idea why humans are like this. They all were born from parents who have mixed ethnicities but they believe that they are more Thai than others simply because they got official recognition from the Thai state that they are Thai. Then they use this Thai nationality to justify their hatred and prejudice against others, not realizing that nationality came much later. The truth is that you all are humans; your blood is similarly red and none of you can avoid birth, aging, sickness, and death.

Do you remember the Sub-district of the Awaiting Deer where the Bodhisattva's Cave is located? What is known nowadays as the Awaiting Deer or Thap Kwang Sub-district got its name from me when I was a deer awaiting the return of the hermit in front of the cave. The locals were used to this name, but later the name was changed to the Sub-district of the Lao after more Lao people came to live there. However, in the end they changed the name back to Thap Kwang because the name the Sub-district of the Lao was thought to give rise to ethnic conflict.

That village was actually not the only place that was named after something I had done, and I will tell you about others in a little while.

For now, let me return to my trip to Khitkhin. I intended to walk back to the bank of Pasak River using a different route because I was worried about running into that leering ferryman again. After I got to the edge of the Village of Small Bamboo Fence, I

followed a route that went through the jungle and thick forest until I got to the river bank. The dusking sky blanketed me and made me part of the darkness. I decided to spend the night near the river bank and waited for dawn to come before finding my way further.

As darkness was approaching, the whole jungle reverberated with the sound of crickets and other insects, the crying and roaring of various animals, and the flapping of winged creatures. I could see dark shadows behind bush trees and the red glint from the eyes of wild animals that hunted at night, yet I was not in the least scared. I lay down under a big teak tree and, as the night wore on, the jungle became very quiet. The only noise that could be heard was the gentle flow of the Pasak River. After a while, however, I heard someone weeping from afar but then it got closer and closer until it became clear that it was a woman crying her heart out from the middle of the Pasak River. I got up and peered out towards the river. There I saw a grieving lady sitting on a floating log in the middle of the river. It was quite astonishing that the log was not moving with the flow of the river. The lady's weeping and wailing echoed throughout the jungle and it cut me to the heart.

I walked along the bank towards the lady and cried out to her: "My dear lady, what brought about such sorrow in you and why are you weeping there all alone?"

The lady paused momentarily before turning to look at me and continued weeping in a voice full of grief.

"Please come to the bank so that you can tell me what has caused you so much grief," I told her, finding it strange that she was weeping in the middle of the river while sitting on a log that didn't float with the stream. The log is a big, long, and very straight one, and I believed she was the owner of that log.

The lady came to the bank as invited and appeared next to me. Her face was initially hidden behind her long flowing hair but after she brushed the hair away and put it behind her ears, an exquisitely beautiful face was revealed. The sadness, however, had somehow dimmed the lady's great beauty.

She told me that she was the owner of that log, which had once been the trunk of a golden Takian tree that grew in a distant jungle and stood there for thousands of years.

The tree was cut down because some people intended to use the trunk of this extraordinarily graceful tree as the main pillar for the newly established Rattakosin city. They were of the opinion that no other trunk was as suitable as this one and they asked for her permission to cut the tree down. She gladly granted them the permission, seeing it as a great honor to be transformed into the main pillar for the new capital. Soon they cut down her tree and scraped off all the bark to reveal the lovely golden timber before floating it along the Pasak River towards Rattakosin city. However, just before they reached Bangkok, they received the news that a suitable log for the main pillar of the capital city had already been found. Her golden Takian log was thus not needed anymore and it was left adrift in the middle of the Chao Praya River, ignored by everyone. She felt very sad and sorry for her log so she tried to steer it upstream, hoping to reach the jungle which had been their home. They travelled against the flow of the river until they got to the Village of Small Bamboo Fence when she was overcome by despair and frustration. In their current state, they could neither return to live in the jungle like in the old days nor could they continue with the mission they had initially set out to do. The sorrow and despair made her hesitate and at a loss in the middle of the river.

Oh, I feel so sorry for you my dear, I tried to comfort her. Like you, I once resided in a tree. I have a human form now because of the great power of the Lord Buddha that mercifully granted my wish. At the moment, I have no home and I'm a wanderer. I think it would be good if we both travel upstream to your old home as I also want to go there, seeing that we share a similar plight.

The lady gave me a brief smile and said I was a kind-hearted person. However, she couldn't travel any further because she hardly had any strength and power left. Out of kindness, she let me know that on the river bank not far from where we were was a dilapidated abandoned boat that I could use for my journey up the Pasak River.

After our small chat through which we showed our kindness to each other, she went back to her log in the middle of the river and wept bitterly. I stood near the river bank looking at the grieving lady for a long while. All of a sudden, she let out a heart-

rending wail that reverberated throughout the river, the jungle, and the nearby villages and communities. Soon she and her log sank to the bottom of the Pasak River.

Not long after that the people of Small Bamboo Fence Village chatted among themselves that some nights they could hear a woman weeping. This went on for months and years. Eventually, apart from its old name, the village was also known as the Village of the Weeping Lady. Some locals claimed that they had seen the weeping lady, so it was not just me who had seen her. The name the Village of Small Bamboo fence was gradually overshadowed and finally replaced by the name the Village of the Weeping Lady, but as time passed by, it became the Village of the Weeping Log, as it is known nowadays.

Fortunately, it seems to me that the lady is no longer suffering. The locals have performed a ritual to invite her from the bottom of the river to reside in a place that befits her dignity where the younger generations could pay homage to her. However, it took over 170 years for such a ritual to take place. As I have recounted to you, the golden Takian log sank to the bottom of the river during the reign of King Rama I, and the log was only discovered in 1958, in the reign of King Rama IX.

When they found the Golden Takian Log, she was not in a very good condition as she had been under water for more than 170 years, and much of her had been eroded until she was full of scars and wrinkles. Her youthful beauty and grace had diminished and she had shrunk and was no longer straight, so much different from when I first saw her.

After they recovered the Golden Takian, they encased her in gold leaf sheets to show respect to her. The pure gold color heightened her sacredness and her wood was no longer visible. However, by encasing her in gold leaf sheets, they had totally transformed her, just like the way they transformed her legend. Purporting to restore her honor, people came up with all sorts of theories to explain why she was not chosen to become Bangkok's main pillar. Some said she arrived in Bangkok later than the one that got chosen (thus blaming her for taking her time journeying on the river). Others said the Golden Takian was bent at the end (implying that it was her fault for not being beautiful enough to be chosen). They substantiated their claim by saying that this fact was known

by all because people could see that the recovered Golden Takian was bent at one end. This claim, however, contradicts the recorded account from those days that the capital city required the most beautiful and graceful log to be used as the city's main pillar. Saraburi in the old days was renowned as the town of beautiful trees. It seemed so unlikely that people in Saraburi would be ignorant enough to send a log with a bent end to the capital city to compete with other candidates. Do you see my point?

Listen to me, the Golden Takian log was perfectly straight and exquisitely lovely, and I saw this with my very own eyes during the night I had a chat with the Golden Takian lady. It is not so straight now because it was infiltrated by air, eroded by the current, and damaged by time. Also, when a freshly cut log becomes dry, it naturally shrinks and bends. They saw the golden Takian 170 years after she had been under water and they judged that she looked like that from the beginning. Then they created a legend and written account about her based on that kind of false judgement and passed it on. Is this fair?

Now that you have listened to my account about the Golden Takian, I want to emphasize once more that their account of her is totally inaccurate. Whether you believe me or not is up to you, but I want you to think about it more. The Golden Takian Lady and I share a similar plight so I want to speak up for her.

The Birth

When dawn arrived and a dim light was visible, I walked down to the river bank and found the boat the Golden Takian Lady had pointed out to me. It was overturned and covered by vines but once I turned it over and inspected its damage and age, I found that it was still quite usable even though it was old. With a boat and a paddle, I thought I could travel quite far.

I dragged the boat down to the Pasak River and before I set off, I said farewell to the Golden Takian Lady and prayed to the higher beings to protect and direct me to a safe and peaceful destination. I also prayed to the Pasak River goddess and asked her to guide me to a fertile area suitable for living and free from illnesses or diseases. Upon finishing my prayer, I stepped onto the boat and used the paddle to push it away from the river bank before starting to row upstream.

After about half a day's journey, I noticed that I had left human communities behind and ahead of me was the ancient jungle that looked so marvelous, mysterious and awe-inspiring. At times the river appeared still and deep and the current was slow, but at other times the current was fast and forcefully rushing along through bent and straight riverbed and through deep and shallow spots. The sunlight was very strong but the whole jungle was relaxingly cool and reverberated with the roars of tigers, pheasants' songs, cries of monkeys and gibbons, and insect noises. All these made me feel quite happy. I ate some bananas I brought with me then drank from the river, and I felt completely at ease and relaxed.

However, my sense of peace didn't last because, after a while, I heard someone moaning in pain from the river bank. Soon that person emerged from the shadow of the jungle and I could tell that he was fleeing from something. He was a man in his prime but looked injured and exhausted. He pleaded for my help, saying he didn't want to die there because he wanted to return to his homeland. He told me he was a good man and if I help

him, he would be forever grateful to me. Moved by his plea, I decided to steer my boat close to the bank and he rushed down onto the boat, nearly tipping it over in his hurry. Then he told me I had to row the boat away from the bank immediately because he had been followed by people who wanted to kill him. He said, Quick, dear woman! We must get going! Once the boat got to the middle of the river, he thanked me and fell unconscious.

He lay unconscious the whole night. At times it appeared as if life had gone out of him and I was alone in that boat. Even though he lay on his side and bent his body, he took up almost all the space in that little boat and there was just enough space for me to sit and row the boat. I inspected his face and found that it was quite bruised and there were blood stains around his ears down to his chin and neck. As if in agony, one of his hands tightly closed over his wounded stomach and in that hand was some sort of grass or herb that he pressed on the wound. It looked like a very serious injury because I could see that the area around his stomach was soaked in blood and there was a lot of blood on his clothes and arms as if blooming red flowers had sprung from him. From time to time, he moaned in pain and that made me know that he was still alive.

At dawn of the next day we emerged into a very remote part of the jungle. I was quite exhausted as I didn't have any sleep and I was concerned about the stranger in my boat, not sure whether he would survive the injury. He was still asleep and I started to nod off. All of a sudden, both of us startled because the boat had accidentally hit a submerged rock. He gave out a painful cry, possibly because the force of the hit stirred up more pain from his wound. I used the paddle to check how deep the river was and found that we were in shallow and fast-flowing water, making it much harder to control the boat. The boat swerved left and right then hit another submerged rock, giving me so much anxiety. As the sky brightened, I could see that we were going through rapids with submerged rocks everywhere and it became extremely hard to journey upstream. The boat kept hitting rocks on its left and right with the force that shook everything up. This was the most difficult section of the river I had encountered so far. The stranger woke up and tried to get up by holding onto the side of the boat and pressing it down to raise

himself. What he did caused the boat to lose its balance, swerve to one side, and hit a big rock so forcefully that it appeared to me as if the boat was shattering into pieces. I didn't know what happened after because I was thrown off the boat and my head hit a rock, knocking me unconscious.

When I woke up again I found that I was already ashore and I could feel the warmth from a fire, which also helped dispel mosquitoes and other insects. I was not alone; the stranger was nearby and he was looking at me with concern, even though he was badly injured himself. I told myself that he must be the one who had rescued me from the turbulent Pasak River and he had not abandoned me when I was in danger. Deeply moved by what he had done for me, I made a vow to myself that I would not abandon him when he got in trouble. I also noticed that he had made a fire, caught some fish and roasted them, as well as fetched some fruits for me so that I could have them when I awoke. He seemed to have a lot of concern for me even though he was still injured. Before that he had probably carried me to this spot, which was a spacious area a little further from a bay. The area was full of small rocks and we were under a big tree that spread its thick leafy branches above us and helped protect us against the sun and the rain. He sat looking at me and his big round eyes reflected the red glint of the fire. A strange kind of feeling occurred in me, something I never experienced before. For some unknown reason, I felt shy and my face felt hot. I decided to change my position and turned my face away from him to avoid his gaze.

He looked after me well until I became stronger. He also got better little by little. We stayed there together for many days and nights and during that time we didn't think about resuming the journey. We exchanged very few words but it seemed to me that we understood each other. We would probably wait for his injuries to heal before continuing the journey as there was no need to rush. I went out to look for food and prepared meals for the two of us and he disappeared into the jungle and returned with logs and grass. Then he started to build a small hut near the river bank to shelter us from sun and rain and there we lived together.

Later, he told me that he was originally a Lao subject from Viang Chan and, together with other countrymen and his Lan Xang king, he was forced to leave his city after they were defeated in a war. The Lao king was kept in Bangkok and his subjects were split up and relocated in different areas. One day his Lao king, whose name was Anuwong, was allowed to return to Viang Chan to rule the city of Lan Xang. As the Lao king's right hand man, he also went back to Viang Chan with him. During the reign of the Siamese King Rama III, King Anuwong and his aides visited Siam to attend the funeral of Rama II, the previous Siamese king. The Lao king saw this as an opportunity to ask the new Thai king whether he could bring some of his Lao subjects back to Viang Chan, as the city was sparsely populated after so many Lao people were taken away after each defeat in war. However, the Siamese king refused to grant him permission to do so and the Lao king returned to his city in displeasure. He complained to his aides that Siam wanted to swallow up his subjects, making them forget their true ethnicity and exploiting their labor, not to mention the fact that Lao people, royalty or commoners alike, were looked down on and treated badly by the Siamese. The Lao king then announced that he could not let this go on anymore and ordered his best soldiers to form different groups and travel to different provinces of the Siamese kingdom namely, Saraburi, Nakhon Ratchasima, Nong Bua Lamphu, Kukhan, etc. The duty assigned to those soldiers was to act as spies who discreetly kept an eye on things and passed on information to the Lao king of Lan Xang.

He and his soldiers were posted in Saraburi. There he was on very friendly terms with Saraburi's governor, Phraya Surarachawong, who was also of Lao ethnicity. Not long afterwards, they received the news from Bangkok that the Siamese king and the British were unable to reach agreement about their trade treaty and the situation might become worse and lead to the outbreak of war. He therefore tried to pass on this information to his Lao king through the Lao spies stationed in northern provinces. Unfortunately, his mission was exposed by Siamese officials in Saraburi, who immediately ordered the arrest of him and his men. All of his men were captured and killed and he had to flee for his life. It was during this escape that he ran into me.

As he was telling me all this, his voice was full of bitterness and anger. He said it was awful of the Siamese to look down on Lao people and treat them so badly. He was very emotional and tears of frustration and fury streamed down his cheeks. He had kept these things to himself all along without telling me anything but now that he decided to share them with me, they became overwhelming to him. As I was listening to him, I felt that his pain and sorrow were also mine and I tried my best to console him and ease his pain.

I told him that it was better to let bygones be bygones and, despite all the loss of lives and suffering, it was good that he still had his life. I also let him know that ethnicity meant nothing to me, be it Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, Lao, Burmese, or Khmer. Then I asked whether he wanted to stay there with me and pointed to the rocky area around us, which was not far at all from the Pasak River. The thick jungle surrounding us was full of wild beasts and we were probably the only humans here. I said to him: We could live like those wild animals who do not aspire for more territory than what they really need and find just enough food for their survival. We will occupy and earn our living from the share of land allocated to us by Mother Earth. He sobbed and indicated that he didn't mind living there with me, so we lived together that way for quite a while.

As it turned out, however, he left our hut every day, both during the daytime and the nighttime. His heart didn't really aspire for a peaceful life and he got excited by news from the outside world. He felt the need to contact people and he told me that he would soon succeed in persuading Thao Noree, who was the head of that region, to go along with his plan. According to him, he had managed to persuade a big group of Lao people in Saraburi to be on his side and they would join the Lan Xang king's army when he moved his army there to launch a war for independence. His job was to gather enough support in Saraburi, he said.

One day he said goodbye to me after telling me that his plan would be successful and after that he wanted to take me to Lan Xang with him, reasoning that his true home was there and he was an important and well-respected figure of that city. He promised

that once we were there, I would be honored as the wife of a powerful and influential man.

He might be successful in persuading others to dream about the success of his plan, but his effort was wasted on me. It was because I didn't want anything more than what we already had. I said to him that it was wrong of him to leave me after we had formed a close relationship, but he responded by saying that he had no intention to abandon me. He told me he had a very important mission to complete and once it was done he would certainly return to me. He promised me so.

That morning before he left, he said: Please wait for me here. He believed our hut was still safe for me because no one knew that he stayed there. Whenever he left and returned to the hut, he made sure that no one saw him, thus he was confident that I would not be troubled by outsiders.

"Please wait for me here," he repeated it again. "I will certainly return to you," he promised me.

You children will later learn about that war for independence from your Thai history textbook. It was referred to as the Anuwong Rebellion in your history textbook though. What happened was that King Anuwong moved his army into Siam and along the way he recruited more and more Lao people living in Thailand to join him. The Lao king announced that he intended to help Siam fight against the British and because of this, he received a lot of support in terms of human forces, food supplies, and weapons from all the provinces his army passed through. When his army got to Nakhon Ratchasima, he dispatched some of his soldiers to recruit Lao people living in Saraburi to join him. However, as he and his army were stationed in Nakhon Ratchasima, he heard the news that Siam was eventually able to reach an agreement with the British regarding the trading treaty, and he had to decide to retreat.

Not long after that, the Siamese king got to know about King Anuwong's aborted plan and he was furious. He accused Anuwong of being ambitious and power-crazed after he was promoted as the king of Lan Xang, and of betraying the old friendship they had

during his years in Bangkok. In his rage, the Siamese king organized his army in pursuit of Anuwong and, along the way to Viang Chan, uprooted all Anuwong's support bases in various provinces. Once the Siamese army got to Viang Chan, it destroyed everything there; city walls and temples were crushed to the ground and the whole city was burnt down to ashes. Lan Xang kingdom met destruction and King Anuwong had to flee to Vietnam for help. He was later captured and sent to Bangkok to be executed along with other members of his royal family.

The Lao king was executed and it was very likely that my husband's fate was no better. However, back then I didn't know this. It was with the benefit of hindsight that I came to this realization, and I told you this first so that you won't get confused. Now let me get back to that day when my husband left our hut near the Pasak River.

I'm not stupid, but in those days I acted very stupidly; he told me to wait for him at that hut and I did wait for him there. One night, then three nights, and several more nights had passed, but there was still no sign of him. I kept waiting and even though I had not experienced what it was like to truly love someone and hadn't known the value of promise before, it was then that I started to harbor all those feelings and knowledge. They gradually grew within me and they became something I had to carry and shoulder. Eventually, they turned into something tangible and concrete that became bigger and bigger in my womb. This thing also grew heavier and made me feel like I was carrying a big stone. Every night I sat waiting for him in front of our hut and gazed at the flowing current of the Pasak river with numerous rocks in it, and I felt as if part of those rocks was growing in my womb.

In that state, I was not merely stupid but was also emotionally unstable, unlike anything I was before. In those days, I often suffered from annoyance, fury, sadness, despair, and loneliness, and I couldn't help giving out mournful wails like those wild beasts in the dark of the night. I simply couldn't keep those emotions locked inside me. I had to let them out otherwise they would burst out of my chest and kill me. It was as if my sorrowful wails during those nights brought about change in that part of the jungle as

there appeared in the Pasak River so many dead bodies floating with the current almost every day. Perhaps there was some kind of epidemic outbreak in regions outside this thick jungle, or there might be a war going on somewhere otherwise those bodies wouldn't have been thrown into the river and left to float aimlessly and pitifully. In the sky above me, dozens of vultures were swerving back and forth and some of them swooped down to feed on the floating bodies, tearing apart and pecking flesh and intestines, a terrible spectacle indeed.

This place was no longer pleasant but I was too heavy to move somewhere else. Actually, even if I could walk easily I wouldn't have gone anywhere because he had promised me that he would be back and that I had to wait for him there. It was that promise that bound him and me to that place. The love and attachment we had for each other was nearly ripe and one night I gave birth to our baby.

It was a baby girl and she was so small she could fit into my two palms. She was completely still and quiet as if there was no life in her. I didn't know what to do.

I held her close to my chest and tried in vain to wake her up by shaking her a little then I wiped the slime off her eyes, nose, and lips with my hand. The experience of childbirth made my whole body painful and I was totally exhausted. The baby showed no sign of waking up and I eventually fell asleep out of exhaustion, hoping that the baby would wake up the next morning.

The Awaiting Rock

I awoke because I felt a sharp pain as if something was pulling one of my body parts. It was quite late and the noon sun was almost above me. The baby was not in my arms and I immediately got up even though I still felt sleepy. I wonder where my baby was, and soon I felt that sharp pain again and discovered that it was from the umbilical cord that connected me with my baby. At that moment, however, I found that the umbilical cord was stretched until the other end of it reached the beach, and there was a vulture pecking it in order to sever it from me. I knew then why I felt that sharp pain.

Then I noticed that a group of vultures was feeding on something near the beach. At the other end of the stretched umbilical cord was my baby and once I realized what those birds were doing, I screamed at the top of my voice. Those vultures had stolen my baby from my arms and they were feeding on her. They were so horrifying. I rushed out to the beach and tried to scare away those vultures with my bare hands, but the devilish creatures refused to budge. I had to get very close to them and really pushed them off before I could reclaim my baby. I held her close to my chest and crawled back to the hut with hardly any energy left in me.

Oh my little baby, my love and attachment, my promise, you were no longer alive. Those vultures attacked you and pecked your soft flesh. They had devoured my love until what was left of you was just a torn up being. I was devastated by deep sorrow and the unfathomable pain of losing my baby and I wept like a mad woman until I fainted. Upon regaining my consciousness, I wept again and again until it felt as if my heart had melted away and my head was on fire and shattered into pieces. I wanted my painful wails to cut into all beings in the jungle and badly wound them so that they could also experience my heart-breaking losses…I wailed like a crazy beast of the jungle and I wanted those humans to hear me lamenting about how they had stolen my husband from me and that I had been waiting for him in vain. I wanted my wails to make them shiver to their core

and unable to sleep, to make them restless, disturbed, and ill-stricken. I didn't stop wailing for three days and three nights.

At daybreak of the fourth day, my whole being was soaked with tears, then my tears turned into blood and it kept flowing out of me. By then my body had lost a lot of liquid and my skin began to harden until it was almost as hard as my bones. The baby I held in my arms also started to change its condition and those devilish vultures were still nearby awaiting its food. Some of them were walking on the beach and others were perching on rocks. I looked at them with a heart full of rage.

I would never let you beasts have her! Never!

Then I made up my mind to do something. This little baby was mine and was born from me. I would never let anyone take her away from me. In order to prevent animals from feeding on her I had to take her back into my body.

Those humans who dwelled near the jungle and heard my piercing wails for three days and three nights had followed my voice to see what had happened. They came in various different groups; some were from the north of the river, others were from the south. There were also those from the east and the west of the river. They gathered together some distance from my hut and looked at me. Even though they were quite a distance from me, they could see what I was doing with my baby. Their eyes and expressions showed that they found me shocking, disgusting, and pathetic.

When I saw them, I cried out to ask whether they had seen my husband, who had asked me to wait for him there. Had they seen my husband? I asked again.

But none of them responded to my question. They grimaced at what I was doing and seemed to be completely shocked and still. Then one of them yelled out:

"You are a ghoul!"

Another one chimed in: "You hellish freak! You devoured your own baby!"

After a little while, they started to curse and condemned me to be burnt in hell. Some wanted me to be punished by being turned into stone. I didn't bother with what they said and continued doing what I had to do—taking my very own flesh and blood into my body. Unable to witness it any further, those people soon dispersed.

Those people later spread a story about a young woman awaiting a husband who had promised to return to her and how the woman ate her own baby instead of letting vultures feed on it. Afterwards, the story spread far and wide and people have committed it to their memory and imagination. Because of this, that place was called ‘the Awaiting Rock’ and the legend is still around till these days.

Thus, that remote area near the beach in front of what used to be my hut is now known as ‘the Awaiting Rock’ or Kaeng Khoi district. That vast jungle that didn’t have a name in the past has also been named. Furthermore, dozens of small villages and sub-districts have also acquired names, and I will soon tell you about the origins of those names.

After taking all my baby’s flesh and blood into my body, what was left of her were bones and I could not bring them into my body. I therefore pulled out one of my baby’s arm bones and threw it with full force to the south. That arm bone hit against a very tall sugar palm tree causing a loud crash before dropping onto the fields and got stuck there. The locals therefore named that area “the Sub-district of the Flying Limb” and later it was changed into “the Sub-district of the Solitary Sugar Palm Tree”, like what it is known nowadays. It was where our old district office is located.

About the other arm bone, I also threw it with full force to the south and it fell into a main brook that served as an important water source for the locals. Once that bone dropped into the brook it magically dried up all the water there, and for this reason, the locals named their area “the Sub-district of the Dried up Brook”.

Regarding the right leg bone, I pulled it out and threw it in the northeastern direction where it flew across several small hills located next to one another. It eventually landed in the middle of a fertile forest dense with tall Klor trees, which are somewhat similar to sugar palm trees. Before it landed, however, the bone crashed against one of the Klor trees, causing it to collapse with its trunk lying across a stream. The locals later made use of that trunk as a bridge that helped them cross the stream conveniently and they named their sub-district ‘the Sub-district of Ta Klor”.

I threw the left leg bone towards the same direction as its right fellow and it easily flew across many small hills lying one after another as if the wind helped carry it along. It finally reached the narrow and twisted section of the Pasak River with towering cliff-like river banks. The leg bone landed against the cliff, making thundering noise and breaking the cliff into small pieces that fell into the river and formed submerged rocks scattering throughout the riverbed. The locals thus named their sub-district 'the Sub-district of Submerged Rocks".

Concerning the bones that formed the upper part of the body such as the spine and the rib cage, I throw them a bit further than others. They flew through the air then the rib cage was miraculously struck by lightning and was broken into three pieces. The first piece fell down into a grove of bel fruit trees and, not long afterwards, those trees grew magnificently. The locals therefore named that area "the Sub-district of Bel Fruit Trees." The second piece fell down to a jungle area where most locals avoided as it was the edge of the Jungle of the Fiery Lord. After the bone dropped there, the area was even more intimidating to the locals and the jungle remained intact. Later, it was named "the Sub-district of the Jungle Village." The last piece of the rib cage fell down on a small hill and got stuck there. Like the first piece of the rib cage, this last piece made the soil very fertile and all sorts of plants sprung from. This could be because the rib cage had been struck by lightning. Later on this last piece of the rib cage was covered by a mound of earth that grew bigger and bigger with the shape of a stupa or a Chedi. The locals thus named that area "The Sub-district of Taat Community". The word Taat was originally from a Lao language and it means stupa or Chedi.

Regarding the pelvic bones, I threw them across Pasak River and they landed on the roof of a house owned by a young man named Song before bouncing off and fell onto another roof of a neighboring house whose owner was a young woman named Khon. The two young people had been in love and they regarded the incident regarding the bones as the auspicious sign for their union and decided to get married. The couple had many children who grew up and lived in the same neighborhood and that area was named "the Sub-district of Song Khon".

About the neck bone, I threw it to the west and it flew across the Pasak River and landed on the other side where there was a community of blacksmiths. The bone happened to fall into one of the furnaces but, miraculously, it was not burnt to ashes. Instead it was transformed into a black and hard object like a metal amulet. The blacksmith who owned that furnace kept it as a sacred piece and since then it was known that he could not be harmed by any weapon and was able to cast powerful spells. That area was named by the locals as “the Sub-district of Cement Furnaces”.

For the tailbone, I threw it to the southeast and it landed on the surface of a river but would not sink. It kept bouncing along the river surface before sailing through the middle of a creeping plant and chopping it up into small pieces. Those pieces were blown away by the wind and scattered on rice fields, other types of cropland, and nearby people’s fences. Parts of that creeping plant could easily grow into new plants wherever they land and people have enjoyed eating them. That plant is called ‘Pak Paew’ and people named the area where pieces of it were spread on ‘the Sub-district of Pak Paew Cutting.’

The last bone left was the skull, which I threw with full force sending it the furthest. It landed in the Jungle of the Fiery Lord, which was known as the most dangerous forested region. Troops travelling from Nakhon Ratchasima to Bangkok had to pass through this jungle and many soldiers caught malaria and died along the way. Old damaged weapons and torn up military uniforms and gear littered the jungle ground. Before the skull landed, it crashed against a helmet that was lying on the edge of the jungle. The crash was quite loud and piecing and villagers who lived near the jungle could hear it. Later on, a hunter discovered the skull lying next to the helmet and he thought the noise people heard was from the ghost of a soldier who died crying for help. The area near where the skull and the helmet were found was thus named ‘the Sub-district of the Steel Helmet’, and later this Sub-district became a district.

Those names originated from my action and the inevitable consequence of naming was that the jungles were divided into various different territories with names and boundaries of their own.

After finishing what I had to do with my baby, I experienced a brief moment of relief. Nevertheless, I was still consumed by despair and there was no energy left in my limbs. I sat down in front of my hut staring at the hovering vultures, knowing that they were eagerly and patiently awaiting my demise. They probably wanted to eat me after missing out on my baby but I would not let them have the satisfaction of feasting on my body. They made a mistake thinking I could be their food not knowing I won't die and can't die. I would live to be over one hundred years old so that I could meet you children and relate to you my story like what I'm doing now.

Do you still remember what I had told you that my soul is immortal and that it will remain on this Earth without being extinguished. But being immortal does not mean being intact. Change is part of immortality and it might take the form of transformation, decay, damage, or wrinkles. I'm not immune to change, both the type that others inflict on me, or the type I inflict on myself. That extremely traumatic experience I have just recounted to you also created change in me.

At first I was the one who brought about the change in myself. After losing my baby girl, I was devastated and heart-broken. I wept for several days and nights until I ran out of tears, until my body was on fire and drove tears out of my pores, draining all the water in me. When I had no more tears, blood streamed down from my eyes when I wept and it would not stop until all the liquid in me came out and became hot vapor all around me. Once my body was drained of all liquid, the soft skin on my arms, legs and neck started to harden until it was bone-like. In that kind of state after such a change, I became very vulnerable and could be easily harmed. It was then that those people who saw me doing what I had to do with my baby put a curse on me. (Many places got their names because of my action, and in a similar vein, those people were able to name me through the way they condemned me.)

By putting a curse on me, they were able to have power over my being and I was transformed into the thing they subjected me to. My whole body gradually became hard

and in the end it was changed into a rock statue rooted to the spacious area near that beach , the area known today as ‘the Awaiting Rock’ or ‘Kaeng Khoi’.

Incantations

I was quite happy being a rock statue rooted to the area near the Kaeng Khoi beach. Being condemned to be an immovable rock, I didn't have to worry about going here and there or struggling to survive. Around me things kept changing with the passage of time and the beach was transformed into a pier where people came and went from all directions. The jungle gradually receded and human communities replaced it. Traders who had journeyed along the river stopped at the pier for various purposes. Some stopped there for a short break, others to sell or deliver their commodities. There were also those who stopped at the pier to wait for another ship. Change was all around me and I was its witness. As time passed, people no longer shunned me. On the other hand, they approached me in order to pay homage to me and to beg me to grant them wishes or to ensure that they have a safe journey. They gave me food and drinks to enjoy and brought me candles and incense sticks that gave off sweet fragrance. As a substitute for my baby, they gave me dolls to play with. When winter arrived, they wrapped me up in a warm blanket. You could see that I was quite spoiled by them.

One day I overheard the locals talking about King Pinklao's trip to Song Khon and his stay at See Tha palace. Rumor had it that the purpose of his visit was to see whether it was possible to build Siam's second capital city in Saraburi. The king was worried that there might be a war between Siam and western powers. He feared that the Chao Phraya River might fall into the hands of westerners and they could fire canon into Bangkok. People said that the king planned to build a palace in TaKor's Kaokhok area as well as use the area as a place to train his military personnel in preparation for the war.

However, Siam didn't go to war with westerners during King Pinklao's reign. It was later on during King Rama V's reign that the war took place, together with so many changes. Rama V travelled to so many places throughout his kingdom and even though it seemed like he took those trips for recreational purposes, he actually wanted to survey the boundaries of his kingdom and when he visited important places, he had his name imprinted there to mark his ownership of those places. He was the one who had Siam's first railway line constructed and this railway line passed through the Kaeng Khoi area, bringing development to regional areas. He also abolished slavery and reformed Thailand's governing system by making Bangkok the centre of power, and appointed people from Bangkok to rule over Siam's regional areas. Because of this reformation,

outer provinces, inner provinces, and colonies no longer exist, as they were replaced by county, city, district, sub-district, and village. He initiated all those changes and got rid of inappropriate practices because he wanted to ensure Siam's independence and sovereignty.

Later, the Kaeng Khoi area became a district, and other villages were treated as sub-districts. However, the truth is that Siam actually became smaller. Siam no longer had colonies as the king had to hand them over to western powers like France and England. Time and again, those western countries threatened to invade our country and they accused us of being uncivilized and barbaric. They also claimed that it was their burden to civilize us. Thus, to stop them from invading us, the king of Siam had to give up all those colonies. Despite so many changes made, Siam still lost a significant part of its territory. I couldn't imagine what would have happened if no change or reformation was initiated.

Change happens because the world keeps moving forward and we cannot go against this; what we have to do is to find a way to change as well. The true nature of the world is change; a very high place might one day become the bottom of the sea, possibly because the core of the earth twists itself and shifts from left to right, causing a landslide. The noble truth in Buddhism derives from the nature of the world, as the Lord Buddha could see that nothing is permanent and those who hold on to attachment will suffer. As time passed, there were more changes taking place in this land. From god-like kings, people later had kings who were considered the supreme rulers of the land. In the past a vast territory was a measure of the power or prosperity of a country or a kingdom, but later that was no longer the case. The governing system was seen as a more important indication of a country's civilization and that was why absolute monarchy was changed to a democracy with constitutional monarchy.

You see children, when a person is rooted to one place, she tends to be flooded by all sorts of things she hears from others. A traveler tends to relate to others only the things she has experienced herself, whereas a person who is confined to one place often makes up stories from others' accounts. The latter has not seen anything with her own eyes but is able to cook up a really marvelous story. You could say that the bad point of being condemned to be rooted to one place is that it makes you go on and on about things you do not have access to. For example, if you are shut inside, you will keep talking about what is outside, or if you are underneath something, you will keep talking about what is above you. In my case, I was unable to move so I keep spinning out stories about development and change. You have to remember though that change is actually my true nature and it was only temporary that I existed as a rock.

Being a rock statue didn't make my beauty diminish. In those days, people from near and far admired my perfect figure and exquisite beauty. I'm not being vain or anything like that, children. I'm simply telling you the truth. What I did when I was a human was viewed differently now that I was a rock statue. For example, young couples who were in love asked me to bless their union and parents who couldn't have babies asked me to help make their dream about having children come true. They seemed to believe that I could give them what they wanted, but look at me at that time, I myself lost both my baby and my husband so how could I grant them those wishes? Anyway, if those people chose to believe that way, I didn't want to destroy their hopes as doing so can be considered a form of sin. Those people didn't merely ask me to grant them wishes but also did some rather naughty things to me, for example, touching my arms and legs, fondling my breasts, or groping me wherever their hands could reach. It seemed to be part of their superstitious belief that doing so would make them become lucky. Having been touched and exposed to human hands so often, my rough and hardened skin got much more smooth and glowing. I became much more beautiful.

Having great beauty and being rooted to one spot can bring harm to oneself. Being the object of people's worship and their source of hope can also bring harm to you. Those qualities attract the attention of all sorts of people and it is impossible to tell whether they mean well to you or not. For me, having those qualities eventually brought about the day that I was transformed into a human again and disappeared from Kaeng Khoi. There would be no concrete trace of me left there and what remained were merely accounts of those who had seen me sitting on that beach.

It was a full moon night and the big round moon glowed and overshadowed the surrounding starlight. The moonlight brightened the beach and it looked as if it was during the daytime. The flow of the Pasak River was slow and gentle and the water was of lead color. I had a premonition that something was about to happen to me on that beach, and I could feel the presence of something strange and mysterious with a will of its own. I also felt as if I was being watched by a pair of gleaming eyes. Those eyes belonged neither to a human nor an animal but to something that was half human half animal. From those eyes radiated power, awe, and worldly experience. It also appeared to me that those eyes desired to possess me. A strange kind of feeling occurred in me as if I was under a spell and I felt hot all over my body.

There was also change in the sky above me. A lunar eclipse was happening. A dark shadow was slowing devouring the moon until in the end the full bright moon turned

blood red, and it was in that moment that a man emerged from the shadow of the jungle. He walked purposefully out of the jungle and stopped in front of me. I couldn't see his face clearly but I noticed that he had a very dark and shiny complexion as if he was coated in some sort of oil. His face was also dark and I could only see the white of his worldly eyes. He directed his gaze at me and at the same time pressed his palms together in a prayer-like fashion and started to mutter some mysterious incantations. His incantation grew louder and louder until it sounded almost like a howl. All of a sudden, I felt hot and cold and then my body felt like it was on fire. Then I was able to move, but it was a movement driven by lust and I was flooded with desire for the man who recited those incantations to arouse me.

During that brief period of a total lunar eclipse, I felt as if I had been yearning for him all my life. His black magic had infiltrated me and made itself one with my memory, acting like a worm that penetrated deep into me in order to rearrange my memory and my past but not totally change them. He only wanted to change me enough to make me give him what he wanted. To do so, he embeds himself in a section of my memory and pretended to be that promise given to me by my husband. That worm convinced me that he was the one who gave me that promise and now he had returned to me. The moon started to come out of darkness and its bright light was visible once more. Similarly, darkness left his face and in its place was the familiar face of my husband.

I could feel the movement of water throughout my body and tears were brimming in my eyes before streaming down my cheeks. My husband was standing there in front of me and I cried out "Oh my dear husband. It has been so long since you went away from me!"

Then I hurriedly told him that we no longer had our baby.

He didn't say anything but walked towards me and helped me to stand up while wiping my tears away. He looked at me closely and I wrapped my arm around his shoulder to steady myself. His eyes were reflecting an intense gleam.

"You are so beautiful, more beautiful than what anyone has described," he said, and his eyes gleamed like an animal. He started to mutter incantations again and all of a sudden I felt powerless and my consciousness left me.

He took me to where he lived in the depth of the Jungle of the Fiery Lord. Within his dark abode were numerous oddities such as a tub full of herbs, a Kali altar, a phallus, a fabric amulet, and other sorts of talismans. I could also feel the presence of his invisible servants hovering around his place, which was permeated by the strong smells of oil,

herbs, candles, incense sticks, and nighttime flowers. The place seemed to be dominated by a kind of stickiness that invited lustful indulgence.

I woke up in his arms as he was placing me in a tub full of herbs. While he was using the water in that tub to wash the dirt and dead skin off me, he kept on muttering incantations. Soon my honey-color complexion looked glowing and dazzling, and he lifted me from the tub to his bed. He didn't allow me a chance to say anything because he used his incantations to lull me into a state of quiet passivity and obedience. Once in bed, he threw himself upon me and devoured all parts of me as if he had been starving and yearning for carnal pleasure for a long time. I let myself indulge in the pleasure he gave me all through the night till dawn.

I slept all day and when I awoke it was already dark. Once he saw that I was awake, he muttered those mysterious incantations that filled me with the desire for him before he used me to fulfil his lustful drive. This repeated itself many nights after until I became pregnant. He left me alone during my pregnancy and at first I didn't find this strange. It seemed to me that he was also awaiting the birth of our baby. When he wasn't with me, he was busy with his magic and spells all day long and during those hours my reasoning returned to me. I realized that he was not my husband and was convinced that he was not a good person, as he was involved with black magic, beliefs, and practices that led one astray from enlightenment. While living there with him, I could feel that he was surrounded by darkness and impure desires. He was obviously on the side of evil, the opposite of the hermit, whose existence radiated purity and positive energy.

It turned out that I was right about him. One night I woke up with a start and found that he had cut open my womb and stolen my baby from me before it was due. I saw him placing my baby on an altar and he was performing an evil ritual to transform the baby into one of his servants. When he noticed my anger, he used those incantations on me to lull me into subservience once more.

He didn't just want one baby. He still wanted more, and when he saw that I had recovered and was in a condition that could satisfy his lust, he started to use me sexually again. When I fell pregnant for the second time and was not under the power of his incantations, I recalled the night that he appeared before me muttering incantations to put me in a blind state of lust, and came to the conclusion that I had to find a way to destroy him. I knew I had to carry out this plan of mine while I was not under the power of his black magic.

The next day I awoke around noon and found him asleep on a sleeping platform in front of a set of altar tables. He slept there while I was carrying his baby, partly because he didn't get involved with me sexually during my pregnancy. The other reason was related to the rule practitioners of black magic like him adhered to; even though those men could sleep with women, they had to be careful not to let women occupy a higher place than them otherwise a terrible harm could be inflicted on their power. I have also heard that powerful black magic would be severely weakened when women did things to humiliate it. With this knowledge in mind, I quietly crept to the platform where he was sleeping and stood above him with my two legs spread across his torso. Then I walked towards his head and made sure that my vagina was above his head. What I did damaged and shook to the core the things he believed in, and it brought destruction to his power and rendered all his endeavors to acquire and master black magic useless.

After doing that, I looked at him. Deep down I was still unsure whether I had successfully destroyed his power or not, so I grabbed a dagger from an altar and was thinking about stabbing him to death with it. As I was trying to gather my courage to do so, he woke up. He didn't seem scared at all and simply opened his eyes and looked at me in displeasure, as if he wanted to reprimand me for entering the sacred and forbidden space near the altar tables.

"You dirty bitch!" he snarled, "Why the hell are you here?"

Still lying on the platform, he started to mutter his incantations intending to force me into subservience, and it was then that I knew I had successfully destroyed his power. He could no longer use the black magic on me and the only thing that came out of his mouth were his awful breaths. He yelled at me threatening to teach me an expensive lesson, and slowly sat up.

I lifted the dagger and stabbed him in the chest with it. It went through the gap between his ribs and pierced through his heart. He shuddered and fell on to the sleeping platform with his eyes still wide open. He died instantly.

At that moment, all the spirits enslaved as his servants started to howl and wail in unison and the whole place was thundering with those noises. Soon the wailing and howling changed into joyous cries, as those spirits realized that they had been set free. After a little while, they all vanished. Set free like them, I began a journey that would lead me out of the Jungle of the Fiery Lord.

Twins

My journey out of the Jungle of the Fiery Lord was a very difficult one and after I emerged from it, I came across a hunter-gatherer who asked me where I came from. When I told him that I had just come out of the Jungle of the Fiery Lord, he told me that the name of that jungle was already changed into the Jungle of the Tranquil Lord. I went along with him as it didn't matter to me what that jungle was called. They could have changed the name of the jungle a hundred times but the nature of the jungle wouldn't change one bit.

The reason I had to get out of that jungle was because it had become too dangerous to live there, especially now that I was no longer alone. I was carrying something heavy in my womb. I had lost my babies twice and I had no desire to let it happen again. By then I had more knowledge about the little lives growing within me and what I should or should not do to nurture those lives. My affection and concern for them naturally developed as my stomach grew bigger, and I was determined to raise my babies at my best. Even though part of them originated from the seed of that evil practitioner of black magic, nothing can change the fact that they are my babies. Like the fruit of a tree that belongs to that tree even though the spores that caused them to bud might be blown from somewhere else by the wind, babies are from the flesh and blood of their mothers. This is the fact of nature and it can't be changed. The mother and her children belong to each other until the latter grow up and become parents who have produced the fruit of their own.

I didn't escape the jungle altogether as I still lived on its fringe, which was between the jungle and the nearby human community. Where I settled down was near what people nowadays know as Muak Lek waterfall. I had built a simple hut with my own two hands and, living there, I didn't have any problem finding food from the plentiful natural resources in that area. My pregnancy this time was different from before

as my stomach was so big as if it was about to explode. When my labor started, the pain was almost unbearable as it seemed like the fetuses in my womb were madly kicking and pushing. I was in insufferable pain for a week before I eventually gave birth to the twin babies who came out to see the world almost at the same time. They were both baby boys and the elder one looked rather small and skinny while the younger one was a chubby little fellow. I guess the two of them must have been quarrelling with each other since they were in my womb and that explained why there was so much pushing and kicking in my womb just before they were born.

I wiped the slime from their lips, noses, and eyes, then severed the umbilical cord that linked their bodies to mine. The babies screamed at the top of their voices and wriggled their limbs. I comforted them by whispering softly and gently to them that I was still with them even though the cord had been cut. I let them suckle and gazed at them with love and tenderness; they were my life, my babies.

I nurtured my babies until they were about three years old. I nicknamed them after their complexion: the chubby boy was Red (Daeng) and the skinny one Dark (Dam), but up to that point I hadn't given them any formal names yet.

One day a group of people showed up and they seemed to be walking around looking for something near the edge of the jungle. They didn't look like local hunter-gatherers but it was clear they were busy trying to find something. Soon they approached my hut and greeted me cordially, but what they brought with them were not good tidings. They told me I was not allowed to live there, and when I asked why they said that area was not for human habitation. According to them, I had to move to a human community. I then told them that I was not used to living with other humans as I had spent all my life in jungles and hills. Still they insisted that I had to move out because where I lived was near a national park, which was a forested area rich in flora and fauna. Human beings were forbidden from encroaching and settling down on such an area. They also informed me that they would soon proclaim the area where I lived as a botanical garden, making it part of the jungle where human settlement was not allowed. I then argued with them and tried to make them aware that I had been living with the guardian spirits of the jungles

and the hills all my life. They wouldn't listen to me and insisted that there was no place for me there. I challenged them by asking what authorized them to order me around and they responded by telling me that they were state officials. When asked what state was that, I got the reply that they were working for the Thai state but I said I had no idea about a state with such a name. I then asked why this area was no longer part of the Siamese king's territory. Upon hearing my question, they laughed at me and said I was undoubtedly a forester who knew nothing about the outside world. They soon explained that this area still belonged to the king but his government had taken over the administration task, and that the name of the country had already been changed from Siam to Thailand. You must have spent your whole life in a jungle and totally lost touch of what's going on, they said.

At first, the fact that the name of a piece of earth had been changed didn't bother me. Name change, no matter how often it takes place, does not affect the earth in the least—the earth is still the earth. However, I soon realized that this change interfered with and sought to manage so many things. I found this rather hard to deal with. More and more jungles had been cleared for human settlement but after too much disappearance of jungles, there arose the need to conserve them so that they wouldn't vanish altogether. I was part of the jungle before but because I assumed a human form and had two small sons I was forced to mingle with humans and leave the jungle to be with them in a human community. I had to leave the jungle with nothing I could claim as my own except my two sons. Not only did they force me out of my home but also ordered me to register myself and my children as part of the population of the Thai state, ensuring that the state had information about us. In other words, we had to be part of the Thai nation. As I had to go through such a hassle, I decided to record the names Siam for my elder son and Thai for my younger son on their birth certificates.

With my two little sons in my arms, I unwillingly left my home, which would soon be turned into part of the Muak Lek Botanical garden. I travelled downhill to a lower land until I found a remote area that looked like it was still part of the jungle, as it was cool and shady with various trees. There the three of us, mother and sons, lived

together in our new home. As time passed, my sons grew bigger, stronger, and their survival skills increased until I no longer had to worry about them. They were also full of curiosity, and as soon as they could walk and run they disappeared for hours each day. They always returned home looking all sweaty with armloads of fruits and the flesh of the animals they had captured. For my part, I underwent a drastic change after leaving the jungle to settle down in an area not so far removed from human communities; I became weaker and my skin became dry and wrinkled, losing its radiant and youthful look. I was no longer a beautiful young woman and in less than 10 years, I was transformed into an old woman.

Every part of my physical body had aged. However, my soul remained the same. Although perhaps, I should say that my soul was still the original one whose age was more than thousands of years, thus more ancient than anything, yet is not weakened or withered away like what happened to my physical body.

Not only were my two sons good at catching animals and fish, but they also loved to acquire new knowledge. The two of them liked to spend hours at a nearby temple helping monks with chores and discreetly listening with interest to them reciting prayers. The monks grew fond of them and decided to teach them how to read and write. The abbot later let them study at a temple school without asking for any tuition fees and after school, they usually carried tins of food back with them. They told me that the abbot asked them to bring the food home for me. Each day they shared the things they had learned and discovered, and I told them I was proud of them for being so smart and keen on gaining new knowledge. Their love of learning also had the extra advantage of being given food to be brought home every day.

One day a man approached our hut after we had lived there for years, and, like what had happened before, he told me I had to move out. I tried to reason with him by saying that my hut was built on land that was part of the jungle and didn't seem to belong to anyone, but he said he owned it and it was part of his large grove that could have been mistaken for the jungle. He emphasized that he had planted all the fruit trees himself and he wasn't happy that I had been picking fruits from his trees for quite a long while,

leaving him not that many. He added that when he first saw me in his grove years ago he thought I would move somewhere else soon, but it didn't turn out that way. He therefore had to tell me to leave his grove. I said I had nowhere to go as wherever I set up my home, I would soon be told that someone already owned that piece of earth. He responded by saying I would have to deal with that myself as it was none of his business. For this land, however, he had a title deed to prove his ownership of it and if I refused to move out, he would have to ask the authorities to arrest me and put me in jail. I tried to argue back by telling him that he was being unreasonable because the earth belonged to all living beings, humans included, and it was beyond my understanding why some humans liked to proclaim sole ownership of this and that piece of earth. He told me to stop preaching. In his eyes, I was an intruder while he was simply making a living out of the land he rightfully owned. Just get out of here, he said, before he had to resort to more forceful means. Being left with no choice, my sons and I had to look for a new home again.

Children can be better in dealing with things than their parents, and this was true with my Siam and Thai. Once they knew that we had to find another place to live, they tried to help me. One evening Thai told me, "Mummy, the abbot wants me to let you know that he gives you permission to build a small hut for the three of us on the temple land." Upon hearing what his brother said, Siam immediately chimed in, "Mummy, the abbot actually told me about that first and I told Thai about it. How dare he tell you about it before I do!" Thai immediately retorted. "Nonsense! We were both with the abbot when he mentioned it, and we were equally entitled to let mum know about it. This time I was quicker than you in passing on to mum what the abbot said, so why can't you just accept your defeat?"

Oh my dear boys, I love you equally. I tried to calm them down and put my arms around them, but Thai, who was bigger, snuggled up to me first and wouldn't let Siam share my embrace. Siam, who had been a wee baby and was still rather small, tried to get close to me but Thai used one of his feet to push him away. Deep down, I couldn't help feeling sorry for the elder twin.

“Mummy?” Thai said.

“Yes, my boy?”

“One day I will make sure that you have a piece of land where you can live on and no one can tell you to move out. I promise you, mum.” Even now I still remember what he said clearly. Thai, who was a mere child at that time, had a very serious expression and a very determined look in his eyes when he gave me that promise. I was so touched and my eyes were brimming with tears. “I will buy all the land available so that I will be the sole owner of it all!”

Sitting there with my younger boy in my arms, I looked at my elder son who turned his back to me and seemed to be quite annoyed. He was facing the jungle and perhaps thinking that his mum loves his brother more than him. It is not like that at all, my dear son, as you two have the equal share of my love. In fact, I had greater concerns for Siam, my elder son, as his fate had destined that he would have to take a journey that takes him away from his mother. As he was sitting there, I could sense that he was inwardly looking at me and wanted me to acknowledge that he was trying his best to do things for me. He looked at me without turning his face towards me, as his gaze was directed towards the horizon further away from the jungle. It was as if, through his intense gaze, he was trying to cast a spell that commanded the thunder to roar, the clouds to move, and the sky to change its color, hoping that the roaring thunder, the moving clouds, and the changed sky color would make me realize that he could create greater and more marvelous things for his mother without him having to look at me directly.

Decades later he would say to me: “A person’s worthiness has nothing to do with the way he describes himself but has everything to do with how others talk about him.” That was Siam, my dearest boy.

The three of us moved to live on the land that belonged to the temple. We built a small hut near a forested area where bodies were cremated. I had become an old woman and could no longer walk briskly nor do stuff I used to do, but I couldn’t stand sitting still doing nothing so I tried to help out with temple activities as much as my physical strength allowed.

Siam was a very smart boy while Thai was a boy of steely determination. Their outstanding character traits were different, leading to their pursuits of different trajectories. The abbot could foresee that Siam had a bright future awaiting him, so when Siam, by that time a young lad, had completed his studies with him at a temple school and still showed great enthusiasm to learn more, the abbot sent him off to Bangkok to pursue higher education. He offered to support Thai's studies in Bangkok as well but Thai didn't want to go to Bangkok as he was very attached to me. Thai said he was pleased that his twin brother left for Bangkok, and he would look after me and make me her happier than before. (Just wait and see!) He chose to take advanced vocational courses at a college in town and returned home every day in the evening. He did his best to look after me and the abbot without stint. Thai has always been a person of strong determination, and when he sets his heart on something, he always makes sure that he gets it. When he desires anything, his eyes would shine like a cat about to pounce on a bird, and the next minute capture and imprison the victim with its claws!

Thai got a job at a factory that manufactured cement. Less than two years after he started his job, due to his devotion to his work, he was promoted to the position of division head. He earned a very good salary and at the beginning of the following year, he bought a small piece of land near a river in Baan Pa sub-district. As he had promised me, he built a small house surrounded by fruit trees and we, mother and son, said goodbye to the abbot and moved to live in that house on the land he had acquired through his hard work and diligence.

I was content enough but I also had worries and concerns. As I got older, sitting at home doing nothing made me worry about things even more, so I tried to find stuff to do around the house. I told Thai not to devote his time looking after me because I had no problem being on my own and he had already built me a house. You are a young man now and you need to do things that make you happy. I want you to have your own life, I told him.

Regarding Siam, my other son, ever since he left home for his studies in Bangkok, he did not return home often. It was only once in a very long while that he took a trip

from Bangkok to visit the abbot and spend a few nights at home with me. He would be off again after his short visit, and as years passed, his visits became more and more infrequent. There could be an interval of a year or so in-between his visits. Occasionally, I got a letter from him and each of his letters mentioned a different plan he had for his studies; in one letter he might tell me that he was studying to become a teacher, but in the next letter he would talk about studying politics and governance. As he kept changing his mind about his study plans, it seemed unlikely that he would complete his studies anytime soon. In those letters he sent home, which were read to me by Thai, Siam excitedly described what he had encountered and how he had reaped benefits from his experiences. He perceived what he was doing as a journey to find out what the true meaning of life was.

"Don't you see, mum? I was not mistaken about him being a good-for-nothing type!" Thai ridiculed Siam as he was reading one of his letters aloud for me.

After those letters, Siam sent no news home for a long while. Then his next letter arrived, telling me that he had joined his fellow students in their demonstrations and the military had ordered a crackdown on them, forcing him to flee into the jungle. He was about to complete his studies but had to abandon them because of the crackdown. Nonetheless, he wrote, the wide world offered him so many things to learn throughout his lifetime, and learning was certainly not confined to a university setting.

Thai, however, laughed at what Siam said in his letter. "It's all blabbering nonsense!" He said.

Siam also wrote that he had spent two years overseas before returning to Thailand once the political climate was calmer, intending to have a fresh start. All things that happened to him were wonderful experiences that made it possible for him to truly understand the core and the soul of the working classes. There is no need to worry about me, mum, as this son of yours has many lives and when the right time comes, I will return home to pay respect to you, he said in his letter.

But Thai had nothing nice to say about his elder brother. He kept saying awful things about him and complained that he was of no use to his family because he spent his

life like a useless lazy bum. For my part, I merely said to Thai that he should not be too hard on his brother.

Deep down I felt that Siam's personality was the exact copy of mine. He spent his life traveling from one place to another, and I had done the same. He said he had many lives and so do I. Thus, I had no objection to the way Siam led his life but I had to keep my approval a secret from Thai, otherwise he would assume that I love his elder brother more than him. Thai couldn't accept that someone else might love his mother as much as he did, and he couldn't stand sharing his mother's love with anyone. His nature was actually a replica of the male who fathered him.

My concerns for Siam partly stemmed from the premonition I had about him. As he was so similar to me, it was almost like I could tell what would happen to him in the future, as if my own life was the blueprint of his fate.

Thai later purchased another piece of land near a big road in the Awaiting Deer District and, according to him, he had started his own business, a garage, there. Then he got himself a wife and I heard that she was a land agent. Thai built the love nest for their new lives together on that land he bought, and since then he didn't visit me very often. I was happy for Thai and was no longer concerned about him. I had told him that he should find happiness for himself and he had followed my advice. I was pleased that one of my sons had eventually settled down.

I still had my elder son to worry about though, and he was about to return home.

Homecoming

It was already late in the evening when Siam returned home that day. I heard his voice calling me "Mother! Mother!" even before he climbed up the stairs and I could detect the trepidation in his voice. By the time I responded to his call, he was up in the house sitting in front of me and asking me anxiously: "Mother, how are you? Is everything okay with you? It's good you are fine, as I was so worried about you." I was pleased to see him and tried to examine him with my aging eyes that couldn't see very well. Look at him, he left home when he was still a skinny teenager and returned as a middle-aged man with freckled skin that had lost its youthfulness. He still referred to himself as 'your little boy' and I knew that my very own son was within that body that had changed with the passage of time.

I asked what he was worried about and he told me that during the trip home that time he was troubled by the fear of losing his loved one and he couldn't help worrying about me, even though he didn't want to imagine awful things. I laughed and tried to comfort him by saying that if it is my time to die, it is not a big deal at all as I have lived for so long, long enough to see him getting old. In ten years' time, he would have looked no different from me now and it would be painful for me to see him getting even older than his mother. It would also be absolutely unbearable for me if my children die before me because it is unnatural.

Siam lay down, put his head in my lap, and gazed at me innocently as if he was still a little boy. He said, I know you will live forever, Mother. You told me you are immortal and you will live eternally. I laughed. He knew what to say to please me. Yes, I will live forever and you also have my immortal soul, son. Siam then asked, But Thai hasn't got the immortal soul because you only gave it to me, right? I said, Thai got his father's qualities as part of his nature. His father was very good at using black magic and once he set his heart on something, he tirelessly strived for it. Thai has strong determination like his father. He is now a man of wealth and he has a wife and kids. What about you? Tell me what you have. He said, I have love for you, Mother. I said, Don't you try to sweet talk me, son! I then told him to go have a wash and get something to eat.

The next morning word reached me that the abbot who had helped me and my sons a lot in the past had passed away. Siam and I wanted to attend his funeral so we left my home in Song Khon sub-district for his temple in Muak Lek district, where the

funeral would be held. Thai and his wife also travelled from their home in the Awaiting Deer sub-district to the temple. It was a grand funeral with guests from everywhere and a big statue of the abbot had been constructed and placed inside a pavilion so that people could pay respect to him. After the funeral, the temple had a new abbot, who was previously the late abbot's assistant. It seemed that the new abbot was a good friend of Siam because they were classmates when they were young.

When Siam and Thai saw each other at the temple, Thai asked Siam what he does to earn his living and why he never lets me know what he was up to. Thai worded his questions as if he already knew something I didn't and wanted to expose Siam in front of me by forcing him to explain himself. Siam said he had done all sorts of things and all went well. He had been busy taking care of several business enterprises and travelling within the country and overseas to negotiate business deals. He claimed that he socialized with people from all walks of life—from those at the lowest rung of society to those with a great deal of power and influence. According to him, he knew a lot of people and was well-respected by them. He also added that when a person had reached a certain stage in life, perhaps it wasn't enough to merely think about himself and his family if he wanted to improve the quality of life of fellow countrymen. He said he wanted to get involved in politics, and it seemed to me that this was a new challenge of his. He told Thai he wanted to help others, but Thai sniggered and didn't look convinced in the least. My two sons never seemed to be on the same wavelength.

When I was alone with my older son, I asked him if he was really serious about wanting to help his fellow countrymen and whether doing that wouldn't be stealing the job from the king. He laughed and said that nowadays the king was the pillar of the nation and was above politics. He let his government deal with the administration of the country and the government came from the people who chose their representatives to govern the country through an election. Siam tried to explain that the country was now a constitutional monarchy, but I interrupted him by saying that what he said was so complicated and impractical, unlike in the past when things were simpler. How come things were getting more and more like a mess? Siam then said, the world keeps changing and nothing remains permanent, don't you agree? I told him I agree but I wasn't sure if the change would lead to something better and he responded by saying doubt was good. I couldn't help giving him credit for being so good with words.

I also had another question for him: "Why do you feel the need to help humans and not other living beings? Humans are not easy to deal with and after they are together for a while, they tend to bicker and fight among themselves. The word 'khon' or human being in our language also means the mixture of all sorts of stuff, and indicates that

humans are from various different family backgrounds. Once humans occupied Earth, they caused many problems as they think they are superior to other living beings. They want to take possession of any territory they gain access to and proclaim it as their kingdom or nation. Then they construct nationalism and show off their power by invading other lands. It seems to me that so far things only get worse and more entangled. I have witnessed humans' craze for power, their passions, love, and misguided pursuits of power. As humans' life span gets shorter, they increasingly crave immortality and they try whichever way they can to make them feel and appear as if they can live forever. What good does it do to live forever? They should have asked me and I would tell them that it is no good and once one has an immortal soul, one has no choice but to just struggle to get by day by day. The truth is living a long life is not happiness, but it is happiness that makes one want to live longer. Once you experience happiness, you want it more and more and very few people learn to be content with the happiness they already have. I think it was the ability to feel content that made the hermit and the Buddha rise above ordinary people. So I can't help wondering why you want to help humans instead of other living beings. "

"Like you said, humans are from various different family backgrounds so they need someone to 'mix and blend' them together. The word 'khon' in our language can be a verb meaning 'mix and blend', and it can also be a noun meaning human being. This suggests that before we can become truly human, we need to undergo the mixing and blending process first," Siam said. "Because humans have the potential to learn, understand, and correct their past mistakes, it is necessary and worthwhile enough to try to transform humans, even though it's probably not easier than other tasks." Then he added, "Won't you feel proud if in the future people remember and talk about me? To judge a person's worth we have to rely on the way people talk about him, not the way he talks about himself."

"You always come up with all sorts of justification." I said, "Still, I love you no matter what, and isn't this enough for you? I was born from Earth and a mother is as important as a motherland. I hope you realize that you don't have to do anything to make me love you because I have always loved you." I continued: "But please don't use my love as a justification for doing things or claim that you do this and that out of love. Also, do not claim that you are doing things as a way to express your gratitude to me because I have never asked for anything in return for my love. My love is like water that flows naturally and endlessly from its source, so don't say that it is drying up or behaving as if you have no love to give."

I also told him I was pleased that he lived life to the fullest by travelling from one place to the next. His footprints were impressed on Mother Earth and I could feel his pulse no matter how far away he was from me.

Siam stayed with me for ten days then one morning he told me that he had to leave. I said: That's fine, son. There is no need to worry about me. He then said goodbye and was on his way.

Not long after that there was a big flash flood. Water flooded in from everywhere, from the hills, the overflowing rivers, and from places no one can tell. The flood was powerful and destructive; water was everywhere as the earth sank beneath it while crops and some locals' houses were being destroyed and carried away by the strong currents. The locals were miserable and whined that they had never seen such a fury from the goddess of rivers. I was affected by the flood as well, but luckily my house was on stilts so I could stay above the flood water even when it nearly touched the timber floor of the house. Thai came to see me in his boat and tried to persuade me to leave the house and stay with him, but I had no intention to do so. He kept asking me during his later visits and I kept refusing. In the end when he ran out of patience, he said I shouldn't be so stubborn and should just leave the house to go with him. I was quite annoyed with him myself so I said I would never leave the house and the flood didn't bother me in the least. Hearing that, Thai got upset and stomped out without saying another word.

There was nothing fearful about floods that originated from the wild. I experienced them before and had been through worse things. I knew that Thai worried about me, worried that I would drown in that flood. Haven't I told you before that your mum has an immortal life? You never seem to remember it. Thai merely shook his head in disbelief and said I let my imagination get the better of me. I understood why Thai turned out the way he was. He grew up with hardships and he didn't want to be a wanderer with no home. That was why he wanted to settle down, find security, and do whatever he could so as to avoid having to live the difficult life of the past again. His soul is different from mine because he is a member of a community and he earns his living as well as leads his life in a way that abides by the norms and rules of that community. In short, he is undoubtedly a human and he has strived for success and happiness by following what a human society has dictated. I have no objection about him choosing that path for himself but I want him to understand me as well. I'm not a human and I only inhabit a human body. My soul therefore resonates with nature, not humans. I'm familiar with things like floods, earthquakes, and lightning strikes. But it was not that long that I got to know a house, something constructed on a piece of earth and then fenced in to show ownership; a piece of paper is later issued to warrant a right to live in it and to sell

it. Without your permission, other people are not allowed access to the piece of land where your house is located. We forgot that the earth is not there for anyone to possess. The earth is actually a space that all beings have the right to pass through. Floods passing through the earth are thus normal, and the same applies to shrimps, shellfish, crabs, fish, and snakes that happen to pass by. You think it's good when shrimps, shellfish, crabs, and fish pass your way but when snakes pass by, you think they have ill intention. Humans were the latest to occupy the earth but they see themselves as above other beings; they issue title deeds, then they busily occupy and buy and sell land. They have messed up the earth, the jungles and the rivers. Still, I have yet to witness Mother Earth asserting her ownership and reprimanding humans for taking liberties in buying and selling her and for cutting down her trees. When humans don't cut down trees and leave them to grow and bear fruits, they refuse to share those fruits with others. In the past, birds, monkeys, or anyone passing by could enjoy fruits borne from the trees grown on Mother Earth, but once humans occupied the earth, they claim that everything belongs to them and those fruits are solely for them to enjoy. This does not seem right, does it?

Mother Earth has never asserted her ownership, and that's the core of her love. She never asks or demands that her kindness be returned. She is willing to give and is generous to all beings, to the most and the least grateful creatures. Mother Earth is not interested in being given anything in return. Animals' excrement left on her can be a spot where some insects or plants inhabit or grow from. The flesh of Mother Earth might be split or torn apart, but in the future rivers or canals might originate from those wounds. Mother Earth creates a cycle and change, and she is happy that one thing leads to the birth of another or contributes to the possible emergence of unknown things in the future. Such is her essence.

Ironically, it's no other creature but humans who like to preach that it is important to love Mother Earth and return her kindness. In fact, once they occupy the earth, humans are the creatures who disrupt the natural life cycle of all other beings and try to dictate this and that. Humans also create a new cycle and want nature to adhere to it. They impose nationalism and nation state on the earth and gild stones and trees then proclaim that this piece of earth belongs to them. They also repeatedly tell others that they need to love Mother Earth and have to return her kindness. The truth is that what they refer to as Mother Earth is not really her but a surrounding fence or border that signifies a nation state. Humans like to use gratitude to Mother Earth to justify their actions but the fact is they have never done anything to deserve her kindness. No other creature behaves like this, so I would say that humans are the most ungrateful creatures of all.

If we see natural disasters as a threat and a sign of fury, perhaps they happen because Mother Earth got irritated by all the messy things humans have done on her skin so she decided to shake herself a bit to get rid of the irritation.

The flood lasted for about a month then the water drained away. The plot of land near the river made me realize that nothing is permanent because as soon as the flood water dried up, it became evident that the land near the river that Thai had bought for me and built the house on had been eroded by flood water until only half of it was left. The house that was once located some distance from the river bank was now close to it. I saw the fact that the land was reduced into half as a test given to me by a higher being and I said to him that I didn't feel bad about it at all. In fact, I was willing to give up all the land to him because I never regard it as mine. I simply live on it temporarily and if it is no longer possible for me to live there, I can always move somewhere else.

However, Thai and his wife didn't see it that way. They were both very upset about losing half of the land bought with their hard-earned money and blamed nature for playing a cruel trick on them. They also saw the loss as a result of bad karma from their previous lives. In the end, Thai decided to get someone with a backhoe loader to fill up the underwater area near the house with earth, which, in my opinion, was not an easy task at all. Then he asked me to move out of the house to live with him. According to him, it was not safe to continue living there and he planned to sell that plot of land as soon as the river filling job was completed.

I went along with him and he soon took me to his home to stay with his wife and children. That house is this one, the one with the garage attached to it. Every day from dawn to dusk, they worked on car repair and maintenance and it caused so much racket, not to mention the overpowering and unpleasant smell of paint and motor oil. I'm so unhappy here. You youngsters might want to argue that the smell is not that bad. Well, it's not so bad today because the garage is closed as they have something to attend to. And that was why they left you mischievous kids with me, you see. Come to think about it, perhaps you kids are used to the smell of motor oil and engine so it does not bother you anymore, but I can't stand it, especially on a day when the garage is open. I don't understand why Thai's wife and kids are able to live in a place like this.

There were days that I left Thai's place and wandered into a grove of a next door neighbor and chatted with her. I told her that her grove was so pleasant and shady, and later I spent more and more time relaxing there. When Thai knew about it, he made it clear to me that he didn't like what I was doing. He also told me that he and the orchard

owner were engaged in a conflict and that I should stay home, not wandering here and there. Hearing that I was quite frustrated but I didn't argue back.

My time is drawing near and I could feel its presence more and more clearly. Having to live in a place I don't belong contributes to such a feeling.

One night about a month ago I had a dream about Siam. In the dream, he was standing in the mist looking confused and I heard him cry, "Mother! Mother! Where are you?" I said, "I'm here, son," but he didn't seem to hear or see me and he stumbled past me through the heavy mist. I awoke with a start and tried to get up but could not move the lower half my body as if a ghost was sitting on it. I cried out to let Thai know that my legs could feel nothing and he took me to see a doctor, who said my spine had pressed on a nerve causing my lower half to become paralyzed. I can only move the upper half of my body. Look at me, kids, what happens to me perfectly shows that a human body gradually deteriorates as time passes.

My soul is still within this body. It is an age-old soul yet it remains intact. Once it was under the earth then it emerged and lived in the gigantic Thlok tree before moving on to inhabit the body of a nāga, a tiger, a deer, a stone, and a human. The time for change has arrived once more. At first I was thinking about leaving this world permanently because my children have grown up and have their own lives. I don't have to worry about them and I don't want to be a burden to them. Actually, I'm now your burden, right? Your parents asked you to be here with me and look after me because they have a task to attend to, a task they don't want you kids to get involved with. Do you want to know what sort of task it is?

Last week I prayed to the higher beings to let me sleep and not waking up again, but once I fell asleep I had the dream about Siam getting lost in the mist and crying out for me again. That same afternoon, Thai told me that Siam fell unconscious while he was working and he was taken to a hospital but he hadn't regained consciousness yet. Upon receiving that news, I told Thai about my dream, which acted as a kind of premonition. My elder son is getting lost in another world and a mother cannot just sit still and do nothing. Right now your parents are trying to make Siam regain consciousness but it seems to me that they haven't been successful.

Knowing that my son is calling for my help from another world, I can't just find my own escape. I have to go there to help him. Even though I had been through all sorts of experiences and was able to understand their essence and let go of them, I can't let go of this matter. When her children encounter hardship, a mother cannot remain passive. So

I have to take a journey once more and it is now high time for it. I have to bring my son back to this world.

Do you youngsters want to help me? If you do, please get me my medicine, as it is now my medicine time. Please also grab that bundle on the Buddha shelf for me. I can't reach it because the shelf is too high. Yes, that's it. Do you remember what is in this bundle? It is the bundle of herbs given to me by the hermit before he left. Now please pour some water into this silver bowl for me. That's lovely. First, I will concentrate and set my heart on the pursuit of my son until I find him and bring him back to this world, then I will eat the hermit's herbs to end my life. I die in order to be born again in my true body.

Now kids, please go outside and enjoy yourselves out there. Let me sleep for a while before you come in here again, ok?

Sequel II: Dr. Siam's Adventure in the World of Conspiracy

Awake

Now that I know it was a dream, I feel so relieved and it is a kind of relief I have never experienced before. In my dream, things seemed alright in the beginning but then problems started. People demanded this and that from me, but because I was not a god, it was impossible for me to please everyone. I had no idea why they couldn't understand such a simple thing like that!

I remember that in the dream I was sitting on a big rock not far from the waterfall. The river was slightly greenish but clear enough to allow you to see mossy rocks and a school of small fish beneath the water. All were soon plunged down with the cascade that loudly crashed against the crevices of rocks and the surface of the river below. White bubbles were everywhere and circular waves expanded further and further. My face was moist and cool from the tiny drops of water caused by the cascade. The sunlight was lovely and I could see the rainbow that was formed because of the encounter between those fine drops of water and the sunlight. I was sitting on the big rock resting my legs and sunbathing. I felt rather cold as I had just jumped down from a cliff into the river below**.** The sun had turned my skin into a reddish brown complexion and, being naked, I could see goosebumps on my arms, chest, and thighs. It was freezing cold and I felt my dick shrink to the size of my pinky finger!

When I felt my skin dried up and my back burnt too much by the sun, I slowly got up and tried to balance myself on the slippery surface of a rock to prepare to have another go at jumping off into the river below. Last time I managed to complete three rounds of somersaults before touching the river surface, but this time I decided to dive straight down like those cool heroes in Hollywood films. I had explored the river below earlier and found that it was deep enough. When I was ready, I tried to catch the attention of my friends who were swimming in the river to tell them that I was about to dive down.

However, one of them yelled out to me that he came up with the idea about diving down first. Another friend then told me to find a more challenging technique to jump down. I was somewhat annoyed because that friend was trying to outdo me. I couldn't let him possibly do that as I regarded myself as the brain of our gang even though I might look smaller than them. As I was trying to come up with a better way to jump down, another friend (no one else but that bloody Somjai) suggested that I should spread my arms and legs then let myself fall facedown and crash against the surface of the river. He shouted out to ask whether I had the guts to do that. I was by no means intimidated by his suggestion, but what's the point of doing it, you bastard! Somjai then challenged me further, saying if I was too scared to do it, then I should just crawl down and he would do the daredevil stunt himself. Hearing Somjai's mocking words, other friends laughed out loud. I noticed that my younger brother was swimming back and forth near those friends of mine and he was looking at me. I couldn't tell whether he wanted to stop me from following through with Somjai's challenge or urge me to accept the challenge.

It would hurt a lot to crash into the river that way, but they would laugh at me if I refuse to accept the challenge. I heard those friends trying to put pressure on me to do it quick, and I told myself that I was tough enough. I would not let them laugh at me, so I decided to do it. I got myself ready and was about to jump down, but all of a sudden I noticed that another friend was creeping towards me from behind. I could tell that he wanted to push me down. What a moron! I was too quick for him though, as I was able to swerve away before he could touch me. I was so pleased that I could outwit him and I yelled You Idiot! at him to announce my victory. Unfortunately, my feet on the mossy rock lost their grip and I fell down before I could readjust my position. As I was falling down, I cursed my friends for causing me such a dilemma then braced myself against the stinging pain on my skin, which I could imagine even before I hit the river surface. I felt a sharp pang in my tummy and it immediately spread to my arms and legs.

I fell down so very slowly and I couldn't tell how much time had passed. There was no slow down in terms of speed but it was if I was falling through the thickness of boiled syrup. The air around seemed to compress against me and wrap me up inside some

sort of vacuum. I couldn't breathe and I got stuck there struggling fiercely to free myself and to pass through to the water surface. At that point I was no longer worried about the pain because I had prepared myself for it a while ago. I struggled harder against the surrounding air that appeared so thick and dense like a hardened syrup. I screamed before gathering my strength for the last time to free myself. Then I woke up from the nightmare about falling down….

Thank God it was just a dream! I have never felt this relieved before. Upon waking up from the nightmare, I sit upright in the bed and surveyed the unfamiliar surroundings. Darkness is slowly replaced by the dim light and I can see that I'm in a room in a log cabin in a resort. The room is quite lovely with its four walls made of logs and pink curtains drawn over all the three windows. To my relief, I notice that Dao is sleeping in bed next to me and she is in a deep sleep. I hope I didn't accidentally hit her while I was having the nightmare. Then I recall that I am on a holiday trip with Dao and I brought her to this place, which is my hometown, because I want to introduce her to my mother.

I'm wide awake so I get up and draw back the pink curtains to look at the scenery outside. I'm tempted by the fresh morning atmosphere to go out and investigate, but I don't want to disturb Dao. I know she has worked very hard and she needs a rest. I decide to leave the room and explore the place alone. All of a sudden, my childhood memories return to me and they bring back the old knowledge of my birthplace. I can now remember that this place once belonged to someone I know, and that in the past it was an agricultural area. I'm in a good mood and I continue walking until I get to the rice fields and groves that look so familiar. Shortly afterwards, I see a big fish pond and I remember that as a kid, I often came here to fish, usually for hours each time. I stroll further and come across a dirt road raised onto a high embankment with rice fields and houses on both sides. It feels so good to be walking in the middle of a road like this. It's like everyone's attention and admiration are focused on me!

I come across a house and in front of its front gate are two wooden chairs, on one of which is a brass bowl containing steamed rice. Placed next to the bowl are a ladle, food in plastic bags, candles, and incense sticks. Obviously, someone has got those things ready for almsgiving. The fragrance of freshly cooked rice mingles with that of the early morning mist. The paddy fields with only rice stumps left in them are covered with dew and when the sunbeams of the dawn emerge from the horizon, it is as if all the paddies are decorated by glittering morning stars. *Oh, my beloved girl, your name Dao is reminiscent of stars. I wonder if you have heard this story before: There was a lovely gentle girl who was so scared of the darkness of the night and so worried that her lover would not return to her in the morning as promised. She cried herself to sleep and her tears showered all over the fields. Her lover was lost in the middle of the jungle and was trying to find a way out. Fortunately, he was able to follow the traces of her tears and returned to her as promised.* My lovely Dao, I must return to you before the strong morning sun dries up your tears, otherwise you will blame your darling Siam (1) for not keeping his promise. (Without concrete evidence, you won't believe me.) I will ask you why you cried for me. But I know you are not a romantic girl and you don't know how to talk sweetly. Others may think you talk like someone with no manners, but I don't mind your way of talking one bit. I actually think it's really beautiful. I know you will say Hey, stop acting like you are a hero in a romance story. Hearing this, I will laugh. I laugh because I'm certain that you love me, despite the blunt way you talk to me. Oh, my dear, you are sending me your love so early in the day, this is what I will say to you. Most likely, your response will be: Don't be stupid! I will let you win though, and I won't mind a bit if you squeeze the skin near my nipple if it pleases you to do so. It hurts but it is a kind of pain that gives me pleasure as well.

I'm about to stroll further, but at that moment I hear someone calling me. When I turn to look, I see an old woman walking out of her front yard and yelling out to catch my attention. As she is walking through the front gate of her place to the roadside where she has placed her almsgiving stuff, she shouts out again and tries to beckon me over. But

I'm not that sure that she wants me to come over. All of a sudden, I see a monk heading towards me and I assume that the old woman was probably trying to get the monk's attention, not mine. I turn to look at her and give her a smile as a way to apologize to her that I got it wrong and only realized just then that she wasn't trying to beckon me. Then I continue with my walk.

I stop to show respect to the monk as I'm about to walk past him. He looks somewhat surprised and says to me:

"Where are you heading to?"

"I was just strolling, Father."

"No clear destination?"

"Not really, Father. I'm just in a mood to enjoy a morning walk."

"In that case, please come to see me at my temple once you are done with your walk, ok?"

"Oh, for what purpose Father?"

"There are people waiting for you there."

Waiting for me? Who are waiting for me? What the monk asks me to do is quite strange. The way he talks also betrays that something weird is going on and I start to feel worried. This is not good because a moment ago I was in a pleasant and relaxing mood but what the monk said starts to fill my heart with anxiety. I can't help blaming the monk for spoiling my mood by triggering my anxieties. I thought monks were meant to free people from their worries! And I can't think of anyone who might be waiting for me at his temple. What the heck are they expecting from me? This is all nonsensical!

Anyway, out of courtesy, I tell the monk I will do what he asks me to. Then I leave him. Come to think about it, I have been to temples quite often lately. Whenever I have time, I travel to temples all over the country to pay respect to the Lord Buddha, to make merit, and to organize all sorts of religious events that help temples get donations. I'm pretty sure that I have accumulated lots of merit that can protect me throughout this life and the next life. The only thing I haven't done yet is building a big Buddha statue. It

could be possible that the monk I just ran into might want me to help build a big Buddha statue for his temple.

I continue my walk and after a little while I come across a big crowd that immediately surrounds me. At first I'm rather shocked but then I notice that the crowd looks quite friendly and is in an exuberant mood. Some faces in the crowd also look quite familiar. Many of them want to shake hands with me and congratulate me about something. They say to me that they are my supporters and they feel so pleased that I have won the election. According to them, they have given me their votes and they hope that I will represent them and make use of my talents. They praise me for being a charismatic and well respected person and say they believe I will make sure that our community is provided with all sorts of facilities and infrastructure like waterways, highways, a proper sewage system, and a garbage disposal system. They are also convinced that I will build a playground for their kids, promote the O-Top village industry and ensure its successful marketing, and protect the community's traditional way of life and cultural heritage. They claim they can feel my awesome charisma, as they notice that my complexion has no blemish, a sure sign that my life is heading towards success and prosperity. I will rise in status and people will be eager to do what I command them to without me having to do a single thing. They go on about how I will be invited to preside over important events, to drink expensive wines, and to join field seminars that provide me with special allowances, souvenirs, and tea money. Business people will have to seek permission and offer me bribes and gift vouchers that allow me to fly to a casino in Poipet with my personal secretary. Or they might give me a plane ticket that allows me and Dao to fly first class to Hong Kong to go shopping and stay at a five-star hotel. And the list goes on... But wait! This is not quite right. This sort of thing is corruption in disguise and it is obviously not done in accordance with laws and good governance. It won't lead our country anywhere!

Well, you see, I can't accept those things you want to offer me. I know that you are real excited and happy. In fact, your excitement and happiness have overwhelmed me and they are getting too much for me. Could you please tell me what exactly is going on?

I'm really overwhelmed by the warmth and enthusiasm you welcome me with, but please kindly explain to me what is going on.

Someone steps out from the crowd and I recognize him and his position. He is the Deputy Chief Administrator of the Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO). He says, Congratulations Dr. Siam. You have been elected Chief Executive of the Sub-district Administrative Organization with overwhelming votes. If you continue your good job and devote your time and energy for the people, I bet soon enough you will be elected Chief Executive of the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO). When more and more people get to know you, they will want you to be their MP. See, it's not true to say that it is too late for people in their 50s to live their lives. For politicians, this is just the starting point of their lives.

The Deputy Chief Administrator of the SAO then whispers to me in jest: Right now you can just work for a political party, trying to solicit votes for their MPs, and later there will be people working for you. In the past when we did things that benefited others, no one seemed to notice us, but this is really a good opportunity for us to devote ourselves for society's good and we won't be ignored anymore. I tell him I agree with him as I believe we are at an age when we deserve such recognition.

"There is one more thing, though." The Deputy Chief Administrator of the SAO stops me before I could say anything further. "Nothing is official until after you show up at the Ministry to formally accept the position. Right now you are just the acting Chief Executive of the SAO and you need to follow through with the procedure to get the approval from the higher-ups before you are officially recognized as the Chief Executive of the SAO."

I say to him, Can you explain to me the steps involved?

"Firstly, you have to show up at the Ministry of Interior to let them know that you accept the position." He said.

I hesitate. All of a sudden I start to have concerns because I'm not sure whether accepting this position will create another worry for me. But before I can figure out the

answer for myself, the Deputy Chief Administrator of the SAO eggs me on; “You’d better rush to the Ministry. Don’t waste a minute. ”

Things happen so fast. First, the crowd’s overwhelming support and expectations, then the Deputy Chief Administrator’s urging that I show up at the Ministry as soon as possible, and my emergence in the near future as Chief Executive of the SAO, the position that will make people close to me and the general public view me with respect. But then a small worry enters my head and makes me ask this rather dumb question:

“Will it take much time to complete the procedure at the Ministry?”

“Not at all.” The Deputy Chief Administrator replies with a gesture implying that my question is totally unnecessary.

I indicate to them that I will head off to the Ministry and the crowd cheers me on. I secretly hope that that this approval process will be over quickly, before the strong sun dries up the dews covering the rice stumps in those paddy fields.

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(1) Things happened so fast, even though in a rather straightforward manner. One day someone I knew suddenly collapsed then lay unconscious and half-paralyzed in an ICU for almost two months before he passed away.

This guy, whose name was Siam, was just one among the many whose lives could be described in just a single paragraph. In fact, some of those people did not even get to have a paragraph that captures their lives. Anyway, about this guy, he couldn’t really expect more than a paragraph. He was simply someone who led a pathetic life that deteriorated further and further and then one day he fell flat to the ground, never to get up again.

“If you want to write a book that becomes a best-seller, you have to write about my life, young man.” That was what he told me about three years back.

I smiled an embarrassing smile. He was clearly that type who believed that his life was so important, and as soon as he knew that I was a writer, he offered his life to be the material for my writing.

“You are kidding me, I know.” I said. He laughed out loud while raising his liquor glass to clink with mine. “I think you should write about it yourself.” I said to him with the utmost sincerity.

That is actually my conviction. I never write about others' lives simply because they have related to me their life experiences, no matter how interesting they are. To me, stories that come to me this way are like bone structure without flesh and blood. More importantly, they are without capillaries, lymph, or hidden cancerous cells—I believe it is necessary to empathize and sympathize with the perspective of a particular narrative, and that mere access to what is intentionally revealed or narrated is not enough.

I can't really explain these things to Dr. Siam because he would pretend that he understood them all. He claimed that he understood everything, for example, when I told him that I was a writer, he assumed that I was a ghost writer. Perhaps he didn't mean to look down on me (but I felt that he looked down on me anyway) and simply wanted to show that he had more knowledge than ordinary folk. He did this by indicating that he could associate the meaning of writer with that of ghost writer, something he believed ordinary folk couldn't. He wanted to show off that he knew what ghost writer means—that ghost writers are those who write about the lives of actors, actresses and singers and published them as pocket books. He believed ordinary folk assumed that those superstars wrote those books about their own lives by themselves. That must have been why he gave me a wink to show that he understood what I was talking about, and later offered his life as the material for what he claimed would be my best-selling book.

Based on the implication of such an offer, he probably believed he was helping me out.

He might not intend to look down on me (but no matter what his attention was, I did feel that he looked down on me).

That was why I said to him that he was acting like a doc(g) teasing a rooster.

I don't think what I said was rude. I even explained further that he should write about his own life himself. He referred to himself as Dr. Siam, but who knows whether he was a real doctor or not. I myself have doubts!

Mr. Siam Duangsuk was a 57- year- old man about 159 cm tall, who claimed that he was a doctor. He had freckled reddish brown skin. He became part of our family, but we weren't exactly sure what role he occupied in our family—as my mother's friend, partner in life, or lover? One day around 2.05 p.m., he was quite busy giving the patients at his clinic health check-ups and hadn't even had his breakfast yet. As he was checking on his last patient, he hoped that he could have a break for lunch soon. There were also many other things for him to sort out, unfinished stuff from yesterday, last week, last month and last year. They caused him worries and each of

them had to be sorted out one by one and little by little. But isn't it good to know that while you are having a lunch break, things you have to deal with, such as concerns, obligations, and other stuff that need to be fixed, are awaiting you? While having your lunch you are also slowly chewing on those obligations and sighing, but after finishing your lunch, you will be dealing with them, or perhaps, have a quick nap before dealing with them. We need to thank life for supplying us with obligations and concerns, and thank it even more for providing us with the ability to handle them. We could also say that concerns and worries give us certainty in life. However, in Doctor Siam's case, he didn't even have a chance to have his first meal of the day, to slowly chew on his obligations and concerns, or sigh, when all of a sudden he lost consciousness and collapsed. His head hit the tiles and since then he could no longer move.

My dear doctor Siam, I'm now writing about your life. Would a paragraph suffice for his life? During those two months of his final stage in life, he was transformed from a person who always moved here and there briskly into someone lost in a state of unconsciousness and complete stillness. His transformation has triggered a change in me, causing me to abandon some of my former convictions...and I'm no longer fixated in my views.

OK, yes, the truth is I'm his ghost writer!

Discovering

Does the maturity of the soul correspond with age? I believe that they are related, but as parallel lines—each runs alongside the other, but refuses to acknowledge each other. Why do I put it this way? It is because I can feel the maturity of my soul but I have chosen to forget my age. Most people who have seen and experienced a lot are similar to me in that we want people to remember our intelligence and abilities, not our bloody age!

Life is strange (Talking about life fills me with enthusiasm!), strange because changes happen all the time as we live our lives. Because no one can escape changes, it may sound like all human lives belong to the same fixed formula. The truth is everyone is unique in their own way.

Humans were born with the sense of lack. When we are young, we often cry out to demand all sorts of things. We want food, want to possess and accumulate stuff, and want to study and learn things. Then when we reach a certain age, we start to want things that could fulfill us ideologically, idealistically, and spiritually. At this point in life, we may have everything our body needs, but our soul begins to get hungry and wants to devour everything. It gulps down all sorts of stuff, good and bad, unhappy and happy, black and white etc. etc. Our soul's ability to eat up everything is so amazing, forceful and unstoppable. After a while, however, we begin to feel full and our appetite diminishes. Our body and soul enter a slow stage of digesting, reviewing and analyzing. The next stage of life is what can be called a stage of giving and contributing. What happens is we need to release what we have ingested and accumulated throughout our younger years. By now we would be in our middle age and what we release (Not our body waste mind you!) would be the best of the best extract (like first-rate quality nutrients or wines). Once we have reached this stage in life, we would be very eager to do things for others; most people who have family would want to do whatever they can for their wives, kids, and parents. However, there are also some people who want to help those they don't even know because they believe that their contribution is meant to benefit everyone and

become accessible to all humanity so that it could link all of them together, no matter whether they know one another or not.

I myself have reached this stage in life and I can feel my strong passion to help others.

Doing things for oneself and one's own family is good, but it is a much greater deed to help other people as well.

Do you want to ask me what I can do for others, for humanity, for people in this country? What I want to do is to point out to them the deformity of the whole system, of mainstream attitude, outlook and way of life that is shaped and influenced by the preaching that the people are always under something and they have to be forever grateful for that thing and try their best to show their gratefulness. This kind of indoctrination and oppression makes it hard for people to achieve a quality life. They will love the security and comfort the system rewards them when they act obedient. As long as they adhere to established rules or norms, the system would make sure that they are rewarded, and this will help build up their trust in the system. However, if one day they start to question the system, the system will claim that they have already benefited from the system as it is—that they are now part of the patronage system, and because of this, they have no right to argue back or protest. If they still insist on raising questions about the system, the system will hand them over to other people in the system and let them deal with the matter. A mob will be organized to defeat and destroy those who dare to question the system. Their destruction is engineered by the system and takes place within the system. They will be branded, not as outsiders or outcasts, but as the ungrateful ones who deserve to be destroyed.

How does such a mechanism affect people's quality of life? It will discourage people from thinking outside the box or challenging the system. There will be no room for creativity and new ideas to emerge. Instead, what is strengthened is age-old tradition and norms, and this is best exemplified by what happens in the bureaucratic system. In this system, time passes so slowly like an inert electric current, and there appears to be no shortcut or bypass. Shortcuts or bypasses are seen as giving way to corruption. Within the

solemn Parthenon of bureaucracy, there is a common path meant for ordinary folk who are obliged to go through all required steps. But the funny thing is that there actually exists another path for businessmen who discreetly exert control over the bureaucratic system. This path is not known to ordinary people, who believe that bureaucracy strictly adheres to rules and regulations. Most people are not aware that the bureaucratic Parthenon has a special path for powerful business people, no different from a path through a building created by white ants.

For those who know something about this path (and there are more and more people like this these days), many of them see it as an opportunity, as something special, as a privilege that few people have access to. They believe that those who could access it are more privileged than others. Thus, the bureaucratic system creates privileges, whether intentionally or not, and people try hard to get to this secret path. Those who are somehow able to access it will feel that they are more special than others, but others who can't and can only watch others access it (there are so many of those people) would complain bitterly out of jealousy. Jealousy dominates the minds and hearts of people in this country, and if there appears a tall poppy among them, they would jealously say "What a smartass!" They will also assume that that type of person must have used the Path of White Ants for sure (They would say: That sort of person would never do anything in a transparent manner! Such assumption happens because they rely on their warped system to judge others, even though the ones they pass such a judgement on may have been highly recognized internationally and most get recognized and find their success abroad.) They would also say: "Go live abroad then. Why bother coming back to Thailand?"

You see, people in this country are full of jealousy, not by nature, but because they have been moulded and shaped until jealousy has become an intrinsic part of their nature. By what? What else but the system!

For those who want to access the Path of White Ants, to have privilege over others, and in the end manage to get what they want, why don't they point out to others that bypass is also meant for ordinary people and that it can replace the traditional path? Why don't they make the Path of White Ants common property for everyone instead of reserving it for themselves and their cronies?

Instead, they try to create the impression that laws and regulations are sacred and cannot be changed (for ordinary folk without privilege and access to the Path of White Ants). However, the truth is they are the ones who have been chewing and feeding on those laws and regulations until they are full of holes. They have played tricks with legal texts and come up with their own versions of interpretations and enforcement that serve their vested interests, and they try hard to make ordinary people intimidated by the sacredness of the legal system.

When I was a university student, I learned that laws have to be enforced by the people and, for this reason, they have to be drafted, adjusted or changed by the people. Laws that do not come from the people are not legitimate and should not be enforced. But ordinary people are not aware of this fact and this ignorance leads to their subjugation. Ordinary folk are meant to be the one in control of the power that helps determine the direction of their own country in a way that reflects the legitimation of the rule by majority. The people have to assert their right and freedom to use laws and to claim them as their own. They must not be intimidated by laws.

I'm really concerned about this issue. Let me relate to you relevant personal experiences from the two phases of my life.

When I was a university student, I had a part-time job, and in those days, I lived near a temple in the Klong Tom area. Every day after class, I walked through small alleys in that area and I could feel the exotic charm of it. So many damaged things were sent to this area, virtually all sorts of stuff that needed to be fixed, and once there, they would be pulled apart; the damaged bits would be fixed, but those beyond repair would be thrown away. There were also other bits that would be kept as spare parts, and this was often what happened to mechanical and electronic parts. When a car was badly damaged from a crash, the owner might feel that the wreckage is useless but for people in the Klong Tom community, it is like a treasure. The car might have been wrecked, but its components, like windscreen wipers, bumper bar, steering wheel, screws, or some parts of the engine, might still be new and usable. There is the overall damage, but once some components are salvaged from the wreckage, each component might look brand-new when standing on its own. We could say that the people of the Klong Tom community are the true surgeons of vehicles as they operate on and heal vehicle parts to make them usable again. They can also be considered the working class shamans as most of them have learned how to miraculously maximize the benefits of the parts salvaged from wreckage.

I was really keen on this form of expertise, and after frequenting the Klong Tom area for a while on my way to and back from the university, I asked to be their apprentice. I learned so much from those surgeons of the vehicles and electronic devices. I knew how to salvage useful bits from damaged vehicles and devices in order to make money from them. As time passed, I became more skillful and I could build amazing innovations from assembling this and that bit together, for example, a remote control that works with television sets of all makes. Later on, I was able to decode and create a cable box. Thus, I was able to develop a kind of expertise that is ingenious and impressive. Fantastic, isn't it?

This kind of expertise is accessible to the working class and is so useful to them. We could say that it injects the life force into them. This form of expertise protects them against being taken advantage of by big businesses, and it is not monopolized by private business owners. However, later on our community was maliciously attacked. We were blamed for conducting unlawful and unscrupulous business operations, and companies that stood to lose from our gains accused our community of being the den of thieves and not respecting the copyright of their products. They also blamed us for not abiding by laws. Those companies tried to convince the likes of them to despise us and to see us as selfish, unethical, and eager to take advantage of them. (Who is really taking advantage of whom? It is you educated middle-class folk who take advantage of us. Let me explain to you what really happened. Those companies had paid a huge amount of money to have the copyrights of their products legally recognized. Some of that money becomes part of the tax money the government spends for public good, and the government tells you that that tax money is from you middle-class people's clean money. This makes you feel entitled to claim that the country is functioning properly because of your money, that you are the ones who help build up the country. And you blame working class people like us for being part of the force that destroys the country, accusing us of not contributing anything to the country. The government has misled you to believe that way). However, the truth is we all have to pay taxes and thus we all contribute something to the country.

What is also odd is that when you eat a restaurant, you don't complain at all that you have to shoulder both the VAT and surcharges. What if a roadside food stall owner wants to add 17% extra on top of what you have to pay for food, and claims that that 17% is for taxes? I'm sure you will make a big deal out of this, accusing us of trying to take advantage of you. But we know that we are just small people and to demand extra money from you is impossible. (I bet you would not let us have that 17% for sure). No way you would give in and you would make a big fuss, like what you do with counterfeit satellites and cable boxes…

Counterfeit, fake, illegal, unscrupulous—those are the words those people who see themselves as above us use to describe our business activities and enterprises. They claim that the country gets more taxes from them than from us. However, whenever, they are allowed to pay less, they won't say a word?

My advice to all those roadside stall owners is this: they should demand that their clients pay both the VAT and surcharges, 17% of the normal prices! Our waiters and waitress are foreigners too (even though you refer to them as aliens) and our chiefs prepare the cuisines that are truly part of their roots and origins.(They didn't just take a few cooking courses overseas, so when you eat the food they cook, it is like you have been indulged with their mothers' home-made cuisines. Also, when you eat at a roadside stall, you can enjoy the real folk culture (not the staged one). Our world is a genuine one but it has been labelled as fake.

They say all sorts of things that make our world look bad. A cheaper world like ours is seen as dirty and full of greed and deceitful stuff. They emphasize that our world is unlawful and unethical, and, more often than not, they drag in superstitions to help justify their claim. That stuff is counterfeit and unlawful so they must be evil! The owners of those spare parts are already dead and their ghosts might still be possessive of them and don't want anyone to have them. You people stole them and did all sorts of stuff to get hold of them. Beware of the spirits' wrath! They might hunt you down in pursuit of those things you stole from them. They might do things that terrify you and shake you to the core! But what about you affluent folk? You seem to have no qualms about lazing around and spending nights at a luxurious hotel that showcases antiques like 100-year-old teak from a rural village, the head of a Tawarawadee Buddha image from an ancient age, an Ayutthaya sword (Rumor has it that the sword had tasted the blood of so many of its owner's enemies), an age-old centerpiece, and cushion from the early Bangkok era. Still, you sleep well in the air-conditioned hotel room, not disturbed one bit by the fury of the spirits whose possessions have been stolen from them.

Two handbags made by cheap labor of the same factory in China could be seen differently if one goes through the 'proper' selling process and the other goes through back door selling. The latter would have 'revengeful ghosts' following it all the time, and the one buying it would be haunted by the ghosts of taxes and laws who would make sure that the buyer feels ashamed and guilty. The irony is that no one gives a dam about the Chinese cheap labor. Who knows, the company that oversees the production of those handbags might have been forced by the government of that country to increase the worker's wages. However, because it didn't want to do that, it decided to relocate its

production base to China in search of cheap labor. Still the prices of those handbags keep increasing and fluctuating in line with the change in international currencies. Well, we have the ghost of taxes and the ghost of international laws, but what about the ghost of cheap labor? The latter does not seem to exist!

The other thing that bothers me is their condescending attitude. They claim that our Klong Tom community lacks creativity! They said the community is typically Thai in that it is lacking in originality and it is only good at imitating or copying others and operating underground. I think this accusation is absolutely groundless.

As far as I'm concerned, the Klong Tom community is by no means lacking in originality. The community embodies the genuine 'Thainess' that all Thais should be proud of. This is somewhat similar to our attitude towards English. In the past, we admired those who could speak English with a British or American accent, but this should not be the case nowadays. Where is our identity if we speak a foreign language without keeping our own accent? I don't understand why Thai people are ashamed of speaking English with a Thai accent but don't mind those TV hosts who put on a weird and pretentious accent when speaking English. Some TV hosts are a disgrace because they can neither speak English nor Thai clearly, making it impossible to tell what nationality they belong to!

Why don't we follow the example set by Indians? They make speaking English with an Indian accent widely acceptable. This is the showcase of language use that incorporates local color. Working class people like us insist on speaking English with a Thai accent, like the English used by taxi drivers, peddlers, stall owners, and bar girls. We have to make English with a Thai accent widespread and widely recognized. This kind of English belongs to us, the majority of this society, who have been oppressed for so long by those who belong to the upper classes (2). Those upper class Thais try to imitate the native speakers' accent but they don't know that our accent is admired by the native speakers, who want to get to know us. They also know who are trying to imitate them and I don't think they are impressed by that.

Is there anyone who is still ashamed of speaking English with a Thai accent but not ashamed of imitating the western way unthinkingly? And may I ask who do you think will be better recognized in the end?

For those who are following the lead of the west, you accuse us of producing fake commodities that do not really look like the real ones. However, you don't know that we

don't want to imitate anyone and our real intention is to produce things that we can use, for our own people. And you label us as lacking in originality, as unskilled copycats (unlike you who belong to another class of copycats who can imitate others skillfully, naturally and legitimately).

Just try to look at things from our perspective and you will agree with me, although this realization will shock you. Be warned!

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(2) Years back, around 6.30 pm, my mother returned home accompanied by a man I had never met before.

He was not tall and was rather plump. On that day he wore a light green long sleeve shirt tucked into his black slacks. He also wore a black leather belt and carried two mobile phones around his waist. The pockets of his shirts and slacks were fully packed with all sorts of things—a pair of glasses, folded pieces of paper, candies, coins, and banknotes that were only half tucked in, etc. All his pockets looked full and disorganized just like his disorganized and restless personality. He carried lots of plastic bags containing food in both hands. To be honest, the first time I saw him, he looked like a salesman who was trying to sell junk.

My mother introduced him to me and told me that he was a doctor and was her 'business partner'. I'm not sure whether my brothers would be suspecting that he was more than her business partner, but I was convinced that their relationship was not merely what she had described. I also believe that if my elder brother had seen this guy, he would be able to tell that he was my mother's new lover. However, my elder brother did not live with us, as he was in Bangkok, and Maitree, my youngest brother, was in jail. Therefore, they didn't know what was going on within our family here.

My mother walked into the kitchen to transfer the food in the plastic bags into small bowls, leaving me and Dr. Siam to get to know each other a bit more.

"Please take a seat." I told him while passing him a glass of Regency brandy.

I don't like liquor but I like to drink wine, and, on some occasions, stout. On that day I was in a mood to celebrate because my housing loan was just approved by the bank, so I decided to drink stout after opening my wine bottle while waiting for the wine to be ready.

As soon as he sat down, Dr. Siam started to chat away. He said it was cool that I loved to drink stout and added that a can of stout a day was good for health, especially for one's blood

circulation and heart functioning. At first, what he said seemed sensible enough but as he went on and on, I found what he said doubtful:

He said: "All types of German beer are good and German people drink beer every day to enhance heart functioning. When I lived in Germany, I noticed that people there really love stout." Then he looked at me as if to seek agreement. "The Germans love beer while the French love wine!"

Next he picked up the beer bottle and grabbed his glasses from his shirt pocket (causing a 100 baht banknote to fall off from his pocket, but he pretended not to notice it.) He put on his glasses, concentrated on the beer label, and exclaimed:

"Guinness is an excellent German beer."

He really made a fool of himself! Then he put the beer can down and grabbed the wine bottle I had opened.

"Wow! This wine is the first-rate Cabinet wine from France!"

Another mistake! He didn't even know how to pronounce the name of that wine correctly.

Did he think he was talking about a cabinet? It is Cabernet—Cabernet Sauvignon, not cabinet! And my wine is from Australia, not France.

He soon focused his attention on my stout once more. "Do you know why stout is good for health? It's the black color that is key to good health. The black color comes from Brand Chicken Soup."

How nonsensical is that! Who would be dumb enough to believe what he has just said? Is this guy really a doctor?

Let me tell you that I'm not the type that enjoys finding faults in others. I know that he was trying to be friendly but his last comment about black beer and Brand Chicken Soup was just so stupid that I stared him out to let him know that this kind of idiotic joke was not appreciated. If he wanted to act like an idiot, do it elsewhere, but I won't tolerate it here! That was my message to him. He seemed to get it and looked a little embarrassed, but then he laughed and continued chattering. For some reason, he really annoyed me.

I didn't despise him or look down on him, but there was something in his personality that could irritate others or make them feel ill at ease or annoyed. He was like a fly or a small insect that hovers around annoying people. Still he was my mother's new lover, so I had to give him some respect and refrain myself from making him lose face.

From that day on, Dr. Siam visited us almost every week and he continued doing so for years. He liked to cook for us and joined us for dinner and a drink afterwards. After Maitree left prison and was back at home, mum initially warned him not to drink too much, but Dr. Siam tried to curry favor with Maitree by saying to mum: "If this young man wants to have a drink, don't you think it's better to let him drink at home so that we can keep an eye on him, dear?"

He could chat with Maitree for hours on end about all sorts of stuff he had experienced and outdoor activities. The two of them seemed to share a lot in common. They liked going camping, sleeping in a tent, fishing—all those hobbies that macho men enjoy. A year and a half after they got to know each other, they often went camping together. The two of them also went to the beach to have a drink by the seaside, or had a night out hanging around a pub or karaoke bar together.

In this way Dr. Siam was able to befriend Maitree and he seemed to know what Maitree wanted. He treated Maitree as if he was the latter's friend or big brother, actually almost like he was Maitree's father. The similarity between these two was quite striking. They both liked to challenge the other to drink up a whole bottle of liquor. They also liked rough play, sharing obscene jokes, and getting drunk together almost every week.

In those days when Dr. Siam was our family's frequent guest, he had described to us so many of his 'talents' until we lost count of them. He recounted the things he had experienced in life as if there were hundreds or thousands of individuals in him. There was nothing in this world that he was not aware of, not a single experience that he had not encountered before, and he could amazingly appear in more than one place at the same time. According to him, he could also create a remote control that worked with all types of electrical appliances, he knew who would be the next prime minister, and what percentage of the world's forested land is left. He knew about a scandalous affair of a certain superstar, and the details about the finale of a TV drama currently on. Afterwards, he demonstrated his skill in predicting people's fortune from reading their palms. He read mum's palm and told her that from now on her life would be increasingly successful and prosperous because she had a patron sitting in the middle of her palm.

I said: "Where is the patron you said was sitting in the middle of her palm? I can't see any?"

He responded by saying it was just a metaphor, then placed my mum's hand on the floor and shifted his bum to sit on it.

"Stop acting silly like that!" Mum said to him. She looked embarrassed and

pleased at the same time, but I felt somewhat uneasy.

Still I couldn't deny that having him with all his eccentricities in our once desolate home made it more lively. For some reason, my mother became much happier and she believed everything Dr. Siam told her. When stem cell treatment was in trend, Mum became his first guinea pig to experiment with this treatment. He took some of her blood, put it in a tube and left it for a few days to allow it to sediment. He claimed that he would send that tube of mum's blood to Germany where it would go through the process of transforming cells into medicine. According to him, he later injected that medicine back into mum's body and it miraculously healed her. My mother went along, saying she felt really good and could walk briskly, and that all the pain in her bones and joints was gone. There was no proof of this of course, and she could have imagined it all herself.

One evening I stopped by and found my mother and Dr. Siam having a drink together like usual. I sat down to join them. I felt unwell as my whole back was in pain. Lately, I had been working overtime, and too much work finally got me. As I was drinking with them I could feel a sharp pain around my spine and occasionally I couldn't help crying out in pain. Seeing that, Dr. Siam asked me to lie face down and he started to give me a massage to reduce the tension in my back muscles. His hands were firm and forceful and the massage gave me a pleasurable sort of pain. Then he asked me to sit cross-legged and lifted both arms up. All of a sudden, he pulled my hands forcefully and I could hear every bit of my spinal cord cracking, then a sense of relief flooded through me and all my pain was gone.

"Oh," I murmured and thanked him "You are a real chiropractor!"

"No, I'm more than that, young man" He said. "The massage I gave you was Wat Po Temple's authentic Thai massage. Those chiropractors of yours have to fly all the way from their home countries to the temple to learn how to master this massage skill."

(The above view belongs to Chidchai)

Going on a Quest

Let me recount to you something that bothered me during the second phase of my life (I almost forgot about it!) It started when I returned home from abroad and shifted my attention to modern medical science. But let me tell you that I always take things seriously and whenever I set my heart on learning something, I will pursue it until I get to its core. I don't let it bother me what others say about me that I never get serious about anything and never accomplish anything.

Our world is full of exciting stuff that can teach us so many things so I don't think it makes sense if we spend our life time learning only one particular science and developing only one type of skill. Doing so means we don't live life to its full. And do you know who benefits from it when people don't live life to its full? The state benefits from it because it doesn't want people to relocate or change job as often as they like. The state wants us to settle in one place and move nowhere so that political and social stability can be maintained.

It's hard to explain this sort of thing to others. When I tried to do so, they accused me of letting my imagination get the better of me and getting all sorts of things mixed up. I once tried to explain it to Thai (3), my own brother, but he looked bored as soon as I started. I also attempted to broach the subject to my friend Somjai (4), but he acted like I was forcing him to take bitter pills. In fact, these two have no faith in what I try to do, or to be more correct, they have no faith in my whole being. The irony is that even though they obviously have no faith in me, deep down they still want to benefit from my business enterprises, even though they see them as risky. I bet they want to share my success despite the fact that they see me as a good- for- nothing type.

Our world has been drastically transformed and our attention span has become much shorter, unlike in my mum's time. So many new things are emerging here and there and they all compete for public attention, even if for just a little while. The time when a

movie could capture public interest for over a year is over. It is no longer possible to sell over a million copies of one music album. Everyone can compete for public attention, but only for a just a few minutes each. We now measure time by minutes, not by months, years, or decades.

Our life span has also become shorter. I have to admit that I personally contributed to people's inertia and poor health. Remember the all-in- one remote control I invented? It is a device that makes life convenient but most people do not have enough sense to know what is too much or too little for them. If they love comfort too much, they won't force their body to move. When body parts that need to move are left still and have to do the same sort of inactivity day in and day out, the result is poor health. Actually, I myself have this kind of health problem as well. Sitting still with hardly any movement leads to diseases and illnesses like muscle pain, pain in the bones or joints, indigestion, sleeplessness, too high level of cholesterol, problems with the functioning of lungs, liver, and kidneys, etc. etc. People's physical condition deteriorates because they hardly move around, and this is the main reason why people nowadays fall ill easily and their life span is much shorter than their ancestors. The world today moves faster, but instead of moving fast with the world, people sit still and only make use of their five senses. They are digging a hole for themselves!

A while back I went to Wat Pho (the Temple of the Reclining Buddha) to get a traditional Thai massage and it really worked magic with me. I felt so good after the massage and I was really impressed with this particular science of massaging that involves rehabilitation, healing and recuperation. The gist of this branch of science may appear simple, but it is actually quite sophisticated and profound. It deals with both the physical and mental health, making sure that both work in harmony to ensure good health. Good health leads to mental relaxation and positive thinking; all these ensure quality life. Do you see the connection of it all?

I went to that temple a few times to get a massage and later I decided to take a one-year massage course there. Upon finishing the course, I became an expert in this science, and it was the starting point of my keen interest in what lies within us. I investigated what is inside us, through the skin that protects us, and achieved a complete understanding of the intricate connection of muscles, bones, joint, tendons, and all the organs within us. The inside of a human body is amazing and it is the microcosm of the universe!

Concerning what I studied at university, I was a law student before I switched to studying medicine. I also learned stuff not offered by university. I was able to make a universal remote control, master the art and science of traditional Thai massage, and at the moment I'm studying Thai herbs. All these will pave way for my bright future. I also got to know that currently modern medical circles are really keen on the amazing stem cell treatment. To put it simply, this kind of treatment involves the extraction of our own cells in order to use them to cure us from illnesses. Our body consists of both the good and bad cells, or, to put it another way, the godly and the evil, and they have to defeat each other. Isn't this fascinating? It is like there is a universe within our body. My enthusiasm in this new body of knowledge triggered my decision to travel abroad to learn more about it. By now I have learned all about it and I'm back in Thailand, ready to impart and share this fantastic knowledge with my fellow countrymen!

Shortly after I was back, I said to Somjai: Mate, are you interested in investing in this business with me? This stem cell treatment is a great breakthrough of modern medical science.

Somjai has been my friend for years, and even though he didn't look that convinced and was somewhat uneasy, he agreed to jointly set up a business with me. Then that day came when I ran into Dao…*Oh my beloved Dao, the first time we met each other was still vivid in my mind, but let it remain a secret between the two of us*….It was in town that I saw her again. I asked how she was doing, as it had been over 20 years since the last time we met. She said she was doing okay and was spending most of her

time looking after her kids (even though by now all of them are big enough to look after themselves of course!). She said her husband had passed away. I was quite shocked to hear that and I asked when that was, but she simply said death was death, no point talking about it. Then she invited me to drop by at her place when I had time and I promised her I would.

And that was the beginning of the renewal of my close relationship with Dao. *She is such a sweet and gentle girl. All her life, no one has given her love, but all my love is for her.* I told her that she had been through a lot and I had something important to share with her. I let her know that she didn't have to immediately agree with me or believe in what I was about to tell her. All I asked was that she listened and thought it over.

To share the thing I had in mind with her, I firstly asked whether she had noticed any change in my physical appearance, for example, Do I look older? Not at all, right? Not a bit older than when we met over twenty years ago, right? And look at my hair. I still have thick black hair and haven't gone bald (like others who are bald). And I still have a clear and lovely complexion. (These freckles of mine are part of the natural aging process.) Why is it possible for me to maintain this youthful look? It is because the healing process within me, and what has triggered this process? Nothing else but my own cells! I use my own cells to help my body heal and to cure me from health problems. This kind of innovative treatment is the latest breakthrough in medical science, and it is much more advanced than the methods adopted in hospitals. So, you see, I heal myself using the extract of my own cells imported from Germany. It is the medical science of the future and it will make humans able to live over a hundred years!

A shot of this extract will immediately make you full of energy and liveliness. Right now my friend and I have opened a clinic, and most of my patients have received stem cell treatment and they all get much better because of it. My stem cells can cure all sorts of diseases and our patients often come back for regular treatment. Those who suffer from gout all get well. Their wrist and knee joints are no longer stiff and are in a

much better shape and can function well again. I also heard from relatives of the patients who have been paralyzed that they can move around again. So stem cell treatment is really effective against all sorts of diseases, including the chronic ones like migraine and anemia. Even those who are not ill can benefit from these cells as they enhance beauty and youthfulness. Just a shot will work wonders, helping women regain their firmness and miraculously improving their complexion. In short, these cells can make them look radiant. Another good thing about this kind of treatment is that it has advantage over other kinds of treatments that require patients to take pills or put on a cream, like what is advertised on TV. That sort of treatment only creates the outward appearance of good health. With stem cells treatment, cells are injected into your body and they trigger recuperation from within you. That's why you look radiant with health as both your physical and mental health are in perfect shape!

You may wonder why stem cell treatment is still relatively unknown if it is that fantastic. How come it is not adopted in hospitals? Why do my friend and I have to be quite discreet about the treatment we offer at our clinic? Well, your doubt is not unusual as most of my patients have the same doubt in the beginning. Let me explain to you. This kind of treatment is something really new and it originated in the West, in Switzerland, to be specific. Maybe you have heard that people in Switzerland live until a ripe old age and they hardly fall ill. Doctors in Germany are also interested in this treatment and they have made it more advanced. Right now it is extremely popular in the west and a few western countries have officially recognized it as really effective in battling diseases and ensuring good health.

If you talk to renowned doctors in our country, you will know that they all are aware of the effectiveness of this kind of treatment. The reason it has yet to become widely recognized in our country is because it is awaiting approval from the Thai medical council. Why hasn't the council issued the approval yet? I believe that even years later, stem cell treatment won't become standard practice, even though it has countless benefits and may have been officially recognized by medical councils worldwide by then. The

Thai medical council won't recognize the treatment because the parties involved, like doctors, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and the Health Ministry, cannot agree on how to split the pie. There is a huge amount of money involved and those people and organizations are more concerned about their own vested interests than the well-being of ordinary people. Now you know the whole story; they don't want to officially recognize the treatment because they haven't reached agreement about how each of them can get a share of the pie. This thing is not a secret among top doctors in the inner circle, and I'm one of them. I'm not interested in what I can get for myself and I'm only concerned about how to cure patients from their illnesses. Humans have to help one another, but most doctors nowadays are no longer faithful to the spirit of their profession. That's why I have to take a risk by making it possible for ordinary people to access stem cell treatment from my clinic. I also travel far and wide to offer this kind of treatment to the general public. It is quite risky for me to do this, but if asked whether it is necessary, the only answer I can give to myself is yes. Everyone should have the right to access basic healthcare service and all good doctors advocate this. You know what, some clinics and hospitals tried stem cell treatment but their doctors were arrested and those clinics and hospitals were closed down. Those doctors were not allowed to keep their practice license and were denounced, accused of illegally operating an underground medical practice, and branded as quack doctors. The truth is they did nothing wrong. They were unfairly condemned as doing something illegal and immoral. And it is all because the Thai medical council cannot agree on splitting a share of the pie to all involved, and thus is unable to issue the official recognition of stem cell treatment and legalize it.

In fact, this case is similar to what happens to street walkers and women who work in a massage parlor. What is the difference between these two groups of women? Both groups offer sexual service, right? However, street walkers are more likely to be arrested while doing their job, while women in a massage parlor have more protection. The same applies to casinos. Some countries legalize them while others treat them as illegal. How come? The difference can be explained. It is only when governments can extort money

from casinos that casinos are legalized! But maybe these examples make things appear too dark? Let me find a better example. Ok, let's put it this way. Suppose a factory produced two brands of fish sauce and both had gone through the same manufacturing process. However, the first brand was registered and was approved by the Food and Drug Administration, but the second brand wasn't registered or recognized by the organization. When both brands were assessed by the authorities concerned, the second one was labelled unsuitable for consumption, and the Food and Drug Administration might make it known that it was contaminated and had not been through a proper process. The other brand, on the other hand, was not found to have any problem. But as we know, both brands passed through the same manufacturing process. Now let me ask you this, what is the thing that determines which is fine and which is unsuitable? Neither the quality of the fish sauce nor the manufacturing process of the factory! Do you know what I mean?

That was how I explained things to Dao and she listened to me attentively and believed everything I said. She is different from others because she is the only one who believes in me, in my being, and it is from this complete trust she has in me that makes us become each other's life partner.

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(3) How could one trust a good for nothing type! He had better opportunities than me because the abbot gave him a chance to continue his studies in Bangkok. Unfortunately, his life is ruined by the glamour of the city. There is one thing that I found really odd about him. He studied all sorts of stuff but I wonder if he had completed any course at all. So far, I haven't seen any certificate or diploma of his. He likes to brag about ideas and stuff that are out of touch with reality. He also loves big words and often criticizes our social and political system. This country is already a democracy so perhaps his constant criticism of our political system meant that he wants a different one!

And it must be remembered that he was seen as an advocate of communism before and had to flee to the jungle. After being pardoned by the government, he didn't show any regret. I really don't know what he wants in life. He should have tried to get a decent job and a wife so that he

could settle down and stop fancying about this and that and causing trouble to others. As he is, he is a nuisance and even a danger to those who just want to be left in peace.

He can hardly stand on his own feet and often changes from one job to the next. No security in his life whatsoever. And he has the guts to blame the government, the justice system, and the army that protects our nation against enemies. He has no respect for anything. He should blame himself before pointing his finger at others or something else. I got to know many scandals about him from his friend Somjai, who often rings me to let me know what this brother of mine has been up to.

Once he stopped by at my house out of the blue. Actually, his real intention was to have some sort of clandestine meeting with the woman next door. He acted suspiciously and told me not to let mum know that he was around. He is a complete failure, you know, and I have no idea why mum still believes in him. He told me he wanted to go into politics to do things that helped the people and to correct what's wrong about the system. I laughed at him. Not that long ago, he attacked the system and politicians but now he wants to be part of it all. This shows that he is really a good- for-nothing type who has no firm stance. Anyway, it is good that he shows his true colors and he has no one to blame but himself for all the failure in his life.

(The above view belongs to Thai, Siam's brother)

(4) Siam is an ambitious type who often overestimates himself and likes to exaggerate things. He could make a big deal out of nothing and spin out all sorts of tall tales. We all know what sort of guy he is, but those who don't know him well enough might be duped by his rhetorical skill and eloquence. I don't really know what ideas he has put into Dao's head. Siam had disappeared for two years without contacting anyone before turning up again with another big idea and grand project. He told me in elaborate detail about his discovery of a so-called fantastic way to make one live a long life. I didn't believe him at first, but after listening to him for a while, I couldn't help agreeing that his discovery was quite interesting.

He told me that the beginning of the vast universe lay within us and if we wanted to understand the universe, we had to look at its blueprint, which was our body. This was how he put it: The complexity of the genes within us is the microcosm of the universe. When humans first originated, there were no medicines and they relied on herbs to help cure their illnesses. Modern medical science came much later, and as we know, the antibiotics widely used nowadays only prevent

the diseases from spreading and offer temporary relief and healing effects, but they can never get rid of diseases. As doctors, you and I both know this. Also, modern medical science and medicines have a lot to do with politics, power, and money, and how to cure people from illnesses is seen as a secondary concern. What I want to tell you is that our body has its immune system and it can heal itself. The real cure to illnesses and the key to long life exist within us.

Siam went on and on trying to convince me. He talked about all sorts of stuff, from the creation of humans and medicinal herbs before elaborating about the Buddha's era (He should be charged for blasphemy!) and shifting his narration back and forth between the ancient era and the past 50 years of our contemporary age. He talked about pious forest monks who lived in the jungle all their lives and were never troubled by illnesses. He said those monks were able to set the date of their death and exhibit after-death miracle as their bodies wouldn't decompose and could achieve a mummy-like state.

"The Lord Buddha was the one who discovered the secret I'm going to reveal to you soon. This secret became the guideline for all of his disciples to follow. The best blessing is to be free from all diseases, you know that, right?" Then he went on: "This secret, which, like I said before, was discovered by the Buddha himself, was even recorded in the sacred texts of Buddhism and monks are expected to abide by what it prescribes." He looked at me with a serious expression as if to emphasize that he has uncovered a wonderful secret. Then he said, "Drink a glass of your own piss every day and you will be free from all diseases."

I felt shocked and disgusted by such an absurd suggestion, but he immediately tried to dispel my disbelief by reasoning further:

New monks will be advised by their mentors that their obligations include the following: Doing their alms round, Wearing monk's robe, Residing under a tree, Drinking medicinal liquor mixed with their own urine

According to Siam, he had done a thorough research and found that western doctors who are interested in alternative medical practice are also advocating piss drinking. Also, countless reliable sources have claimed that piss drinking proves effective in combating illnesses. Drinking your own piss helps enhance the immune system and fix whatever deficiencies it may have. Piss drinking can also cure one from a cold, stomach ulcer, asthma, diabetes, cancer, and HIV-AIDS.

Siam also claimed that he had witnessed with his own eyes the marvelous improvement in people who had been unwell for so long and found modern medication totally useless. Those people

miraculously achieved perfect physical and mental health after drinking their own piss. Some of them had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and their doctor said they had no chance. However, after drinking their own piss for five years, they regained their health and were no longer troubled by any health issues. They are still alive and well ten years after being diagnosed with terminal stage cancer.

See! These are the outcomes of goodness and virtue. He said to me emphatically. Don't put on an incredulous expression like that. You think what I said was crazy? Don't you act like all these are nonsensical. He said, before continuing, When I said drinking piss, I mean drink your own piss, not others' and you have to drink it properly. You have to make sure you drink the middle of the piss flow, not the beginning or the end, which is full of toxic stuff. Your disbelief is common. People often showed disbelief the first time they heard about this, and in the beginning it is not easy to drink your own piss. You will get used to it though. The important thing is that you have to drink your own piss because our immune system works the best in healing us. This is the method that relies on your own cells to fix themselves.

"And are you drinking your own piss?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm." He said.

All of a sudden, I felt as if the smell of piss was coming out of his mouth.

After that, he disappeared for months and I got wind that he went to Bangkok to work as a taxi driver. People said he transformed his taxi into a mobile clinic. He tried to attract people's attention by pasting stickers advertising free health consultation on the outside of his taxi. When passengers got in the taxi, he chatted with them about all sorts of health problems before starting to talk about piss drinking as a way to cure illnesses. I'm not sure what he gained from doing this, but some said he simply did it for charity.

One day Siam returned to Kaeng Khoi and asked me to meet him at a pub. He looked rather depressed and full of worries. He said to me,

"I don't drink my piss anymore." I think I understood why he quit it. Then he said, "I have diabetes. It sucks."

I listened in sympathy and said "Why don't you open a clinic here like before? I can help."

So Siam opened his clinic again and borrowed my practice license to be pasted on a wall behind the counter of the clinic. I worked at the clinic about two days a week.

During that year, organic food and alternative and traditional medical practices became quite popular and I couldn't help giving him credit for always being ahead of others when new trends are concerned. It is almost like he has a sixth sense that tells him what the next craze will be. However, his problem is that when he starts to get serious about something, he can't do it well, compared to others.

Not long afterwards, Siam's sixth sense seemed to signal to him about another new trend. He asked me to help look after his clinic and spend more time working there. He said he was going overseas. He soon disappeared, and never showed up for years. When he was back in Kaeng Khoi after years abroad, he seemed to change a lot. He dressed and talked differently and his manners were not the same anymore. He socialized with new circles and started to drink wine and imported whiskey. He no longer shared his big plans with me and simply told me that he had found a new love and he was planning to set up a business with her and to spend their lives together. He said he had discovered a new medical practice, but he preferred not to tell me about it yet. He would wait till things settled down a bit more before giving me more details about it. And one day he brought Dao to the clinic and introduced her to me. When I first saw her, I felt that she looked very familiar but it was clear that she is the type I dislike and there is a big difference between us, the difference that can't be bridged. Siam became closer and closer to Dao and her folk and paid less and less attention to his old friends and relatives. He spent most of his time at Dao's place and was hardly home. He also left me to look after his clinic by myself. But then Dao gradually tried to exert control over the clinic and wanted to force me to do things her own way. I found this unacceptable and I told Siam about it.

I later got wind that Siam and Dao are having a joint business enterprise related to that new medical practice. Well, all I can say to them is good luck!

(The above view belongs to Somjai.)

Infiltrating

Change is the natural state of our world and those who don't want change are against the law of nature. I think everyone is well aware of this truth, although some may face it bravely while others are afraid to confront it. Change is people's frequent guest? They were once young but not anymore; isn't it a form of change? Our world is moved forward by time and this is another form of change.

Change is an intrinsic part of human life. Our physical appearance has to go through change and so do our mental being, thoughts, and ideals. I don't see change in humans as unusual. If a person has undergone a lot of change, it means that that person has lived his life to its full and he has taken immense risk in order to acquire valuable experiences. People who reject change are those who love a comfort zone and safety. This type of person tries their best to create permanence and they detest change because it does not fit in with their nature. Then they label change as being similar to uncertainty, inability to take things seriously, and lack of commitment. I have often been accused of having those negative traits.

People attack me for changing from being left-wing to right-wing, from being a communist to a capitalist, and they laugh at the way I have changed. It would please them if they witness my degradation and destruction. Also, they would be eager to denounce, mock, look down on, and ridicule me if it appears to them that I have betrayed the ideals I once cherished. They would even try to dehumanize me. But I have a question for those people: What about you guys? What is your identity? I think you have no identity whatsoever. Each and all of you are faceless, and what you believe in is nothing but a nail polisher that you used to scrub off your face so that you became similar to other members of your club. You made yourself faceless in exchange for your own safety and peace. You also did it because you believe it would help ensure a lasting changeless state.

I don't dislike people but their ideologies make me suspicious and full of doubts. Yet I still have compassion for the people and I haven't lost my faith in humanity.

I got attacked a lot when I let them know that I wanted to go into politics. People around me acted shocked. They said this is unbelievable! How could you become something you spent most of your younger years attacking? The younger you was

persecuted by it, but the older you wants to embrace it. What caused this change in you? I have seen you using an ox cart all along so how come you are driving a Mercedes Benz now? This is so unacceptable! Even an eco-car does not suit someone like you. I'm used to seeing you in rural areas, in rice paddies, why do you show up in a city?

Listen, I will compare politics with a vast chess board. The players comprise merely 0.5 % of the whole population but they could exert immense influence on our lives. However, we cannot control them at all. Through this chess board, control, supervision, orders, rules, regulations, and policies are issued and they affect millions of people in this country. The players claimed that they are entitled to a seat in parliament because they had won votes from the majority of the population. The irony is that when we demand change, they argue that the majority does not welcome that change. We were once the majority, but now they claim that we are in the minority, and they have made the majority something abstract. So what do those people you claim are the majority look like? The majority who hasn't cast votes, who belong to the opposite camp to ours, and who you often refer to, what do they look like? Oh, I forgot that each of them carry a nail polisher used to polish their face until they are faceless, and they are eager to make others faceless as well.

Listen, of course we can't deny that humans are social beings. It is true that I once attacked the system, but we have to admit that this system is all around us and we can't escape from it. Even if you flee to the jungle, there are rules and regulations there. So the important thing is that you have to understand the system and once you understand it, you can neither turn your back on it nor simply boast about how much you know about the system without taking any action. People will be sick of you if all you can do is to brag without doing anything. The crucial thing is that you have to take action to initiate change.

I admit that this realization only occurred to me after I have contemplated things for quite a while. However, what is more important is that I have been familiarizing myself with politics ever since I was a university student living in the Klong Tom community up until now when I open clinics and offer treatment to patients. All these have made me decide to get myself involved in politics in order to help make things better. I have mentioned before that within the Parthenon of bureaucracy, there is the Path of the White ants, and what I want to do is to make this path visible and accessible to everyone. My first step is getting rid of privileges, and the next one is creating equality for all. Most important of all, I want to ensure that people can access what they should be entitled to. These are the goals I have set for myself during this phase of my life.

Now this is my promise!

I will infiltrate the system and my strategy will be similar to the way I treat a patient (5). Like stem cells which are injected into the body to heal and cure it, I, as an individual unit of a society, will get into its system in order to heal and cure it. As the Lord Buddha once observed, to get to know this universe you don't have to know the whole jungle. It is enough to know just a handful of leaves because this amount of leaves is the microcosm of the jungle.

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(5) The first day the patient was admitted to the hospital, I gave him a thorough health checkup. After that, I informed the lady who brought the patient to the hospital that I had found a blockage in the patient's blood vessel that supplied blood to the brain. The blockage had caused difficulty in the blood flow and his blood vessel became swollen. This put a lot of pressure on the patient's brainstem. Obviously, the patient was in need of urgent treatment because if his condition was left the way it was, it could lead to other dangerous side effects. He was already suffering from the paralysis of the right side of his body and his chance of recovery was only about 50%.

However, I promised her that I would try my best. Still, it was important to consider whether his physical condition was good enough for the kind of treatment I wanted to give him. The other crucial thing was that I needed to give him the treatment immediately and the lady had to be informed about the treatment process.

Three days after receiving the treatment, the patient's condition didn't get better or worse. I informed the lady that it was necessary to give the patient high doses of injections so that it would dissolve the blockage that caused the brainstem to be under too much pressure. That was the thing I could do for the patient at that particular time. The patient's pupils were still dilated and we had to wait for a few days for the injections to dissolve the blockage before deciding what to do next. Unfortunately, I later discovered that the patient was also suffering from diabetes and problems related to his kidneys and liver. These ailments would tremendously affect the treatment, and the more the patient received those high doses of injections, the more damage it would do to the functioning of his inner organs. In short, the patient's overall health needed to be overhauled and I had to try to fix his health issues one by one. Like I said before, the first thing that had to be done was to dissolve the blockage that put pressure on the patient's brainstem and caused the failure of the nervous system that controlled the receptive ability and the functioning of body parts. The nervous system failure had brought about the paralysis of half of the patient's body. He

also had failed organs which were in need of treatment. I really hoped that the injections would successfully dissolve the blockage before the patient's organs failed to function.

I noticed that the lady looked displeased but it was to be expected. It seemed to me that she wanted to shout: What! I brought him to the hospital because he collapsed and lost consciousness. I want you to help him regain consciousness. Instead of that, you make a big deal about things I'm not interested in, like his heart and kidney problems and diabetes. Why don't you make him conscious first before fixing those health problems?

Of course, I understand the way she felt because most patients who came to the hospital all had complications. Although the thing that caused them to come to the hospital was a particular ailment that had reached its severest stage, there were also other health issues involved. As a doctor, the ailment that triggered a patient's hospital trip was merely a starting point because when I examined what was going on with the patient, I usually found that there was a complicated web of many physical issues that culminated in the ailment that made it necessary for the patient to require hospital treatment. Because of this, sometimes I had to say to them:

"How could the patient allow his inner organs to become so damaged like this? The damage was so extensive so you will have to prepare for the worst." Nonetheless, I also tried to cheer them up a little by saying: "But don't worry too much. We promise that we will provide the patient with the best treatment even though things are not very hopeful."

I also explained to them that even though some patients were unconscious and unresponsive, regular visits and loving touch from the patients' loved ones were essential. The patients could feel them, despite the fact that they could not respond.

Still I let those close to the patients know that there might be cases in which the patients display some physical responses, such as nodding, squeezing their loved ones' hands back, or even having tears in their eyes. In such cases, people close to the patients should not make too much out of those responses, as they were merely automatic physical reactions or a release of body substances.

For this particular case, I noticed that the lady who brought the patient to the hospital was already starting to look for other alternatives for him, something that often happens actually. I know that there are many people who rely on modern medicines but also seek help from traditional medicines, monks, spirits, meditation, merit-making, vegetarian diet, and many more, depending on what people deem most helpful. Generally, I let those close to the patients do what they want so as

to give them some peace of mind. I have to admit, however, that sometimes they do not give me enough credit for what I have done for the patients. When the patients fail to recover, those close to them tend to blame my treatment without thinking about the complications they themselves have contributed to due to their interferences. However, if the patients become better or finally get well, they tend to give credit to other alternatives they sought for the patients, as if I play no part in the patient's recovery.

A week later, I had to inform the lady that what I feared from the beginning had happened. The high dose of injections I gave the patient for the purpose of dissolving the blockage that was pressing down on his brainstem had negatively affected his other organs. The damage started from his kidneys then spread to other organs. This damage, together with the patients' numerous other ailments, led to the overall failure of internal organs. Thus, I decided to stop giving the patient injections because his body was not ready for it. Instead, I focused my treatment on the patients' dysfunctional organs in the attempt to get them back to normal before trying to dissolve the blockage close to his brainstem.

"In short, he would have to lie here waiting and waiting until his body is ready for the treatment. Is that what you mean?" The lady shot back to me.

I explained to her that there was nothing I could do to help when his body was not ready for the treatment. I was ready, but the patient was not ready. I hope you understand this. Then I tried to make her feel better by telling her that the patient would be transferred from the ICU to a private room, which was a sign that he was getting a little better. Once he was in the private room, he would have a nurse who would look after him closely.

The lady seemed skeptical so I asked a nurse who was standing near me to explain the whole procedure to her so that she could see the overall picture that could help her comprehend things more clearly. The nurse did a great job by first telling her the costs that had accrued from the treatment given to the patient during the first week. Can you please pay for these first? The nurse said. The lady took the document that listed all the details of the costs from the nurse, who explained further that it was the policy of the hospital to ask for weekly payment so as not to cause too much financial burden to patients' families in the end. Better to pay little by little this way, she said.

The lady turned over those few pages given to her by the nurse. Of course, the details listed on those pages would include expenses caused by the use of medical tools and devices necessary for the treatment of the patient, by the medicines used, by ICU fees, by payment for the doctor's expertise, and many other services. Things like this could make the patients' family confused and they need to be fully informed about them, as they serve to justify the bottom line of the last page. "Oh, no! 420,000 baht!" (Never once did our patients' relatives fail to express their shock upon reading the bottom line of the last page.) I heard the lady mumble, "I can't believe that my life's savings are used up in one week", as if she wasn't quite in her right mind.

Again, the nurse knew what the best thing to say in such a situation was. She informed the lady that she could receive up to 40% discount on medical treatment fees if she applied for the hospital's membership card. This card would entitle her to many types of discount---like a discount on hospital accommodation. Have you read the details about hospital accommodation from a brochure available in this room? The brochure gives you information about several types of accommodation and their prices. We have Superior Room, Deluxe Room, and others, and breakfast is included in some types of accommodation. So please don't hesitate to consult our brochure before you make a decision. I highly recommend our hospital's membership card because it's really worth having. We have several types of card—Primary, Gold, and Platinum, for example. The fees for the cards vary, starting from merely 30,000 baht. Once you receive the card, you are immediately entitled to a discount on medical treatment fees.

The lady look pissed off, but there was no other option for her but to pay for the incurred costs. Applying for a membership card was something that she should do because it made her eligible to up to 40 % discount (10 % discount for Primary Card holders, 25% for Gold Card holders, and 40% for Platinum Card holders). I admit it was an awkward situation but things had to run their course.

I excused myself and left the lady with the nurse. Before leaving, I said to the lady, Madam, please take your time making up your mind.

Two days later, the lady moved the patient out of the hospital. It seemed she wanted to take him to a public hospital. That was nothing new, nothing unusual. Working in a private hospital, one witnesses the patients' family members making such a decision all the time.

(The above view belongs to the doctor who treated Dr. Siam.)

Making an Entrance

I'm standing in front of a huge building that looks like the Greek Parthenon. The building is located on high ground and there is a long staircase leading to its front. I hesitate because I'm not sure whether this building houses the ministry I'm supposed to report to. All government office buildings look the same as if they come from the same blueprint from which all Parthenon-like buildings originate. (After a second thought, are those buildings more likely to be modelled after a Thai-style spirit house?)The front part of this kind of building often looks quite grand and solemn but behind such an awe-inspiring facade, ten stories or more could have been added to it and, based on my experience, the inside of such a building tends to look like that of a shopping mall.

I see a number of people walking back and forth across the big yard in front of the building, and as one of them is walking past me, I ask him whether the ministry I'm looking for is located in this building. After he assures me that it is indeed the ministry building, I no longer hesitate and hurriedly enter the building.

Just like what I imagined, the inside of the building is similar to that of a medium-sized shopping mall with a KFC outlet, Pizza Hut, Sukishi Buffet, 7-11, Watson, etc. There is also a food court and shops that sell clothes, perfume, watches, DVDs. Also available are shops that rent out movies and offer photocopying services, Internet cafes, one-stop-service centres, and so many other types of business that I can't possibly mention all. Then I notice a sign indicating that those who have bureaucratic matters to sort out should head to a hall on the second floor, so I use an escalator to get there.

Once I enter that hall, I hear the voice from an automatic queuing machine calling out: "No. 216 please". I see so many people waiting around in that hall and I don't really know where to start. I decide to walk towards the machine and read the descriptions of the services available next to each button on the machine to see which one I should press to get the kind of service I want. However, none of the descriptions matches the thing I want to do here. That's not very surprising though, as I'm here to report to the ministry and get appointed to the position of the Chief Executive of the Sub-district Administrative Organization. Mine is a special case so it won't be among other services listed on the queuing machine. I'm not an ordinary folk anymore, I'm about to become a

privileged individual. Actually, someone should have come out to welcome me. How could they leave me to wait around like this? It does not befit someone of my position!

I decide to walk towards counter no. 9, behind which a young government employee is sitting and doing nothing. In front of her is a sign saying “Please contact the next counter”. I have no intention to jump the queue and all I want is to ask where I should start from. As soon as that office worker sees me approaching, however, she sighs in annoyance and points to another counter in order to get rid of me even before I have a chance to utter a single word.

“Oh, I just want to ask….”

“Sir, you have to get the queue ticket from the queuing machine,” she said.

“I know, but I was wondering….”

“You can’t just approach me and ask a question. You have to get the queue ticket from the queuing machine,” she said.

“I didn’t mean to jump the queue.”

“That’s why you have to get the queuing ticket,” she emphasized.

“Listen, I don’t know where to start so I…”

“You can start from pressing the queuing machine,” she repeats once more.

I’m at a loss of what to do next. This woman is definitely hard to deal with and I think it’s time I have to show off my privileged position.

“Let me tell you this. I’m not just an ordinary guy. I’m here because I want to report to the ministry so as to be appointed as the Chief Executive of the Sub-district Administrative Organization.” I don’t really want to brag but I need to let her know that I’m an important person.

The government employee of counter no. 9 paused a little then she said in a loud voice: “No one can claim that they are more privileged than others in a governmental place like this. Rules and regulations sanctioned by the public are most important and have to be obeyed by everyone. All citizens are entitled to equal rights and freedom. Aren’t you ashamed acting as if you are more privileged than others?” She does know how to use words as weapons! She continued in a louder voice, intending to make sure

that others can hear her exposing my shameful act. “And this is even before you get appointed to that position!”

I’m really embarrassed and want to hide my face from everyone, but at the same I’m also angry, at myself and at her. I have fallen straight into her trap. It could be because she has a personality that, for some reason, can provoke others. It is as if at first she was testing me by pretending to ignore me so that my pride would be hurt and I would get upset at her for not acknowledging me as someone important. I would feel that she should have known better and that I could not let her treat me that way. Because of this, I fell into her trap because I acted like an important figure in the position of power, despite the fact that I have not even been appointed yet. I’m upset that I have made a fool of myself as well. I then explore the depth of my being to try to figure out whether the desire to be above others is something that has just occurred to me, or has existed in human genes all along. I’m curious about this and can’t really decide which is the right one, but after a little while this line of thinking leads me to hypothesize that if the desire to be above others is part of the instinct of all living beings on earth, then it is important that such a desire has to be controlled or guided by conscience and a strong determination to do good things so that it won’t go astray. In other words, conscience and a strong determination to do good things are necessary to ensure that a desirable result is achieved.

In my case, I’m definitely aware that (6) I have flaunted my authority but I have done that because I want to find a shortcut to my new position that will allow me to sort out all the wrong things. My weakness is that I focus too much on an outcome until I have forgotten about the journey towards it or the means to get there. And that government employee of counter no. 9 made me angrier because she stressed the thing I know fully well. In fact, she not only stressed it but also wanted to expose my mistake. There is no need for her to do that. She certainly does not have to teach a crocodile to swim.

I’m dumbstruck and rooted to that spot. After a while, the government employee of counter no. 9 yelled at me: ‘Come here sir!’ She does not really have to yell because I’m standing quite near her.

I walk towards her timidly and sit down on a chair gently so as not to trouble the chair too much (Not sure whether this kind of consideration has just occurred to me or whether it was part of our genes.) This time the government employee of counter no. 9 puts her face rather close to mine and half- whispers: “I apologize that I spoke to you loudly before, sir. I had to mention rules and regulations as part of my job and I hope you

forgive me and try to go along with the roles we have to assume. We have to do things this way so that those people who are waiting around won't get it wrong that you have privileges. Actually, I know that you do have privileges, as you are about to become the Chief Executive of the Sub-district Administrative Organization. I'm going to do my best to help you get things done without having to wait in the line." Then she gives me a knowing smile. "Can you please wait for me in front of the elevator located in the western wing of the building. It is to the right. Soon I will meet you there." Then she yelled at me: "Please go to the queuing machine!"

Magnifique! What a superb performance!

I let her know that I understand what she has explained to me, and I feel much better. See I have proof now! Proof that what I discussed before is all correct! There is definitely the Path of White Ants through that Parthenon-like ministry, but the information about that path is passed on to me only. Other members of the public are not supposed to know anything about it, and all that is available to them comes from that loud public announcement alone. No secretive information is whispered to them, and I myself have to be reprimanded and humiliated first so as to help the organization keep up a respectable public image. I can easily imagine that later that government employee and I will laugh together about the roles we have played to deceive the common folk.

I go along with the role I'm supposed to play by acting like I am ashamed of what I have done and timidly get up and leave the hall.

A big while later, the government employee of counter no. 9 joins me in front of the elevator located in the western part of building. She is carrying a lot of folders and, instead of taking me upstairs, she leads me to a guest room located not that far from the elevator.

When we get there, she puts all the folders on a long desk and asks me to take a seat behind that desk. Then she sits down opposite me and opens one of the folders before reading through it quickly. I assume that the folder contains the details about me. After that, she hands me a package of documents, and written on that package was the description of what is inside—*Documents and Timetable for the Orientation of the Executive Chiefs of the SAO Nationwide*.

I open the package and notice that the first set of documents is *A Manual for Basic Personality Enhancement*. Included in this manual is a guidance about the correct usage of language when addressing people who belong to different levels of social hierarchy.

There is also advice about trendy and important words that are widely used in social circles, words like integration, civil society, community networking, voluntary spirit, etc. According to the manual, these words should be memorized and used frequently. When you are interviewed or have to answer questions, including these words in your sentences will miraculously ease any tense situation.

Of course, I know all about this kind of stuff. I don't object to using those words, but one should not believe that they can always work magic.

I go through nearly ten pages of those documents and it occurs to me that the word 'sufficient' appears in almost all those pages. Sometimes that word is simply added even though there is probably no need for it. My curiosity about the excessive use of the word 'sufficient' gets the better of me and I ask the government employee of counter no. 9: "Has the word 'sufficient' entirely replaced the word 'enough' nowadays?"

My question startled her and there is a change in her facial expression. For a brief moment she looks annoyed and upset as if she wants to lash out at me. But then she seems to realize that my question arises from my naivety and that I have no hidden agenda and no intention to provoke or challenge her. She explains to me that:

"Oh, it is because the Ministry's computer system has been set in a way that whenever it detects the word 'enough', it automatically changes it to 'sufficient'." Her face is full of pride after she has explained that to me.

I flip through the documents and get to a page about how to dress appropriately for different occasions and about royally granted outfits made from Thai silk, which according to the advice on this page, is the type of outfit that everyone should wear so as to promote Thai culture. The advice goes on to say that it will be excellent if one can wear them every day and pick a color that matches the auspicious color of each day. Other pages of the documents explain where to place one's hands when appearing in front of the public or respectable people. There are even illustrations showing the right positions of where to put one's hands on the front and back parts of one's body, depending on each occasion or circumstance.

Seeing me concentrating on reading that bit about where to put one's hands, the government employee of counter no.9 says to me:

“Please don’t worry about them. You will be trained about those things on the orientation day. In fact, after you are appointed to that position for a while, you won’t have any problem knowing where to place your hands.”

I nod to indicate that I think she is right.

“Now let me tell you about the important stuff you will need to do,” she says.

She explains to me how I should proceed. According to her, I need to fill out a form and then submit it at counter no. 3 then get a receipt from there. After that, I have to go to a secretarial office located on the eastern wing of the building so that they will put an official stamp on the form for me. Next, I have to proceed to the underground floor and photocopy the form and related documents as well as verify all the photocopied ones with my signature. Once that is done, I have to return to this room to meet her again.

While rushing out to do what she has advised me to, I start to feel anxious and worried because things seem to take longer than what it should be. I have no control over the rules and regulations of this ministry and there is nothing I can do about my wasted time. I also start to worry about Dao having to wait for me for a long time.

After I get everything done, I returned to the guest room in order to wait for that government employee of counter no. 9 as advised. I wait for ages before she finally pushes the door open and walks into the room. “What a hectic day!” she complains out loud, perhaps hoping that I will sympathize with her.

“Sir, this is your membership card,” she says while handing me a card that looks like a business card. “Please take this card to the registration division and let them record all the details about you.” Then she sighs in relief before saying, ‘My job is done now. I wish you luck, sir.’

(Her job is done, but I could sense that my ordeal is about to start!!)

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(6) Perhaps no one had noticed signs of deterioration in Dr. Siam during these recent years. Gradual change and subtle symptoms of decay were actually noticeable in him. One could detect turmoil and anxiety in his eyes and the way he walked betrayed the restlessness within him. Sadness and desperation also seemed to sink roots in his flesh and his breaths carried the sense of decay. He was often absent-minded and when someone addressed him, he startled as if his mind had

been wandering off to a distant land. When startled, one could also notice that he acted as if he was struggling to free his soul from a body that imprisoned it.

During these past few years, he didn't look happy at all.

I think it was because he had so many things to think about and so many decisions to make. He had to reconsider some matters as well as make up his mind about others. Dr. Siam must have known better than others about the circumstance of his life at that point and how it affected people around him, especially my mother.

He was so devoted to her and was willing to shoulder the burden of making the dreams he had envisioned for her come true. I know well that my mother is not the type of person others can easily live with. To be precise, she had been through a lot during the time she was with my late father. His death brought about a drastic change in her, making her someone who demands a lot of attention from others, but only from people who are willing to give her the attention. Those people also need to give her the full attention because she will reject anything half-hearted or mediocre. She has become a person who refuses to meet others halfway or to accept anything that is not clear-cut. This kind of personality has made her totally different from what she used to be when she was still married to my father.

I find it rather surprising that my mother welcomed someone like Dr. Siam, who was never clear-cut in anything, into her life. But then it could be because he was so devoted to her and his devotion never faltered. That could explain why she placed complete trust in him. However, during these recent years, he didn't seem to have enough to offer her and he took it upon himself to acquire whatever he could so as to give it to her and make sure that she was satisfied. That was why I said he was totally devoted to her and he overspent his resources. He kept borrowing from other sources in order to ensure that he met her requirements and expectations. In this way, he was always in a state of deficit. The way he treated his health was no different, and it was to be expected that sooner or later he would collapse.

How should I recount what happened? Let me put it this way:

Dr. Siam not only treated his patients but he was also my mother's personal doctor. Once upon a time, he introduced himself to her as someone who envisioned wonderful dreams for her and could protect, look after, and provide her with security. Because of the way he treated her, she held on to the security he offered as a wall or a backrest pillow she could lean on. He often told her that she was not well because she had been through traumatizing experiences, and she needed

special care. She believed that and became his patient and his lover at the same time. Each day she complained about a different type of ailment—a headache, a pain in her shoulder, a pain in her leg, joint pain, etc. Dr. Siam amazed her with his eloquent explanation of the causes of her ailments then prepared the medicines for her until she got well. Later, when her pain came back, he provided her with more medicines until she felt better. He also gave her a massage when she complained about working too hard till her neck, shoulders, back, etc. suffered from aches. His massages seemed to lessen the tension in her muscles and made her feel quite good, but only for a while. When the aches returned, he gave her a massage again. Lately, the most vivid image of our family in my mind was that of us enjoying a drink together at home and my mother sitting and leaning against Uncle Siam, as if she was his conjoined twin. While chatting away with me and Maitree and holding his liquor glass in one hand, his other hand was giving my mother a massage.

"Uncle, aren't you tired of taking care of my mum like this?" I once asked him while we were drinking together and my mother was not with us.

He was quiet for a little while as he was figuring out how to respond to my question. Then he answered light-heartedly: "It's something I'm happy to do, young lad."

What about now? Will Uncle Siam wake up to give my mother a massage? Will he wake up to shoulder everyday duties and obligations for my mother, a person he was willing to toil for? My mother no longer has anyone to give her a massage and whenever she feels the aches and pains in her muscles, out of habit, she looks for him while saying "Where's Dr. Siam?" Then she remembers that he is lying unconscious in hospital and she says: "Oh, you must have taken a trip somewhere. I don't know why you haven't returned home yet." I know that my mother was talking about Uncle Siam's state of unconsciousness in a figurative way—as him taking a short trip somewhere and about to return home soon—because, like most people, she believes that one should not say anything negative about the condition of someone who is bed-stricken and unconscious. However, I believe that what she said about Uncle Siam being on a trip also reflects her innermost wish for his return.

From what I can see, another thing that directly affected Dr. Siam was his work, especially his experimentation with stem cell treatment, which started out pretty well and was warmly embraced by many patients who were as excited about this kind of treatment as him. In the beginning, he had a long queue of patients waiting to receive stem cell treatment. People heard about the treatment by word of mouth and it became a fad. But like all fads, this one had an expiry date and its golden time didn't last very long. Dr. Siam's stem cell treatment was popular for only a

year before it went into decline. During the boom period of the treatment, he had opened several clinics in different provinces and now those clinics became a burden. He had to look after them more than look after his patients, whose number kept decreasing. The expenses incurred by those clinics involved rent, fees paid for the importation of medicines, petrol costs, and tea money. During his glorious period, Dr. Siam's stem cell treatment not only attracted patients but also some unwanted people. As stem cell treatment has yet to be formally approved and legally recognized, some state authorities harassed Dr. Siam and demanded a piece of the pie from him in return for their turning a blind eye to his stem cell treatment. When he refused to give them tea money, they threatened to shut down his clinics. Because of such a hassle from state authorities and other issues, the lifetime of this kind of business was a few years at most.

Uncle Siam was aware of this fact but he wanted to keep it a secret from my mother. He didn't want to disappoint her –the only person he didn't want to let down—so he merely told her that all types of business had their ups and downs. For my part, however, I got to hear all of his concerns and worries as we were drinking together late at night, although he didn't actually intend to confide in me. Without being aware of it, when he was drunk he often complained about the annoyance and frustration he had with his work and financial situation, and I was able to piece things together and see the mess he was in.

He was a heavy drinker. On Saturdays and Sundays he drank a whole bottle of liquor by himself, and about half a bottle every work day after he finished his work, which often involved a trip across provinces. He would return home looking rather tense and anxious with his hands shaking, but after he drank half a glass of undiluted liquor, he seemed to be more relaxed.

He was the type of person who enjoyed talking about his past and while doing that he would gulp down his undiluted liquor in complete satisfaction.

One night, he told me that he felt sorry for that former prime minister. He said he had thoroughly studied Thai politics and that made him realize that there were so many wrong things in our country. According to him, it was not merely that certain individuals were warped, the whole system was also warped. However, he complained that no one listened to him. "That guy is just an ordinary man but his opponents have created a very exaggerating image of him." He paused briefly before continuing: "And don't forget that he got to that position through a proper and legitimate democratic procedure." He poured more liquor into his glass and gulped down its content. "They have uprooted the system simply because they want to destroy him. What nonsense!"

Then one day he said out of the blue that he wanted to get involved in politics: "I want to help the locals as I know them so well. They will soon hold a new election of members of the local council and I want to offer myself as one of the candidates."

"Does mum know about this?" I asked.

"Yes, she does." He briefly responded to my question before adding: "But I won't abandon my job at the clinics of course."

Not long before this, his health failed him and he had to stay in hospital for a while. A health check revealed that he was suffering from diabetes and his cholesterol and triglyceride levels were pretty high. There was also something wrong with the function of his heart as a result of coronary artery heart disease. Furthermore, he displayed symptoms of chronic alcoholism (something I already knew). He was prescribed a health regimen that involved a strict control of diet, a no-alcohol lifestyle, and many other don'ts. He was in hospital for less than a week and was allowed to go home to recuperate. When he first got home, he moped around the house looking quite depressed and miserable, but after a while, his health improved a little and he started to visit his clinics in other provinces. My mother drove him to and back from those clinics and when he got home in the evening, he went straight to his room and locked himself in there without talking to anyone. As he was used to doing a lot of things at the same time, he became restless when there was nothing much for him to do. He tried watching TV and flipping through channels, reading magazines, and going through old junk kept around the house but those activities didn't do much good to him. One day he found an old melodeon among all the junk and decided to try his hand on it. During that period, I often heard him playing the melodeon in his room and he even bought a music lesson book to help him learn how to play the instrument better. The music he made, however, was mostly out of tune and it strangely conveyed a very sad tone.

After a month of submitting himself to a diet regimen, Uncle Siam suddenly remembered that he was a doctor who gave others stem cell treatment so he decided to give himself several injections of his own cells. When he saw his doctor during the next health checkup, the doctor was surprised to find an overall improvement in his health. Uncle Siam claimed that it was the stem cell treatment that worked wonders on him.

Since that day he joined us for dinner again. He often had his melodeon with him and played this and that song for us with it. He also started to drink again, but under the supervision of my mother, who felt sorry for him when he was in a miserable state due to the lack of alcohol. She let

him drink one glass of wine only, and Uncle Siam had convinced himself that a glass of red wine was really good for one's heart. (To him, one glass meant a completely full wine glass.) After he was allowed to drink wine, he started to discredit other types of alcoholic drinks he was forbidden to touch, like the one Maitree was drinking (even though Uncle Siam himself also liked it in the past). He claimed that the liquor Maitree was drinking had a weird kind of taste, different from what it used to be. He suspected that it was counterfeit liquor, he said.

"It tasted much better in the past. Now it's no good."

While convincing himself that Maitree was drinking counterfeit liquor, he also tried to plant the seed of doubt in others. Soon he came up with what he claimed was the real cause of his illness--- unknowing consumption of counterfeit liquor.

Two months later, his wine consumption increased from one full glass to one full bottle, and from one bottle to two. Soon enough Uncle Siam complained: "No matter how much I drink, I don't seem to get drunk!" Then he asked to try Maitree's liquor and exclaimed: "Oh, it tastes alright now!" Since then he started to drink as much as he did in the past even though he was still very careful about his diet and other health related stuff. My mother didn't really know what to do because on a day he didn't drink, he looked miserable and restless and his hands were all trembling, making it impossible for him to treat his patients. In short, that whole day was a total waste. My mother got upset to see him like that and in the end she had to let him drink.

Four or five months before Uncle Siam collapsed (and would never get up again), he persuaded my mother to visit well-known restaurants in several provinces after he finished his work at his clinics in the evenings. After that, he would analyze the tastes of the foods he had tried and figure out the ingredients used. He also did a survey of the locations of those restaurants, bought cook books, meat, vegetables, fish, and spent a lot of time in the kitchen trying to cook marvelous food. Cooking was another of his talents. Whatever he cooked was delicious and interesting. He prepared specially-made gravy to go with his steak and spicy sauce that was uniquely his own. He seemed very serious about and totally devoted to cooking, and he even planned to open a restaurant. He claimed that he was looking for a good location for his restaurant, and right now he was practicing cooking so as to hone his skill. According to him, he was at an age when he enjoyed cooking for others.

"I'm cooking fusion food because this type of food is in trend at the moment, you see," he boasted.

"Yours is more like confusing food, I think," I teased him and asked: "What about your political career?"

"I'm working on that as well but it's not quite settled yet. Perhaps we should call it a job I want to do for the people rather than a political career."

"What about your clinics?" I asked.

"I have already made sure that everything will be fine with the clinics." The way he put it was like he wanted to have everything ready before saying his last farewell. Then he continued: "I'm doing my best with the clinics and maybe I will hire nurses to work full-time there. Your mother can look after the administrative stuff and I will gradually hand over my responsibilities to her and others. Actually, all you have to do when you are a politician is to join meetings, and with a restaurant, once it becomes well-known, you don't have to do everything yourself. You see, I have already planned everything and you don't have to worry that your mum will have to work too hard. If my plan goes well and makes everyone happy and have a comfortable life, I think I will become a monk. Mind you, a forest monk, not a monk who stays at a temple, so that I can travel through forests and jungles."

"But a monk is not allowed to drink," Maitree light-heartedly interrupted him.

Uncle Siam stopped short before saying: "You cheeky lad! You have spoiled things for me!" But then he continued drinking with us in a rather cheerful mood.

I have recounted to you all these things as I believe they seem to indicate and warn about things that would happen later. Uncle Siam still worked very hard and struggled to shoulder all the expectations and risks. He was not young anymore but he continued acting like a bird that kept flying here and there and swooping down to perch on a tree branch when he found food there; once he lost interest in that food, he flew to another tree. His life didn't seem to have any security. All he had were the dreams in his eyes and the dreams he saw in the sky, the sea, and the grass fields through a bird's- eye view. We cannot tell whether he had really seen those dreams because we are unable to view things from somewhere that high up.

This time Uncle Siam collapsed and does not wake up again. My mother could be right when she said: "He was taking a trip somewhere and hasn't returned yet."

But why should he return? My question is why should he return as it would mean walking straight into the trap and nets he had set up by himself?

(The above view belongs to Chidchai.)

Exiting

I leave the building again as the registration office is in another building towards the back and separated from the main building like what the government employee of counter no. 9 told me. The sun is getting stronger and I start to feel worried but I keep heading towards the registration office.

Once there, I see a long waiting line and feel so discouraged. But then when I notice that the line is moving ahead rapidly, I feel a bit better. After waiting in the line for quite a while, my turn arrives. I hand my membership card to an office worker sitting behind a counter and he inspects it before opening a folder in front of him in order to get a couple of forms that he passes on to me together with my membership card. How annoying! Now I have to fill out more forms!

"Please fill out these forms and then proceed to the underground floor of the main building. You will need to give the completed forms to one of the tellers at the T Bank. Next, please."

He does not give me an opportunity to ask any questions and those behind me are trying to push ahead. No wonder the line moves fast. The only thing I can do is to follow a person ahead of me. A big group of people in front of me proceed into a big room and all of them are trying to find some space where they can sit down and fill out the forms given to them. Those forms are no different from the ones we have completed before. It is so boring that we have to fill them out again and again!

I walk back to the underground floor of the main building in a state of exasperation. The Deputy Chief Administrator of the SAO has told me it won't take long to complete the procedure, but I have wasted a lot of time already. When I get to the T bank, I also have to wait in a line for people in front of me to get things done, and many of them haven't even completed the forms, making it even slower. It is awful and it makes me realize that even if you get things done, it does not matter much because you still have to wait for others to get theirs done. The reason is we live in the same society

and we have to move forward together. It is annoying but it is here where equality starts. I try to calm down and get rid of my annoyance by telling myself that my goal is to initiate change in the system but before I can do that, I have to go along with the system first. What has happened to me could be seen as the first test I have to pass.

I glance at the teller and it seems to me she is also annoyed with those 'acting' SAO Chief Executives who cause the delay because they are still filling out the forms. The assumption prompts me to take action, hoping that it will help speed up the process. I turn to the people behind me and say: If any of you haven't filled out the forms yet, please do that so that things will flow smoothly, conveniently, and fast.

When it is my turn, I throw myself on a chair because I'm exhausted and getting sick of the whole thing. The teller who is facing me seems to know what I'm thinking. She gives me an odd smile before saying: "If you look around, you can see that others are also frustrated. It is not just you who are frustrated." What she said makes me pause and think. I'm a special person amidst others who are also special. In fact, we all have been ordinary people who are allocated a special status.

The teller gives me another form, which turns out to be a life insurance form.

"Is this form that necessary?" I cry out in annoyance.

"Yes, it is." She says, "This form comes with others. The procedure is nearly completed." She tries to cheer me up.

I fill out the life insurance form in frustration. It occurs to me that what really causes the delay is not because others don't complete the forms in advance, but because all of us are required to fill out this life insurance form. I complete the form as quickly as I can and do not even bother to read what is on the form. I don't even glance at the conditions and details of mutual agreements listed on the back of the form. I'm aware of the secret interconnectedness of all these though. You are told to do the same sort of thing again and again until you feel everything is all the same and get so sick of it. You reach a stage when you simply want to get it over and done with. When they hand you the last page of document full of words, you can no longer bear to look at them. All you want to do is to look for a place where you are supposed to sign and then just sign.

However, once you sign, you are immediately in a disadvantageous position. They have planned it from the beginning to make you sign with no protest and many parties work together to achieve this end. They distract you then make you go through a tedious and complicated procedure until you feel so frustrated and exhausted. In such a condition, you won't want to raise any concern or ask any question and you will just want to sign to get out of everything. This is what I'm doing, and even though I'm aware of what they are up to, it is too late for me to do anything. I sign and hand the form back to the teller.

She looks at me with a solemn expression and says: "I have to let you know that what you did is not appropriate."

"How do you mean? What exactly did I do that is not appropriate?" I ask her.

"You telling others that they have to complete the forms first."

"Why isn't it appropriate? Didn't it help you to get your work done faster? I noticed that you looked tired so I simply wanted to help."

"Thanks, but it is not appropriate." She insists and looks at the form I hand back to her. "You did something that was not your job. It is actually my job to do that. What you did could cause problems to our organization because you are not in the position to do it. Also, it could trigger others in your position to follow your example."

At that point I have no more energy to argue with her.

She relaxes a little and gives me a smile before handing me the T bank's platinum credit card. She said: "In the beginning, the credit limit on this card is 200,000 baht, but you cannot use it until after you have activated it."

"What! Isn't it done yet? I still have to activate this bloody card!" I yell, almost threateningly.

"Please try to be civil." The teller tries to calm me down. "You need to activate the card at the Telecommunication Company or at the Property Company. They are just about ten blocks away. The card needs to be activated otherwise the procedure won't be completed."

I get up quickly and leave the bank, cursing all the nonsensical things they have made me go through. I have underestimated the world of bureaucracy and ministries,

which turned out much more complicated and mysterious than what I have imagined it to be. This world does not merely consist of the main traditional path and a few alternative paths, but embodies millions of routes branching off from the main paths. However, this realization occurs to me too late…

I keep walking till I reach the two companies mentioned by the teller. I notice that there is a receptionist standing in between the facades of the companies. She is wearing a tight and skimpy outfit and looks very pretty.

"Do you want to activate your card, right?" She asks, looking adorable with her Big Eyes contact lenses.

"Yes, my dear." I respond.

"Please take a look at this before you make a decision, sir." She says and directs my attention to the advertising board. "You can choose the best one from the two options available. Please pick the one that fits in well with your lifestyle. We also offer a very special promotion for privileged people like you."

Wow, I'm impressed! This girl is so persuasive and eloquent.

"You will find all sorts of hi-tech communication devices along with fantastic applications and other cool stuff from the telecommunication company. All these are on promotion for you, and T Bank card holders can get 15% discount on top of it. We also offer you another option—you can choose to purchase a unit in an apartment or a condominium from the Property Company on promotional pricing that comes with 25% discount for T Bank cardholders. This purchase will also entitle you to special rewards namely, a complete built-in kitchen, a romantic dinner in Bali, or a discount of up to 500,000 baht."

"But my dear, I've already got a smart phone and a unit in a condominium." I tell her, even though what I've got might not be as cool or advanced as what she is advertising.

"But sir, you are required to activate your card so you have to pick one of the options we are offering you. Selecting one of them is an inevitable part of the procedure

and doing so is also a fringe benefit and privilege for someone like you who is the Chief Executive of the SAO."

"Is it really necessary?' I ask. At this point I no longer find the girl's voice charming. "After I have chosen, I bet I will have to sign contracts and fill out more forms. Who knows when all these will end."

"There is not much to be done after this, sir. Once you have activated your card, you will only be required to complete just one or two more forms. After that, you can go upstairs and await a meeting with the minister."

Despite her assurance, I can vividly imagine that things won't get done easily and my whole day will surely be wasted. In fact, I'm not even ready to do it today. I come to this Ministry building because the general populace have pinned their hopes and expectations on me. I'm not blaming them, but the thing is I have done enough today and it's very late, so I can't go on anymore. Whatever needs to be finished has to be postponed to tomorrow.

"What time is it now, my dear? Can I come back to activate the card next time?' She looks confused and does not respond to my question immediately. Then she suddenly cries out:

"No, you can't do that, sir. Rules and regulations are there for us to abide by. If you refuse to obey them, things will come to a standstill and I will be in big trouble. I will be blamed for failing to make you comply to the steps and procedure required!' Then she touches the outside corners of her eyes with her hands and acts as if she is trying to wipe away tears. While doing that, she looks absolutely adorable like a cute Japanese girl and I find myself momentarily under the spell of her cuteness. "If you refuse to do it today, it will cause damage to the organization. Please do what is required of you today, sir," she pleads.

Once she utters the word 'organization', the hold she has on me is broken, even though she is a very charming girl. That word startles me and helps me regain my ability to see through the tricks of the Ministry. Enough is enough!

I turn my back on the Ministry because I'm worried about Dao (7). They will have to wait because today is the day for her and me only. I tell myself that I have to rush as it is getting late, and hurry out of that Parthenon-like Ministry building.

As soon as I emerge from the building and about to step down from its front, I hear a loud siren and an announcement through a loudspeaker.

"Those bastards! Look what they have done!' I swear to myself and run out as fast as I can.

How is this possible? That Ministry has just announced that I'm a wanted person!

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(7) "Keep an eye on her. Don't trust her too much. People generally want to get involved with others because they expect something in return. No one is sincere." That was how I warned Siam in the past. I also said to him: "If you don't trust me, then there is no one else you can trust because we have been friends since we were kids. You need to keep an eye on that woman, as I'm not sure if she can be trusted. She also has a different lifestyle from ours – we are down to earth, but she is into city people's lifestyle; we are sincere and say what we think, but she has secrets and agendas."

In fact, I warned Siam about Dao since the first time I met her. I told him that she was different from us, and that she looked down on me and Thai. With Siam, she merely wants to use him.

Now that Siam is not well, she reveals her true colors even more. At first, she took him to an expensive hospital but just a week after that, her true nature and real intentions became clear to me.

I got a phone call from her and she told me that she had spent a lot of money on Siam's medical treatment. He was in hospital for just a week but she already paid over 400,000 baht for the hospital fees. Then she bluntly said to me: "As his close friend, do you want to offer any help? What about his relatives? Aren't they going to share my financial burden."

"Have you talked to Thai yet?" I asked.

Instead of answering my question, she sighed in exasperation and threw me a question: "What about you? Any plan to help?"

"Of course I will help Siam."

"How?" Her tone was harsh and uncompromising. Then she added, "I can't shoulder all the burden. You do have to help me.'

Oh, well, why on earth did you take him to such an expensive hospital? And you did so without consulting any of us at all. The other thing is I heard that you and Siam have set up some sort of business together and it is doing extremely well. The two of you have earned a lot from it and have lots of savings in your bank accounts. At least, that was what I heard from others and from Siam's boasting himself. We never interfere with or ask about the money you and Siam have, but now that you are losing some of that money, you are asking us for help. In fact, you have spent only about half a million for the hospital fees and that amount should not have caused you any trouble at all, considering the fact that you have heaps of money, don't you think?

That was what I wanted to say to her at that time but I managed to stop myself from doing so.

"How do you plan to help me?"

She repeated her question once more and let out a big sigh.

"Siam gave you a lot of help in the past and now that he needs some help you, aren't you going to do anything?"

"What did he do to help me and who told you he had helped me?" I retorted.

"He told me himself that you got a lot of help from him. You have been relying on his help all along."

"That's not true at all. You have been mistaken."

I told her that and hung up the phone as I feel no need to explain myself.

As expected, after a week had passed, Dao decided to move Siam to a public hospital, claiming that it was not possible for her to shoulder the fees charged by that private hospital. Mind you, what she said was merely an excuse. Those hospital fees are nothing because Dao and Siam have heaps of money. Her other excuse is that Siam might remain in this unconscious condition for a long time and there is very little that doctors can do to help him. The chance that he will regain consciousness is also very slim. She therefore believes that it's better to move him to a public hospital as it is pointless to pay more than 10, 000 baht each day for medical fees and a room in the private hospital.

A performance through which that woman and her folk aimed to show off their generosity has ended. Let me emphasize once more—it was merely a performance. Ridiculous, isn't it?

Since then what do you think has become her source of hope? While Siam shows no sign of waking up from his long sleep, Dao places her hope on the abbot, hoping that he could bring Siam's soul back to his body. She believes that supernatural stuff could help her. How foolish is that?

The other day I ran into Thai and he told me that he had recently visited his brother. He said Siam's doctor had very little hope that he would regain consciousness. He has been unconscious for two weeks and this could lead to the decay and demise of his organs, as they haven't functioned properly for a long time. (That is something I already know of course.) The doctor believed that Siam could remain a vegetable or a sleeping prince like this for a long time and he wasn't sure whether this state was better or worse than death, as being a sleeping prince means that Siam would be a big burden for his family. The doctor probably told Dao about this as well, and you know what she said to Thai? Thai told me himself that she said:

"Do you and your folk have any plan about how to look after Siam?"

It is obvious from what she said that she does not want to look after him herself. What about the true love and devotion they claimed to have for each other? Hey, Siam, look at what she has become, and she was the woman you had been so devoted to. How would you explain her behavior? Please show up in my dream tonight and tell me why.

Any plan about how to look after Siam? What a question to ask! Thai and his family have already taken on a lot of responsibilities as Thai's mother is now living with them. Isn't it too much to ask them to look after Siam as well? It would be really hard on them if they have to look after two bed-ridden people at the same time. All I can say is that that woman and her family have caused Thai unending trouble!

She is actually in the best position to look after Siam. She is well-off and lives with her grown-up sons, and her place is right next to Thai's garage. It won't cause her any hassle at all if she brings Siam home and looks after him. Her sons can help look after Siam as well. To be honest, Siam did so much for them in the past, and because of him, Dao has become well-off. From what Siam had told me, before she met Siam, Dao was a widow with no job. All she did was staying home, doing household chores, and looking after her kids. The money she has now all came from Siam's hard work. He gave her most of the money he earned and kept very little for himself. Only once in a blue moon did he give a small sum of money to Thai and his mother.

What does she want me to make out of all this then? If she is willing to reap the harvest of Siam's hard work, then she should also take responsibility for the burden that comes with Siam's illnesses.

The more I think about her attitude and behavior, the more annoyed I am. The other day she had the guts to ring me to remind me that I should do something to help Siam. Doesn't she know that I have helped him all his life? What she has done for him is hardly anything, but she keeps complaining and making a big fuss about it.

"If you can't help with anything then I want you to give me back that 70,000 baht," she said.

"What are you talking about?" I was nonplussed.

"I'm talking about the money you borrowed from Dr. Siam. Don't pretend that you remember nothing about it."

Here she goes again! I don't know what nonsensical stuff Siam had been telling her. Now Dao, let me make it clear to you that I never owe Siam any money. In fact, he owes me the exact amount you thought I owed him. Do you want to know why he owes me money? It's the money he is supposed to pay me for the practice license displayed on a wall of his clinic, the license that makes it possible for him to run his clinics. That practice license is mine and at first I didn't bother to charge him for it, but Siam offered to pay me for using the license and I went along with him. However, the truth is he has never given me the money he promised, not a single baht, and who can I demand that money from now? Can I demand it from you? The other thing is— for years, I had to work a couple of days a week at Siam's clinic, but he didn't pay me much at all. What if I demand the rest of my payment from you? Would you like it if I ask you to pay me all of what Siam owes me?

At a loss for words, she hung up on me. Oh, well, I forgive her. Some people are defeated by their own vindictive nature!

When I had a chat with Thai about what to do with Siam, I had given Thai a warning: "You need to keep an eye on those people. Make sure they don't get anything that should belong to us. I'm saying this because I mean well for you and your family."

A day after that chat, something popped up in my mind, and I decided to ring Thai. We talked for about 15 minutes and our conversation goes like this, Let, me be frank with you, ok? (Come on, out with it!) I'm a doctor so I know all about Siam's condition, and I can tell you that he won't last very long. (I think you are right, but I don't know how long is this 'not very long'. My mother wants me to bring him home.) You mean your home? (Of course, where else could it be? I don't really want

to bring him home though.) You know, this is actually why I rang you today—to tell you that it's good to bring Siam home. (Good? In what way? He would be a big burden to me.) Now, you listen to me, (I won't get anything from doing that. All I will get is an awful burden!) I know how you feel, but I gave this matter a lot of thinking last night and came to the conclusion that bringing Siam home would be good for you. (I don't see how!) You are Siam's brother so you are legally entitled to everything he owns. (I don't know what you are on about, Somjai.) What I mean is you have a right over everything that belongs to Siam. (But everything he owns is with that woman! I'm also sick of having conflict about who owns what with others, especially with that woman. It gave me a lot of hassle when I was involved in that land conflict with her not that long ago.) That is why I want to remind you that whatever money or any kind of profit Siam and that woman made together actually belongs to you in the eyes of the law. (You are right, I have to admit.) So I want you to give this matter thought and figure out a plan to ensure that we get what should belong to us. This is all I want to say, as it is not good to go on and on about this sort of stuff. Bye for now, ok? (Thanks a lot, mate.)

I have cautioned everyone I'm familiar with about this. I don't mind if it might look as if I'm a heartless person. I believe what's more important is to have someone who gives others sensible advice, otherwise they might be too overwhelmed by grief too see things clearly. By the time they return to their senses, those people might have gobbled up everything. I don't mind being that person who warns others about financial stuff, although they can't really blame me for being heartless because it is actually that woman who started it first by trying to push the burden onto us. She can't be the one who takes from others all the time!

Now, I'm going to be straightforward here. I think it's time we should discuss about those things Siam owns because he won't wake up for sure. Others should get what they are entitled to and, as for me, I believe I'm entitled to the Siam's Kaeng Khoi clinic.

(The above view belongs to Somjai.)

(8) As I'm standing at the foot of the bed on which Mr. Siam is lying unconscious and breathing in and out regularly with the help of a medical ventilator, I resign myself to the fact that this is what life actually is. It seems to me that Mr. Siam is still trying hard to stay alive. Every once in a while, he struggles to draw air into his lungs and nearly chokes. At times, there are also startling movements in his limbs. From what I can see, he really tries hard not to give in to death.

And one party must win in the end.

Based on my observation, I believe that the winner will be Mr. Siam for sure.

This is because he is not meant to die yet and what is happening to him now is merely the encounter with a bad karma and a 'creditor'. All of us have our own 'creditors' and they may originate from our actions in this life, or they may follow us from our previous lives. For those whose 'creditors' from the past lives come after them, they won't be aware that they have been pursued because this kind of stuff is beyond their consciousness. It is very likely that during their previous lives, they had done something that terribly hurt and angered their creditors, causing the latter to come after them in order to cause them misfortune, destruction, and even death.

When I look at Mr. Siam, I notice that his whole complexion looks so pale as if there is no blood left in him. What I see is merely a body without a soul. His soul must have wandered off and got lost, no different from a homeless person. I'm sure that Mr. Siam's soul no longer resides in this body of his.

Even though he looks so pale, there is a shadow on his forehead that appears quite dark, as if that part of his forehead is covered by a dark cloud or a birthmark . This dark spot is a clear indication of his terrible misfortune, but if he can pass through this crisis, he will live a long and successful life. The important thing is whether Mr. Siam can get through this crisis or not.

I have known Mr. Siam for many years, since he was a kid, and I also know his family quite well. His folks are all good Buddhists. Mr. Siam himself was especially keen about Buddhism and he often visited me. He was an inquisitive boy and he enjoyed spending his free time with me in order to learn about all kinds of things. I was happy to impart my knowledge to him as I could tell that he loved learning and was a courageous and ambitious boy. In my eyes, he was a boy with a great future, greater than others I had known. The other good thing about him is his enthusiasm to show his gratitude to people who have been kind to him. You see, he became an important and successful figure, but he never forgot me. He often paid me a visit and did many things for Buddhism and for our temple.

You ask how come I got to know about what recently happened to Mr. Siam and what made me pay him a visit here? As I told you before, Mr. Siam and I are quite familiar with each other so it's not surprising that I know what has happened to him.

Last week just before I started my morning alms round, Mr. Siam happened to walk past me from the opposite direction. He looked absent-minded and depressed and I could tell that something awful had happened to him. Thus, I decided to retrace the footsteps of his soul and they

led me to this hospital. Actually, ever since I got here, I have been trying to extend my loving kindness to him but his soul is only partially receptive to it. He cannot fully benefit from it because the 'creditor' from his previous life has been trying to block him from receiving the loving kindness from me. The more I try to pass on to him my loving kindness, the darker that shadow on his forehead becomes, indicating that there is a struggle between him and the 'creditor'.

What we must do is get rid of that dark shadow.

That's my advice to you.

You ask whether his condition is critical? My answer is yes, it is indeed critical, but I can assure you that he will survive because he is not fated to die yet. He will live till he reaches his 70s.

It's good that you are now eating only vegetarian food and following the Buddhist precepts strictly. It will even be better if you also keep your action, words, and heart free from impurities. I also recommend that you dress in white and meditate in the mornings and evenings to extend your loving kindness to Mr. Siam and share your merit with him. If you can persuade people close to him to do the same, Mr. Siam will be able to accumulate more and more merit and that will make him strong enough to destroy the 'creditor' from his previous life.

I'm here to help as well so please don't worry too much. I will meditate and set my heart on communicating with Siam. Right now what you see on this bed is merely Siam's physical self. His soul no longer resides in his body as it has wandered off with no clear destination. The demons have deceived him into believing that he is in a blissfully carefree state with no obligation or burden that drags him down. If he allows himself to be lured further, the gate into our world will be closed to him and his soul will not be able to return to his body. So we all have to help bring him back by making him able to see through the demons' deception and realize that the beautiful lotus he sees is actually a dreadful weapon. We all must help him.

I'm sure Mr. Siam will regain consciousness and until then I will not abandon him. He will wake up because he is not destined to leave this world yet.

I will have to say goodbye for now and I will stop by again. I will keep you informed after I have made further contact with Mr. Siam's soul, ok?

I wish you a good day.

(The above view belongs to Abbot Glab)

Hunted

See what has happened? This is so awful! It's quite late now and the sun is shining. No more mist left! Dao must have woken up by now and she will be very worried when she can't find me.

It's all my fault. I really can't blame anyone. So many things happened to me all at once and I didn't handle them well. At first, I just wanted to take a walk and breathe in some fresh morning air and I was quite cheerful when I left the guesthouse. But look at me now! I become entangled in all sorts of trouble, and what is even worse is that they are after me. I don't understand why things turn out this way. I could imagine Dao's expression and voice when she sees me. She would say: "Where on earth have you been you silly Doc!!?" That would be how she starts her interrogation of me.

I actually should try to come up with a good story to appease her. Too bad my brain does not seem to work right now. Oh, well! Humans have limited ability. Only a genius can run and think at the same time!

Where the hell am I now? It's not important anyway because I have escaped the grip of those Ministry people. That's much more important. Come to think about it, it's really unfair that they treat me this way. All I did was not following some of their rules and just because of that they are hunting me down. Wait and see, I'm sure they will claim that the documents I have signed are worthless because I refused to follow all the rules. Also, I bet they will later use them against me one way or another. Anyway, at least now I know what it is really like to be involved in politics. I certainly don't want to have anything to do with it anymore. I have enough of trying to use a political career to look after and nurture other people's hopes. There should be a better way to help people. Being a politician is like digging a hole for yourself!

Think hard Siam! Where on earth are you at the moment?

I try to concentrate, focus on my own name, and utter it. I'm Dr. Siam Duangsuk and I'm on a trip with Dao. We stayed overnight at a log cabin in a resort and I had a

dream about having fun at a waterfall. Then I woke up at dawn and I went out to take a walk. This area is called Song Khon Sub-district, and it is actually my birthplace. As I was enjoying my stroll, I ran into an old woman who seemed to be about to give morning alms to monks. When she saw me, she called out and tried to beckon me over: "Son, I'm here!" Oh, no! now I remember that she is actually my very own mother! What's wrong with me? Is this an onset of Alzheimer's or something? A moment later I was approached by a monk, who said "Come to see me at the temple, ok? They are waiting for you." Come to think about it, that monk is actually Abbot Glab, an old friend of mine since the day we attended a temple school together. He became an abbot after the previous abbot passed away. My memories must have played tricks with me because I didn't remember all this till now! Oh, well, at least I got to a starting point.

I decide to hide in a warehouse, which is supposed to be a storage place for tapioca. The warehouse is full of a damp and pungent smell of tapioca and I can see a gigantic rusty broken machine in the middle of it. The machine is partly hidden in the shadow and partly disclosed by the dim light. A narrow sunbeam is shining through a small hole in the corrugated roof, but it is still hard to see anything clearly. A big pack of rats seem to be the supreme rulers here and I can hear a house lizard trying to break the silence of the place with its noise. I try to gather some of the tapioca in my hands and notice that there seems to be a lot of dirt everywhere. Is this tapioca or dirt? Or are they all mixed together? All of a sudden, I can smell corruption everywhere. Is it really there or is it just my imagination?

I hide in the warehouse for about half an hour to gather my energy and to make sure that no one is following me. Then I get up from a pile of tapioca on which I have been sitting and discreetly walk across the cement floor to a small door on the other side of the warehouse. Once I open the door, I feel my face burnt by strong UV light and bright daylight momentarily blinds me. Outside, there are only stumps on the tapioca fields and the earth looks very dry. Whose warehouse and fields are they? I rack my brains but cannot really recall the name of the owner. (I'm not sure if remembering the

owner's name is that crucial though) While trying to get rid of the dirt and bit and pieces of tapioca from my arms, neck, and face, I feel itchy everywhere and my body stinks. Shielding my eyes from the strong sunlight with one hand, I survey the landscape in front of me and see no one, which is really good. Then I scan from left to right once more. Suddenly, to my shock, someone emerges from a dark corner of the warehouse.

"Abbot Glab! (9)" I exclaim and politely greet him.

"Hello Mr. Siam."

I can't hear him that well so I ask him to speaker louder.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Excuse me Father, ready to go where?'

"They are waiting for you at the temple," he says. 'Please come with me.'

"I can't go with you now, Father. I have to go back to see Dao. She must have been waiting for me."

Abbot Glab says something but I can't hear him. Then he points out to the west and when I look in that direction, I see a big group of people in the distance. They are coming! Those people from the Ministry! I can't waste any more time.

"Let me go back to see Dao first, Father. After that, I will rush to the temple to see you, ok?"

Having said that, I quickly excuse myself and run across the tapioca fields in the direction opposite to where those people are coming from.

If you ask whether I know which direction is the right one, my answer is no. All I can do is run away as fast as I can. Humans have this mysterious form of energy within us and we can always rely on it in an emergency. This kind of energy is derived from our natural instinct to stay away from danger, which is something primitive that has been with us for thousands and thousands of years. You could say that it is actually our missing tail. We often feel that having no tail makes us different from animals, but, my dear Dao, the truth is we still have it, even if very little. It's merely a tiny bit of a tail attached to our sacrum. Let us be warned. We all have to make sure we use this nearly missing tail, or our instinct, time and again!

Once you let your instinct guide you, it's really amazing because there's no need for reasons or careful thinking. You can automatically move forward to ensure your own survival. Look! I'm finally at the entrance of the resort! Once there, I slow down and pretend that I merely went out to have a leisurely stroll. Even though I'm covered in sweat, thus suggesting that I didn't merely go out for a relaxing walk, it does not really matter. One of the staff of the resort is walking along a stone path towards me and when she sees me, she stops and bows politely. For lack of anything better to say, I said to her: The sun is so strong this morning, isn't it? She nodded her head in agreement and said: It's a perfect day to visit a waterfall. If you are interested, please contact our reception desk for information about our guided tours. I thank her and walk away towards my bungalow, whistling to give the impression that I'm quite relaxed.

When I get to the log cabin and open its door, I'm surprised to discover that the bedroom is still very dark. All the pink curtains are still drawn and all the sunlight is blocked off so there is no light in the room. It's dark as if it is still night time even though it's very sunny and bright outside. All of a sudden, I feel dizzy as my eyes are still trying to adjust to the darkness of the room. Then my tummy hurts. I guess my blood pressure is getting too low again. I struggle to find my way to a mini-bar and when I'm there, I open a small fridge and grab a bottle of soft drink. I open it and gulp down the whole contents. Seeing a package of sweets nearby, I pick it up, tear it open, and find a lot of small rounded multi-colored candies coated in chocolate that I pour into my mouth and quickly chew on. I feel much better after that, and I go to sit on a chair looking towards the bed. Dao is still sound asleep and shows no sign of waking up. It's weird that she does not seem disturbed in the least even after I have burst in through the door, quickly opened the fridge door, opened a bottle of soft drink, and torn open a package of sweets to eat those candies. I have no idea what has made her zonk out like that. For a little while, I sit there looking at her while popping those candies into my mouth. Then it occurs to me that I can't waste any more time because they are hunting me down. I have to get out of here as quickly as possible, and I have promised Abbot Glab that I will see him at the temple

soon. No time for a shower for sure. First, I must wake Dao up then I have to pack immediately!

I shake Dao's arm lightly and say: "Dao, please wake up." Her smooth skin is cool to my touch. She certainly has all the qualities of a beautiful woman: she has a gorgeous look, long hair, smooth and fair complexion, and cool skin. I look at her face closely and realize that when a woman sleeps, she looks much younger. I try to wake her up again. This time by shaking her leg and not so lightly anymore, and say to her: "Dao, we've got to go!" There is still no response from her so I sit on the bed next to her and slap her very lightly across the face with my right hand while saying: "Dao! Dao! Can you hear me?" Her eyes are still tightly closed and I guess only her eyeballs are moving back and forth behind those eye lids. This is ridiculous! Why is it so hard to make her wake up? Then it occurs to me that she might wake up if I slap her hard across the face. I look at her smooth and rosy cheeks and imagine how they would redden and become bruised after being slapped, and I feel so sorry for her. I certainly can't slap her like that. Looking back, we have worked hard together for years and some of those years were really exhausting for us because we were trying to make money and we had to travel across provinces seven days a week. When people have been exhausted for so long, it's normal that they need a lot of sleep. Dao also suffers from anemia so she naturally needs more sleep than others. In fact, there have been times that I myself need a lot of sleep too. Sometimes after I finish treating my patients, I doze off while I'm still sitting with a glass of beer in my hand. Dao never disturbs me or tries to wake me up because she wants me to have a good sleep. One day I slept for many hours and didn't wake up till after noon. I didn't see Dao when I woke up so I took a shower and caught a taxi to our clinic. Dao was already there busily looking after patients, greeting those who had just arrived and telling others to wait or come back the next day. She said to them: "The doctor is not here yet. I think he will come in the afternoon." When she saw me, she greeted me sweetly: "Oh, honey, you finally show up! Have you eaten yet?' She is such a dear.

Actually, it won't make any difference if I let her sleep a bit more. She needs plenty of sleep to make her blood become as healthy as other people. She always let me

sleep as much as I want to, so I shouldn't be unkind not to let her. We belong to each other and we know how we can find each other, so it does not really matter if one of us wakes up before or after the other. We both know where we should go to meet the other one.

Once Dao gave me some extra money—thousands of baht—and said: "Please go and have some fun, honey. You have been working so hard all day long." You see, she wanted me to enjoy myself the way men do. At that time, I tried to please her by saying: "It's really not necessary, my love. Being with you is enough to make me happy." Her response was: "No need to sweet talk me. If you keep doing that, I might change my mind and ask you to stay home instead." She knew what I was up to so I chuckled in embarrassment. She continued: "You'd better go and have some fun. Let those pretty girls entertain and please you with their sweet words. I know I'm getting old and I have no sweet words to offer you." I protested: "You always have sweet things to say to me, my dear." But then she said, "Make sure you don't fool around with them though, otherwise you wait and see!" She threatened me further by saying "If I know you sleep around, I would cut off your private parts and feed them to the ducks!"

Dao is fully aware that men need this kind of entertainment. For me, I don't need anything much. I just want to be relaxed and have some fun after a hard day's work. I feel good listening to girls' sweet and pleasing voice and letting them massage me here and there. All this makes me feel young again and I don't really want anything more than that. Men are not complicated and most men are like me in that they don't want anything much. Even though they might be having fun somewhere all day and all night, in the end, they will crawl back home to the ones they love, care for, and feel attached to…Home is always their refuge…

"Enjoy your sleep Dao," I say to her, "I must get going now."

If she wakes up and does not see me here, it really isn't a big deal, in my opinion. I will leave the car for her. If she does not find me at the clinic, she can look for me at the temple. And even if we don't see each other at the clinic and the temple…we can meet at home.

(9) Please try to calm down and listen to me, ok? I have good news for you.

Two days ago, I entered a state of deep meditation and let my soul leave my body in order to look for Mr. Siam. It took me quite a while to find him. He is now in another world, which is a parallel universe that exists for and is visible to lost souls only. If those souls remain in that world too long, they will become independent from their physical beings, or, to put it another way, they will become the homeless ghosts of that world. This is quite worrying because if Mr. Siam lets go of his physical being that still remains in our world, he will not be able to return to his body. Where Mr. Siam is at the moment is full of seduction and temptations and it is very easy for him to accept that he belongs to that world. He has to reject and refuse to take anything there into his soul, but after following him for a while, I realized that he had been led astray by the 'creditor' from his previous life. This 'creditor' appeared to me in the image of a White Buffalo Lord of enormous size. He has curved horns of about 6 metres long and muscular arms and legs. His whole body is fiery red with rage. He is the one who has control over Siam, whips him, and drags him here and there the way he wants. Yes, that's what Mr. Siam's 'creditor' looks like and is doing to him.

However, the thing is I can see his 'creditor' that way because of my special sight. Mr. Siam himself does not see the White Buffalo Lord the way I do, and he is not aware that he has been under his control. It is possible that the White Buffalo Lord has transformed himself into some kind of tempting power or a wish fulfilling gem in order to entice Siam to follow him around willingly. Also, Siam might not be aware that he is being whipped by the White Buffalo Lord but he might have imagined the whipping as loving touches instead. In short, Siam could have imagined the White Buffalo Lord to be anything.

Mr. Siam is now in a space that does not belong to the three worlds of hell, heaven, and the human world. He is on a journey and is being led by his 'creditor' to a very long line of the spirits of dead people and made to wait there with them. The journey to hell is a very long one and they have to pass through many barriers before they get to see the Lord of the Dead and are judged by him. The last barrier before they reach hell will appear to them in the form of a feast. At that time, I followed Siam from afar and tried to send him a message by telepathy, telling him not to eat anything at that feast because if he did, he would be seen as one of the dead. I also tried to make it possible for him to see through those temptations created by the White Buffalo Lord. It did work. Siam suddenly struggled to break free from the control of the White Buffalo Lord and fled. I

didn't know where he fled to because at that moment I had to ask my soul to return to my body, but at least now we know that Siam is aware that he is in danger. And it is better that he runs away instead of staying in that line of the dead who are about to join the feast.

Believe it or not, after my soul returned to my body, I had to meditate for more two days and two nights, and I was shivering when I came out of the meditation. It was quite weird because I had visited hell, which was burning with and surrounded by extremely destructive fires. I had to rest for half a day before I could feel normal again. At first, I planned that when nighttime arrived I would go there again to look for Siam and find out whether he was okay or not. However, I felt so weak so I had to figure out a new way to communicate with him.

I will explain to you my new way of communicating with Siam. First, I put a big brass bowl in front of an altar then I paid homage to a Buddha image before placing it in the middle of the bowl to symbolize the pinnacle of all that is virtuous and pure. After that, I poured sacred water into the bowl until the water covered the lap of the Buddha image. Next, I burnt an incense stick, said a prayer, and set my mind on communicating with Siam. I also lit a candle to help guide Siam's soul. The glowing light of the candle signified my questions to Siam with regard to his whereabouts, while the teardrops were meant to represent the answers he gave me.

Astonishingly and formidably, teardrops of purely white and awfully black colors dripped incessantly one after another into that bowl of sacred water. What was even more breathtaking is that the teardrops kept running anti-clockwise and formed a circle on the surface of the water, with the black drop chasing after the white one. In my reading, the white teardrop represented Siam and the black one represented the White Buffalo Lord. Siam was running for dear life while the revengeful White Buffalo Lord was chasing after him in rage. The chase appeared like a circle of life with the Buddha sitting in the middle of the bowl looking at it in resignation. Based on what I had seen, I could immediately tell that Siam was still on a run without any refuge or anywhere to go.

I asked Siam: "You know that you have been misled, right? Do you want to return home?"

One of the white teardrops began to run faster and faster round and round.

"How would you like me to bring you back?" I asked further.

Suddenly, the white teardrop that had started to run faster gradually slowed down and moved towards the lap of the Buddha image until it eventually stopped still in the hand of the Buddha. The black teardrops kept running around in circle and none followed the white teardrop in the Buddha's hand.

What message is sent to us through this vision?

Now you all listen to me carefully, ok? Mrs. Dao in particular must pay attention to what I'm going to tell you.

There is only one way to defeat the White Buffalo Lord and bring Siam back to life. A refuge must be built for Siam as his hiding place and shelter, and as an entrance to the world of humans. Siam's bad deeds from his previous life have caused him horrific misery and in order to help him, a good deed that yields great merit must be urgently performed otherwise it might be too late.
You have to organize for a big Buddha image to be built.

I have pointed a way out of darkness for you and in following it, you will gain merit.

(The above view belongs to Abbot Glab.)

Stigmatized

To rid myself of the curiosity that keeps nagging me after being told by Abbot Glab that there are people waiting for me at the temple, I decide to go to see him at the temple first. I wonder what he means when he said ‘everyone is at the temple waiting for you.’ My head is being bitten off by curiosity, similar to the sun being gradually swallowed by an eclipse. This curiosity is an out of place dark shadow, like a wig in the middle of a bald man’s head.

I finally get to the village temple where Abbot Glab resides. By the side of a road near the entrance to the temple, there are about 5 or 6 villagers sitting around blocking the way into the temple gate. Some of those villagers were looking at their cattle and buffaloes which are grazing nearby, while others are surrounded by chickens pecking on the ground for food. There are also those who have monkeys or pigs with them. I feel very surprised to see those villagers and the creatures they keep near a temple entrance like this. Don’t they have a better place to keep their animals? I walk cautiously towards the temple gate and when I feel sure that those villagers are not there to capture me, I feel more relieved. I notice that there are two old men guarding the gate on its left and right, and the one on the left beckons me over and says come in quick! The abbot is waiting for you. Ok, no worries, I say, and walk through the gate into the temple. Suddenly, havoc erupts outside the temple when those five or six villagers try to get through the temple with their animals. They beg the two old men to let them go into the temple, but they are told that they are not allowed to. The old men then urge me to walk straight ahead without looking back. There is nothing I can do but follow their advice, leaving the racket made by those villagers behind me.

I walk towards Abbot Glab’s abode, which is located near a medium-sized pond full of duckweed that gives it a dark green surface. Undoubtedly, beneath the duckweed are various kinds of fish, all well-fed and roaming free without having to worry about

being caught, as the pond is located in a sanctuary where killing is forbidden. In the middle of the pond is a small gazebo and the abbot is meditating there while waiting for me.When I get a bit closer, he opens his eyes and gets up as if he knows in advance about my arrival. But then he raises his hand and gestures that I must not walk towards him. This is odd. I don't really know what he wants me to do.

"Wait! Mr. Siam," he yells out a warning from the gazebo. "You can't walk across the wooden bridge to this gazebo!"

"Excuse me, Father? I can't hear you."

"You can't walk across the bridge to this gazebo."

"Oh, why can't I?"

"You are too heavy. The bridge will collapse under your weight."

I start to hesitate. This is weird. He asked me to come here himself but now he is making things hard for me. I didn't really want to come here. Also, he told me that there are people waiting for me here, but where are they? From what I see, he is the only one sitting in that gazebo.

"If you want to ask me to do anything for you, please let me know now. I have something urgent to attend to so I'm afraid I must get going soon." I start to show my annoyance.

"Wait, Mr. Siam. Your most urgent business is here and there is nothing more important than this."

Does he want me to solve a moral riddle or something? I say to myself.

"You told me that there are people waiting for me here. I see none of them."

"They are with me here, waiting for you."

"I don't see anyone."

"The fact that you can't see them doesn't mean that they are not here."

Here he goes again, trying to make things so hard to understand.

"There are many things you can't see at the moment, but those things will appear before your very eyes once you jump into the water."

You are kidding me! I exclaim to myself.

“Why do you want me to jump into the water, Father?”

“I beg you to jump into the water. It’s really important. Then swim towards me and others who are waiting for you in this gazebo. Once you have done that, truth will be revealed to you.”

“No way! I won’t do that.”

“Do you know that you didn’t come here alone?”

What exactly is he up to? Not only does he ask me to jump into the pond, but he also tries to scare me with something weird. I turn to look around me but can see no one.

“You came here with a creditor from your past life,” he says. “When you were about to pass through the temple gate, you saw those villagers in front of the temple, right? They are wandering ghosts and all of them have their ‘creditors’ with them. Those ghosts want to enter the gate but the guards have stopped them. You could pass through the gate because I asked the guards to let you in. You are not fated to die yet.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Father.” Trepidation creeps up my spine and I immediately feel that there is a black shadow standing behind my back towering over me.

“You are being hunted down. (10)”

That’s exactly what’s happening to me! “You are right, Father,” I say.

“It’s good you are aware of that. You have to cut short his revenge by jumping into the water and swim to me.”

“Why can’t I just walk across the bridge?” I try to bargain.

“If you walk across the bridge, your ‘creditor’ will follow you. You have to swim and this pond is a sacred one so the ‘creditor’ can’t jump into it.”

I’m still hesitating

“Don’t waste more time. Your time is running out. That White Buffalo Lord behind you is about to attack you with his horns!”

Hearing that, the four joints of my tailbone come to life and immediately send a warning signal to my brain in a flash. It is like lightning has struck me and I plunge into the water.

I'm immediately overwhelmed by a freezing cold, but it's not just the water that is very cold. Everything feels strange—the mud stinks, the stale and damp smell of water plants and duckweed is horrible, and the slimy and wet feel of the underwater world gives me creeps. I also feel that my face is being washed over by all kinds of stuff, and bubbles pop up everywhere and burst open in my face. All around me, the water is turning into thick mud color liquid, and I feel so disgusted.

"What else do I do now?" I yell.

"Swim towards me quickly!" he yells back.

Even though I have gathered all of my strength and tried to swim, my body does not seem to move anywhere. It is almost like I'm swimming while being rooted to one spot, and my limbs feel so weak and have no energy left in them.

I turn to look at the other side of the pond where I jumped from and see nothing there. Then I hear the abbot's voice urging me to swim to the gazebo in the middle of the pond and telling me that the While Buffalo Lord has just jumped into the water to follow me. In that moment, I hear a big splash of water and when I look in the direction of the noise, I see a huge and muscular being with the head of a buffalo and the body of a human. His skin is rather fair and pinky and he is twice my size. He is heading towards me and I let out a shriek. This is the first time I have seen something like this. The sacred water in the pond has revealed the true form of my 'creditor', and the abbot has been right all along, except one thing! He told me that that monster wouldn't be able to jump into the pond to chase after me and that's not true!

I try once more to gather all my energy together and use both arms to propel myself. Then I turn to the right and dive beneath the muddy water along the edge of the pond trying my best to hold my breath as long as I can and keep pushing myself forward.

When I emerge above the water again, I find myself on the other side of the pond. The White Buffalo Lord is still persistently following me. Before that, I was concentrating on getting away from him so I dived and swam aimlessly around the pond and completely forgot that the abbot wants me to swim to the gazebo. All that time the abbot was shouting his encouragement to me, but in that kind of emergency I couldn't

hear him because my sense of hearing was marred by fright. Then when I can hear him yelling at me to swim to the gazebo, I find myself on the other side of the pond. I cling to the edge as I need to take a rest and catch my breath. We humans have limited energy and we were not created to live under water. Being under water for just a little while exhausts me physically and spiritually. We were created to be on the earth, to live our lives, earn a living, and survive ashore. Enough is enough!

The abbot is still yelling at me: "You only have a little more to go. Please just swim towards the gazebo. It's not that far…. Pull yourself together and try once more."

But I have already decided for myself. Having no energy left means having no energy, and even if it's not that far at all to go, I can't do it, and that's that. My hope is gone. More importantly, the White Buffalo Lord is not following me anymore. Instead, he is swimming around the gazebo and it's obvious that he has come up with a repulsive plan to wait for me there and seize hold of me. All of a sudden, I feel annoyed and angry at the abbot who keeps wanting me to do this and that but does not offer me any help at all. That bloody White Buffalo Lord is by the gazebo and so near him at this moment. He could easily hit that Buffalo Lord with his staff, and that will be a big help to me.

Come to think about it, what happened some minutes ago was all because of him. He told me to do this and that-- things I didn't intend to do in the beginning. For the start, he asked me to come to see him at the temple, then he wanted me to jump into the pond and swim to him as he was waiting in the gazebo in the middle of the pond. After that, the White Buffalo Lord revealed himself. All these are incomprehensible to me but they all happened because of the abbot, him alone. And he does not tell me clearly what exactly he wants from me. He keeps withholding things from me, so I see no point exhausting myself. It wasn't that awful when I had to run away from those Ministry people because I could manage to get away from them. What I don't understand now is why I have to swim to the gazebo and, apparently, doing that does not help me in any way.

I look at the edge of the pond and the vast land that stretches to the far distance ahead of me, and I feel that out there I have many chances to save myself. However, there

is only one chance offered to me by the abbot—swimming to the gazebo. My mind is made up. I'm not going to do what the abbot asks me to anymore. I gather whatever energy I have left and heave myself out of the sticky water of that pond. Then I balance myself and run at my fastest towards the vast land ahead of me, leaving the stunned abbot and the White Buffalo Lord behind.

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(10) To the dear listeners of our community radio, I'm Chalermlarp, your DJ, and I have an important announcement, an urgent one and sent directly from the Ministry. I've just been informed about it myself and I was told to make this announcement known among our local communities. The announcement is about a person the Ministry wants to get hold of. We are advised to be vigilant against his presence and whoever spots him must turn him in to the Ministry.

According to the authorities, the name of this person is Mr Siam Duangsukk. He is 57 years old, has a ruddy yellowish complexion, and is about 159 cm tall. He had been a practitioner of traditional medicine and it seems that he was originally from Saraburi's Kaeng Khoi district, a local, so to speak. He is a wanted man because it is believed that he has been involved in a fraud. He also tries to subvert the power of the state, and, lately, it has been found that he acts in a way that shows disrespect towards democracy. He clearly wants to replace it with a different governing system and because of this, he is allegedly a traitor, someone who wants to change the current governing system and advocate separatism… This is a very serious criminal offence against the state. Strong evidence of his traitorous intention can be found when he raised a question concerning a certain word coined by the state. That question of his originated from his ill intention to insult the public and deeply distress them.

If you will excuse me, I will not repeat Mr. Siam's disgraceful question because I'm afraid doing so is a violation of the law, even if unintentionally. However, I think you can easily guess what he had said. What sort of thing would be perceived by the authorities as deeply distressing to the public enough to warrant a charge of treason, you see?

To be frank with you, I admit that I have seen Mr. Siam before even though he was merely an acquaintance. He has always been a dubious character. When he was a university student, he joined the Communist Party of Thailand, and later he was involved in illegal business dealings. I have also heard that he was friendly with those who were extremist capitalists, and he sought to trigger pro-

western sentiments that disregard our beloved traditional customs and culture. Regarding his latest movement, he has become involved with a political party that secretly advocates the change of our current governing system. Even though it is not widely known, he is actually a member of that party, a party that sought to destroy the precious traditional customs and culture our ancestors sacrificed their lives to protect. That party knows nothing about gratitude or doing things for our ancestors and our motherland in return for all the good things they have given us. Worse, it is a party that provides refuge to traitors, people like that Siam guy. You can never trust that party because it never does what it proclaims to do, and it never shows sincerity or tells the truth about what it wants. Its real goal is to radically change our country and transform everything into immoral capitalism. Only the rich benefit from its policies and it wants to make people selfish and competitive. In short, it knows nothing about morality, and it wants to change our motherland and our national independence that our ancestors defended with their blood and lives into immoral capitalism. It wants to make sure that foreigners can do whatever they want with our country—buying, selling, owning shares, etc. etc., and soon enough we will lose our motherland!

The government has been trying hard to get rid of those traitors, and even though this is an arduous and time consuming mission, it has to be done for the sake of Thai people. The exposure of that Siam guy is an example that shows how the government never neglects this issue. The authorities kept investigating it until all the necessary evidence was found and it is clear to them that the guy is truly a traitor who became a member of that political party in order to bring about destruction upon our country.

For this reason, the Ministry has made the announcement that if anyone comes across this guy, please inform the authorities or detain him to ensure that he will be brought to justice.

That is all of my important announcement, dear listeners. If any of you want more details about it, you can access them from the Ministry's website. Our radio station will also broadcast them through our website and Facebook page, and if anyone has information about the movement of this guy, they can contact us via these channels.

This guy's hideous behavior is absolutely awful. Before a short break, let us listen to a song to improve our mood. I have picked a song that will encourage us to love our motherland and to recognize the vital importance of our national sovereignty. My choice is the song 'Scum of the Earth' and I hope you enjoy it. I will be back after this song.

(This section is the announcement made by the community radio.)

Publicly Persecuted

I run for dear life. You could say that I run aimlessly with the sole purpose of fleeing that place. If that pond made my ‘creditor’ reveal himself, I assume that the dry land will make him invisible again. It is easier for me to handle him because if I can’t see him, I won’t be scared of him, right?

Even though I run without thinking about where I should be heading to, the instinct from the four joints of my tailbone has already determined the destination for me. To be expected, when I regain my composure, I find myself in front of the log cabin and this time I determine to wake Dao up no matter what. However, after I push open the door of the cottage, I see a housekeeper inside the bedroom pulling out the bedsheet. I yelled out: Dao! Dao! Where are you? The housekeeper looks stunned to see me bursting in and she anxiously asks: Who are you looking for, sir? I’m looking for the lady who stays here and was sleeping in this bedroom earlier, I explain to her. Oh she has checked out and left the resort about half an hour ago, sir.

After knowing that, I feel so confused and at a loss of what to do next. It is like I have been cut off from people close to me and have no way to communicate with them. Today I have encountered no one but strangers and those whom I don’t know what they are up to.

Eventually, I decide to leave that resort although I’m not sure where I’m heading to.

Dusk is arriving and the dark blue paved road ahead of me looks abandoned as it has no traffic at all. I follow the road aimlessly and I don’t even know where on Earth I am. I see only hills on both sides of the road. Suddenly, I hear noises that seem to come from a big group of people chatting, so I jump to the side of the road, trying to hide myself from them. I stay behind rows of tall dry grass while a single cab ute carrying lots of people in its back runs past me. Then I see another vehicle, this time a six-wheeler

truck, also with many passengers. All of them are wearing a headband and waving a flag. A big sign made of cloth hangs down the side of the truck but I can't read it as I'm trying to hide from their view. Then comes the third vehicle, a ute with an extra cab, and the fourth one, which is another single cab ute laden with passengers.

As the last vehicle is about to pass and leave me behind, someone in it yells out: "There! He's there!" This is immediately followed by a few voices asking: "Where?" "Who are you talking about?" After that, everyone seems to be banging the side of the truck they are in and ask the driver to stop. They are yelling out that the traitor is right there. I waste no more time and rush out of the rows of dry grass and run towards a forest, hoping that my quick escape would at least give me an advantage over those people in their trucks. It takes a while for the trucks to stop and for those people to communicate to one another what is going on, and when I turn to look at them again, it seems that they are about 300 metres away from me. I make the best of that distance and run at my fastest into the forest further away from the road. Those people have gradually got off the trucks and are heading across the fields intending to capture me.

Suddenly, the abbot appears in front of me out of the blue and that startles me out of my wits. He is blocking my way, but I tell him: With all due respect, I'm not going to dive into that pond ever again, Father. However, the abbot keeps following me and tries to persuade me to go back to the pond with him, insisting that it is the only way to save me. He says: I have to look for you again because Mrs. Dao begged me to. Hearing that, I hesitate and say: Father, I find it hard to believe you because when I was at the temple, I didn't see anyone but you there. The abbot insisted that he does not make things up and adds that Dao came to see him a while ago, and when she didn't see me, she was really worried. When the abbot mentions Dao's anxiety and concern, I feel so sorry for her and at the same time also feel depressed and overtired. I don't really know what to do as I'm in a very difficult situation and I'm being hunted down. (I scratch my head, hoping that a great idea will pop up and save me.) The abbot then comforts me by putting his arm around my shoulder and promises that he will protect me. All I need to do is to go back to the pond with him. It is at that moment that I hear a whizzing sound close to my ear and

the next second I feel a heavy blow on the back of my neck. I collapse to the ground and am surrounded by a few men, who block off my view of the abbot until I can no longer see him.

The next second they start to kick and beat me. Heavy blows come from all directions and I try to get up but find it impossible to do so. I hear the abbot's voice trying in vain to stop those people from assaulting me. It is only when I almost lose my consciousness that they start to give me a break.

The abbot intervenes and tries to shield me from them. I feel confused and numb and can't help expressing my disappointment at the abbot:

"Father, you said you would protect me!"

The abbot tells me he is not aware that I'm being hunted down by so many enemies. Then he turns to those people who have attacked me and asks why they have to resort to the use of force.

In response, those people pour out horrendous accusations against me. They say I'm ungrateful and disrespectful, and that I'm a traitor who has infiltrated himself into the national system in order to destroy it. They also claim that I want to undermine righteousness and law, and after knowing that I'm a wanted man from a public announcement, they volunteer to hunt me down to bring me to justice.

Trying to bring them to their senses, the abbot reprimands them:

"But what you are doing is really unjust. You have taken the law into your own hands. Aren't you ashamed or guilty at all for beating up him like this?"

"Hurting a wicked man is not sinful," one of them shouts out, "and even if we kill him, it's not sinful."

"How do you know that he is wicked? What makes it possible for you to judge him that way?"

"The government has made it clear in their announcement that this guy is a bad man and has to be captured and brought to justice."

At that point, I'm finally able to get up and I shout at them in bitterness and anger, 'but even the law you like to quote does not give you the right to assault me. You act as if

you hold personal animosity against me, and as if you have been licensed by the justice system to take law into own your hands without having to be bothered by shame.'

"See, he is acting like a smartass again. He needs to be beaten up until that kind of smartness is drained out from him!"

I can see that a big group of their members has caught up with them by now and soon the maddening rage against me will erupt again. I notice that one of their leaders, a man who looks like an extremist with the power to embolden the mob and persuade them to do what he wants, is approaching the abbot and acting as if he does not mind a bit of compromise.

"Father, I can't stop the crowd from sharing and expressing the same sentiment. They come together because they are outraged, and you have to try to see things from our perspective. We have suffered from the consequence of his actions. We have been cheated, deceived, made confused, and led astray because this guy disobeys the law."

"That does not mean that what you are doing is right though," the abbot says, "This is an awful thing in our society. When the accused is taken to a crime scene to reenact a crime he allegedly committed, people like you guys often like to crowd around when that kind of thing happens. The police don't dare to do anything and the law lets you do what you want. If all of you happen to feel so outraged at the accused and beat him to death, the police and the law seem to simply turn a blind eye to it. The police probably come up with an explanation like yours—that it is not possible to stop the crowd from sharing and expressing the same sentiment. And those who do not take part in this kind of mob violence are most likely to ignore it as well. They might think that if the crime was committed against their parents, siblings, or close relatives, they would do the same to the criminal as well. In my opinion, you refer to the law so that you could release the barbaric and violent instinct within you. In fact, none of you has any personal conflict with the person you are hunting down. I wonder what is it in your heart that makes you crave for violence and barbaric action and deprive you of conscience and shame."

"That's enough, Father!" That leader says, "I think you'd better go back to your temple and deliver a sermon to those interested. What we are dealing with here belongs to

the secular world, something you probably don't know much about. You have knowledge about the spiritual world and that is good, but you don't know that secular matters can be really complicated. I'm telling you this because I mean well for you. If you keep criticizing us, you might get in trouble yourself. So my advice to you is please go back to your temple before it is too late. If you keep going the way you are, you yourself might be charged with treason. Don't get involved with this traitor. Believe me, don't interfere anymore and you'd better go back to your temple."

That is the way I guess things will turn out anyway. In fact, when I heard their leader say "Enough Father!", I decided to run off. That made the crowd quite confused and unsure, as they couldn't decide whether they should stay there and continue listening to that leader or run after me.

After escaping from them for just a little while, I notice that what lies ahead of me appears to be a dead end—a steep embankment of about 12-14 metres high leading down to a river. However, I do not let this obstruction slow me down. As soon as I get to the embankment, I jump down into the river and swim across it to the other side. Once there, I hide behind a tree waiting to see what will happen next. Soon those people crowd the other side of the river but none of them have the guts to jump into the river. Then one of them shouts through a loudspeaker:

"Please turn yourself in, Mr. Siam. You won't be able to escape. All of us who want you to surrender are waiting on this side of the river."

I poke my head out from behind the tree to find out who is speaking and discover that the speaker is the Deputy Chief of the Sub-district Administrative Organization.

"Mr. Siam, I'm sure you can hear me. Please come out to talk to us. The people who are with me here want you to do so. They have the right to demand an explanation from you as to why you made such a decision."

What decision you are talking about? I argue with him in my mind. At first, out of the blue, you people wanted me to become the Executive Chief of the Sub-district Administrative Organization but after I refuse to activate that card, you turn me into a criminal and hunt me down as if I was the most detested enemy from your previous life.

A middle-aged woman yells at him: “That power was bestowed on you by the government, but you treat it as if is a joke. Have you ever considered that what you have done has caused a lot of grief to us?”

A spectacled man chimes in: “Those rules and regulations have been well-established. Who are you to disobey them? What on earth makes you think you are entitled to violate them?”

The crowd cheers loudly to show their approval of what he has said.

The Deputy then tries to caution those people: “Wait a minute. Please try to calm down. We should not intimidate him but should give him a chance to explain himself. Right now he is merely a suspect and has not been found guilty yet.”

Suddenly, a woman’s piercing voice screams abuse at me: “You thick-skinned shameless coward! You did something despicable and you wouldn’t admit it.”

That voice triggers a sharp pain in my heart and I’m overwhelmed by bitterness. What have I done to her to make her yell obscenities at me like that?

I shout back: “What have I done to hurt you? You come here in a big crowd wanting to capture me, but I know none of you and I’m sure that you don’t know me personally. So why do you act as if you really hate me and want to deprive me of my freedom and hurt me?”

In response to my questions, I hear loud voices from the other side of the river. One of them says, “Yes, we don’t know you, but this is a good opportunity for you to tell us who you are and why you did such things to us.”

“What have I done to you?” I ask them.

“We don’t have to answer you. You know full well what you have done. Deputy, can you kindly enlighten this stupid guy?”

Another voice yells obscenities at me; “Idiot! You don’t know what you did? You refuse to obey rules and regulations! That’s what you did!”

Then the deputy’s voice interrupts them: “Please try to calm down everyone. Mr. Siam, our people here always respect and cherish rules and regulations and they have strived to maintain them. When all of a sudden you refuse to obey them, it’s normal that

they are outraged and see it as unfair. When you break rules and regulations, it's like you are hurting our people as well. Thus, you have no right to say that you never personally harm any of them because you have actually hurt vital principles in their lives. For now, that's all I want to explain with regard to one of your questions. Also, your claim that none of us personally know you is not true. You see this person here? He is Mr. Somjai and he is one of us. Mr. Somjai, can you please try to make your friend come to his senses?"

I'm very surprised to see Somjai walking out of the crowd.

"Siam, as a friend, I really want you to turn yourself in otherwise things will get worse. Your family will be in trouble as well because the government will seize control of everything you own. Your mum and bother will suffer from shame. Do you want them to be ostracized? Believe me, come out and admit that you are guilty. Our society always forgives those who show regrets, my friend."

In that moment, I'm overwhelmed by bitterness and loneliness. In time of crisis like this, people who are close to me –my mother, my brother, and Dao—are nowhere to be seen. And the abbot cannot help me. Worse, a friend I trust refuses to stand by me. Come to think about it, deep down I know all along what sort of guy Somjai is, even though I try to ignore it. He always manages to be in a position from which he can demand and bargain. Now he wants me to swim across the river back to him and the crowd on the other side. I remember that when we were kids and went to a waterfall to have some fun, he dared me to jump down in a weird pose from a high point of the waterfall into a river below. His intention was to hurt me and make me accept my defeat.

What is all this about? At first, it was not a big deal at all, but then it somehow becomes entangled with immorality and the violation of rules and regulations, and it draws hatred from people who are total strangers to me. What sort of situation is this? This is hell for sure. This is exactly what hell is like. Hell is not a place full of destructive fires but it is actually a situation I have encountered today that makes me so lonely, so disoriented, and unable to control anything.

The deputy tries to communicate with me through a loudspeaker again: ‘Please come out of your hiding, Mr. Siam’

I no longer want to respond to anything he says. I’m making up my mind about what to do.

After a big while of silence, the crowd gets frustrated as they don’t know what I’m up to.

Dusk has arrived and darkness has spread everywhere. Then I hear someone say: “It’s very likely that he can act as a smartass in the dark only.” Oh, well, I can’t really control what people think and say about me, and it is too late to correct their misunderstanding. By now some people in the crowd have lost patience and one yells out: “If you want to stay on that side, stay there and don’t come back. People and the land on this side don’t want you here!”

What that person has said helps me make a final decision. Shrouded in darkness, I get up and stagger towards the jungle ahead of me.

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(11) It is really sad and unfortunate. We were nearly successful but Mr. Siam passed away before things were accomplished. However, I can assure you that we almost succeeded in bringing back Mr. Siam’s soul and returning it to his body. There were two factors that made our mission fail. The first one was because Mr. Siam’s relatives gave up on him prematurely, and the second one was due to the fact that Mr. Siam’s creditor was extremely intent on exacting revenge on him.

But the truth is Mr. Siam’s soul actually tried hard to fight against his creditor, and I can testify to this because my soul had left my body in order to help him. I did try my best to help him. If one’s soul is strong, it can pass through all obstacles, no matter what condition the body is in. Even if the body is extremely weak and paralyzed, or has been diagnosed as having no chance to survive, a strong soul that determines to live will find its way back to its body, no matter how hard it is. In Mr. Siam’s case, his life and soul have not been extinguished yet because the torch of his life is meant to go on. However, because his body is no longer alive, how could his soul return to his body?

I agree with you that many things are not right and, like you, I also feel rather upset that we were the only two people trying to bring Mr. Siam’s soul back to this world. Others did not

understand what we were trying to do and they also tried to obstruct us. Actually, to let Mr Siam stay in hospital for a little while longer was not a hassle at all. I had told them that less than a week was needed to know whether what we were trying to do would be successful or not. In fact, I had assured them that I could help Mr. Siam's soul to return to his body. Furthermore, it is not really a doctor's business to tell a patient's relatives that there is no need to keep the patient in hospital as his condition gets worse and worse with no sign of improvement. And it is quite unacceptable for a doctor to say that to continue keeping the patient in hospital is a waste of money and that it is better to bring the patient home. Still, Mr. Siam's relatives agreed with the doctor and they all went to the hospital to bring him home. The outcome? After being brought home for less than a day, Mr. Siam passed away.

And now what will Mr. Siam's soul do?

His life is not meant to end yet, but he has no body to return to. His soul will keep wandering here and there and remain homeless, a really pitiful state. Some of his close relatives approached me to ask: "Father, he is at peace now, right?" What else could I say except "Yes, I suppose so."

However, the truth is that Mr. Siam still hangs around trying to find his way back. His body is no longer alive, but his soul can't go anywhere because he is not meant to die yet. I can only reveal this truth to certain people, and I have chosen to reveal it to you, Mrs. Dao.

With the death of Mr. Siam, some people's duty towards him may have ended, but others may still feel that there are still some lingering obligations. For a doctor, his job is to treat a physical body and when that body is no longer alive, the doctor has no more duty. Similarly, Mr. Siam's relatives organize a cremation ritual for his body and when that ritual is done, they have no more secular obligation towards him. For a monk like me, things are different because my obligation towards Mr. Siam is not over yet, and I believe that it is the same with you. You probably feel that there are still some unfinished affairs between yourself and Mr. Siam. If we still have some attachment towards another person, it's better to complete what we want to do for him so as not to have lingering worries. Don't you agree with me?

I certainly sympathize with you, who feel betrayed, exploited, and disappointed that things unexpectedly turned out this way. It is impossible for us to know what kind of person Mr Siam truly was. We will never know whether Mr. Siam was really that awful guy some people believe him to be or not. Personally, I believe that he was a good person, and this I could tell from his behavior. I

think you feel the same way about him, don't you? When he was with you, he was nice to you, right? It's important that we stick to what we personally know about him.

We have to ensure that we help Mr. Siam travel to where he is supposed to be. We can't leave things half- finished otherwise his soul has to keep wandering aimlessly and it will be like we commit a sin against him ourselves.

I sincerely want to ask you to help me guide Mr. Siam to his last refuge. For my part, I can only provide guidance, and it is up to Mr. Siam's relatives to set up a refuge for him. I think you are the only one whose financial support I can rely on because it is unlikely that Mr. Siam's other relatives would offer any help. Mr. Siam relies on your mercy now Mrs. Dao.

The reason I ring you today is because I want to ask whether you will still continue to provide financial support for the construction of the big Buddha statue as we have agreed earlier. If your answer is yes, I will be quite relieved, as I have already organized for part of the construction to get started. I don't want the whole thing to come to a standstill simply because Mr. Siam has passed away. Like what I said before, even though Mr. Siam's body is no longer alive, his soul still hangs around. That is why I believe our duty towards him is not over yet. If you assure me that you will still go ahead with your plan to support the construction of the Buddha image, I will perform a ritual to release my soul from my body so that it can travel to see Mr. Siam again tonight. I will let him know that he will have a place to stay, a place that is a refuge for him, and he won't have to wander around like a homeless spirit. I will inform him that you have organized for a Buddha statue to be built so that he can stay under the protection of the Buddha and no harm will bother him. The Buddha statue will be his refuge until the day his time in this world ends and he can be reborn in another world and have a better life there.

You have no objection to what I have proposed, right? Now I feel much more relived. Oh, and if you have any question in your mind, please do not hesitate me to ring me, ok? Bless you and have a good day.

(The above view belongs to Abbot Glab.)

Waiting for Mr. A.

Luckily, it is a full moon night and the whole forest is lit up. Actually, where I'm at this moment is not really a forest, as it looks somewhat like a residential area with a sizable paved road, big enough for two cars to easily pass each other in opposite directions. All around me, insects are buzzing intermittently, and occasionally I can hear noises from trees and branches breaking off. Am I scared? Not in the least. There is nothing scarier than what I have just encountered. I actually feel at peace and I'm no longer exhausted. I also feel safer here, and being here is like I can leave the past behind (12). Even that 'creditor' from my past life seems to leave me alone for once.

The bright moonlight makes it easy for me to stroll along the road up a small hill until I get to a sharp bend. Then I notice a flickering lamp light some 10 meters or so away from me and I hesitate a little. By the side of the road is a makeshift shelter and there are two men there. One of them is lying down while the other is sitting and looking straight at me. Unsure whether they are part of a group that is chasing after me or not, I stop and try to figure out what to do. Both men are looking at me now, and the one who was lying down before is getting up and nudged the one next to him while asking whether I'm the person they are waiting for. The latter looks uncertain and decides to ask:

"Are you Mr. A.?"

In this kind of situation, I'd rather say no than yes, even if I'm the real Mr. A. Once I say no, however, both look downcast and disappointed. Based on their reactions, I feel that they are probably harmless, but I still hesitate to approach them.

"Then who are you?" He asked again.

"I'm lost," I reply and walk a little closer to them.

"Are you waiting for Mr. A. like us?"

"No," I answer.

Hearing that he says, “Then how come you show up here? Everyone coming here is hoping to see Mr. A.”

The other man invites me to come into the shelter. As both look friendly and do not seem to be connected to those people who are hunting me down, I decide to join them in the shelter.

“So you both are waiting for Mr. A.?” I ask.

“Yes, we are,” says the one who has just sat up. He looks older than his friend. Then he says,

“At first we thought you were Mr. A.”

“Yes, and we were quite excited,” the other one who looks younger chimes in.

“Who is this Mr. A.? And why do you have to wait for him?” I ask.

“He is the one who can open the gate for us.”

“The gate?”

“It’s the gate of the castle.” The younger one explains to me and points to the other side of the paved road.

At that moment, it occurs to me that lying ahead of me is a hill on which a large estate occupying more than 4 acres of land is located. In front of the estate is a towering dark gate with golden rims. There is a moonlit concrete path leading from the gate to a grand and awe-inspiring castle that is elaborately decorated with bright and fantastic lights in all of its corners. The refractions of those lights look both fascinating and sophisticated. Who is that great personage who resides in this estate?

“I suppose you have been lost like what you said,” the older man says, “But it’s quite odd because hardly anyone is lost around here because everyone comes here in order to wait for a chance to be allowed to enter the castle.”

“But before they can enter the castle, they have to wait for Mr. A because he is the only one who can open the gate,” the younger one adds. “We have been waiting for him for almost a week and when we saw you, we were so pleased as we thought you were Mr. A.”

I laugh in embarrassment. I feel somewhat guilty for disappointing them. In fact, although I'm not Mr. A, I was almost appointed as Mr. A(dministrative Sub-district Organization Executive Chief) with overwhelming votes, and I find that somewhat amusing.

"But why do you have to enter the castle?" I ask out of curiosity.

"Our problems require special attention. We were dragged into a mess that we didn't cause. Then we were misunderstood and maliciously accused of doings stuff we didn't do until everyone hates us. Going into the castle is our last chance to lodge an appeal and be pardoned," the old man explains.

"We have to get into the castle because it is our last chance to appeal for a pardon," the younger one emphasizes. "It is the only chance that can help us return to the other side."

"We have to say that we are guilty even though we have done nothing wrong because we want our normal life back," the old man says bitterly.

"For this reason, we have to wait for Mr. A.," the younger one sums up.

Thinking about it, my case is hardly different from theirs. I was encouraged and pushed to do something that deep down I myself also wanted, but it was actually a trap. I was too excited and pleased to see things clearly, and before I knew it, I was totally trapped. The longer it goes, the harder it is for me to break free from it.

"Isn't there anyone in the castle who can come out and accept your appeal so that you don't have to wait for Mr. A.?" I ask.

"We have been waiting for almost a week and we didn't see anyone there," the older man replies.

"I guess the great man in the castle can't come out and receive our appeal by himself because it does not befit a man in his position. I think someone else has to present an appeal to him for his consideration," the younger man guesses.

"Or it is possible that there is no one in the castle. Both the one who wants to lodge an appeal and the one who will consider it are outside the castle. Perhaps it is only once in a long while that they go into the castle."

“We know nothing and all we can do is imagine things while waiting,” the older man says.

“We can only wait for M. A.,” the younger man says.

“Why don’t you wait here with us? Mr. A. might show up tomorrow, you know,” the old man invites me to join them.

I nod in assent, although I have no desire to wait for Mr. A. or enter the castle. What happens is that I’m touched and soothed by the growing friendship between me and the two men, as we seem to share the same plight. This budding friendship under the flickering lamp light within this makeshift shelter makes me want to spend a night with them and talk about what we have been through and any other stuff we might want to share. Our paths cross and we are similarly looking forward to something.

“Have you had dinner yet?” the older man asks.

“Not yet,” I answer.

“Let’s have dinner together,” he says.

We sit in a circle and the younger man puts a bamboo woven container of glutinous rice in the middle of our circle then lifts its lid. I can smell the fragrance of cooked rice mixed with the slightly damp smell of the container, and my mind wanders off to a faraway place. The older man unties a rubber band that tightens a plastic bag containing sun-dried salted meat and distributes a small piece of the meat to each of us. I feel that the blended smell of glutinous rice, bamboo woven container, and salted meat is the smell of the two men’s lives and of mine as well.

Before I know it, tears are streaming down my cheeks. I apologize to the two men and explain that it’s the exhaustion and overexcitement that make me emotional, and the younger man tells me that I’d better lie down and rest after finishing my dinner. I thank both of them for being so kind and generous to me.

After the meal is over, I lie down and as I’m about to doze off, I can hear the two men chatting in soft low voices next to me. I imagine that when they first met about almost week ago, they probably started off their conversation by greeting each other and trying to get to know each other more before sharing their problems. After spending a

few nights in this shelter together, they might have chatted about their lives, families, people in general, as well as their own hopes and dreams. Now they no longer talk about that stuff and their conversation at this point is dominated by what they think might happen and the way they imagine things might turn out, as well as rumor and hearsay. To be honest, they now talk about what seems impossible, but perhaps talking about that kind of stuff makes them feel that what they are waiting for is not something beyond reach.

They want to go into the castle—to become part of the system that had once recognized them but then rejected them. Right now they are waiting to see whether the system will welcome them back or not. They have to endure all the tests administered to them by the system before being told whether they pass or fail the tests. They see no other choice but to accept whatever is decreed for them. I, on the other hand, have no desire to enter the castle or lodge an appeal, and I don't want to apologize. Like what I have experienced before with the Ministry, once you go in there, you can't come out and a whole new series of events will be triggered.

Life is a mess and a mere slight movement can attract trouble. Nonetheless, they have made up their mind about what to do—they will wait for Mr. A. and wait to be allowed into the castle. Based on what I have encountered before, I can't help imagining that if they are allowed to enter the castle, they might have to run away from it afterwards. It is similar to what happened to me before and it still gives me the creeps whenever I think about it. But I might be wrong, as they might be allowed to lodge an appeal, and if they persevere, they might even be given a pardon in the end. In that case, awful stuff will be resolved and the crime they have never committed will be forgiven. Their physical beings will be blended with the shadow behind the gate and vanish.

All they have to do is to wait for Mr. A. to show up and open the gate for them…

For my part, I only pray for the coming of tomorrow. Life might be messy and full of trouble but one has to keep going, as there is no other way. If something is about to happen to me, all I want is that it is what I have chosen by myself. I don't want to be forced to fit into a pre-existing script written by others.

I will now take a nap to reenergize myself so that when I wake up, I will be ready to continue my journey.

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(12) The death of Dr. Siam has revealed so many things to me, especially in connection with the change in my mother.

When Dr. Siam was first admitted to the hospital, my mother was really concerned about him and she tried every possible way that might help him recover. Her initial devotion to him was totally selfless. As time passed, however, doubts started to creep into her mind when she realized that no one seemed to offer her a helping hand. She began to pay attention to the reactions of people around her and every little thing they did started to upset her in one way or another. Perhaps she felt that she was the only one trying to prolong Dr. Siam's life, and in doing so, she had spent almost all of her money. Worse, no one, even her own children, had given her the support she wanted.

In the beginning Chidchai and I went to see Dr. Siam at the hospital together once. After that, I didn't visit him again because I live and work in Bangkok and during the weekends I often feel too tired to do anything except staying home and taking a rest. Chidchai told me over the phone not to worry because he would visit Dr. Siam himself and he would give him my regards. I felt it was a good idea because it was almost like we both visited Dr. Siam anyway. However, my mother didn't seem to see it that way and whenever she was on the phone to me, she would make it clear that she wasn't happy about me not finding any spare time to visit Dr. Siam. What she often did to make me feel bad was talking about what she was doing in the hope of helping Dr. Siam regain consciousness then sarcastically said to me: "What about yourself? Have you ever thought about doing something for Uncle Siam?"

One thing my mother did in her attempt to help Dr. Siam was to dress in white, eat only vegetarian food, and pray for his recovery twice a day in the mornings and evenings. My mother said to me: "You could help by praying for Uncle Siam and eating only vegetarian food. Doing so will help pass on some good energy to him." My response to what she said was doing nothing. The other thing she did for him was trying to collect enough money to build a big Buddha statue that, according to her, could give direction to Dr. Siam's lost soul. When I heard about it, I immediately dismissed it as absolutely ridiculous and all I saw in it was the attempt to make money out of people's desperation. I asked my mother: "How much will it cost to build the Buddha statue?", and she said it

would cost a little over 100,000 baht. I protested that it was a huge amount of money, not to mention that she had already spent almost half a million baht on the hospital fees. I let her know my concern about how her future life would be with so little money left.

I did worry about my mother. She had become gullible enough to take on board any advice and suggestion. Take the stem cell treatment for example, she agreed to let them try it on Dr. Siam and ended up paying higher medical fees for that even though there was no guarantee that it will work. Actually, Dr. Siam's condition showed no sign of improvement at all. My mother also turned vegetarian and took up praying (although she kept complaining about life and fate). And later her attempt to find enough money to build the Buddha statue for the temple (even though it is impossible to prove that Dr. Siam's soul will take refuge in it), wasn't she going overboard? Honestly, I didn't want to play any part in those superstitions. I never believe in that kind of stuff so I didn't say or do anything my mother expected me to. For her part, she probably felt that I was heartless as I didn't visit Dr. Siam, didn't pray for him, and didn't help her build a Buddha statue. My mother probably felt that her children had let her down.

In her loneliness, what those people said about Dr. Siam increasingly affected my mother. More and more of the scandalous images of Dr. Siam were disclosed and those people claimed that they had witnessed his villainous side themselves. My mother couldn't possibly defend Dr. Siam. At first, she tried very hard to fight off her doubts about him but later on she became unsure. My mother's Doctor Siam was totally different from the other Dr. Siam conjured up by those people.

Dr. Siam still remained unconscious and paralyzed in a hospital bed. He couldn't breathe by himself, let alone defend himself against those awful things they said about him. Because of this, his identity was dominated more and more by what others imposed on him. My mother probably felt that we gave her no support, and Dr. Siam, the one who could really help her gain confidence in him and argue against those unkind words and accusations, was lying helpless in a hospital. Come to think about it, my mother didn't really have anyone to turn to.

This lonely and desperate situation affected my mother in significant ways. She became more and more dependent on Abbot Glab for psychological support and she placed a lot of faith in him. She also focused all her love and hope on Dr. Siam. Every time she visited him, she looked at him with her eyes full of intense love and devotion, hoping that her love could make him regain consciousness. To put it another way, she was gambling with fate and using all her love for and trust in Dr. Siam as her bet. She prayed with all her heart that he would regain consciousness.

The only way for her to win was having him back.

But he died, and she lost all her bet to fate.

Because of this defeat, she believed that all the bad things people said about Dr. Siam were true. She believed he was crooked, untrustworthy, wicked, dishonest, and deserved to be ostracized. She believed that he didn't wake up because he wanted to escape from all the mess he had caused. Those convictions were very important for my mother because they made it possible for her to stop loving Dr. Siam. The wickedness, deceit, and act of betrayal of your loved one can justify your indifference towards him and make you able to totally erase him from your heart. It is actually like when you are being swept away by strong currents in a river and there are two poles available for you. You are allowed to pick only one pole to hold on to. Once you have picked it, it does not matter whether that pole can really help you or not (and you only realize that the pole is not very helpful after you have chosen it.) Others might see your choice as unreasonable but that does not matter because it is reasonable enough for you. You won't let go of it and when the strong currents finally swept you away, you hold on to your pole. You have something to hold on to, and that is reasonable enough for you.

My mother had lost all her love for Dr. Siam in her gambling with fate, and she became unsympathetic and willing to believe in the worst things others have to say about him. It was her only way to eradicate all her affection and attachment she once had for Dr. Siam.

The other day she rang me and said:

"Have you heard?," she asked.

"About what?" I asked her.

"Uncle Siam is dead," she said without any emotion.

I went silent and felt sad about the loss.

"It was not that long since he was still around...," I expressed my sorrow.

"It's good he died. He is no longer suffering but the ones who have to suffer are those who are still alive," she said and sighed.

"And when is the funeral?" I asked. "Let me know when we are attending his funeral, okay?"

"He has already been cremated." She told me.

"When was that?" I exclaimed in shock. No one has told me about his funeral until now. Does my mother hate me enough to stop me from attending his funeral?

"Yesterday evening," she said.

"Why didn't you ring me before?" I was overwhelmed by hurt feelings.

"I didn't tell anyone and none of us attended his funeral." She paused before adding: "I didn't go to the funeral myself."

"Really?" I was stunned by her coldness and indifference and almost ran out of things to say. "Why?"

"I don't really want to talk about it." She said and there was annoyance in her voice. "It's such a mess and even if I try to explain it, you won't understand. It's best you stay away from this matter like what you did before."

What she said really hurt, and my eyes were brimmed over with tears.

"It's good this mess is finally over. From now on we can live our lives without having anything to do with them," she summed it up.

Then she started to tell me about what had happened, but her story changes Dr. Siam's existence into a mere source of trouble and mess. It would have been much better if she attacked me verbally then hung up the phone, as I would have been tormented by guilt, and in those moments of guilt and self-hatred, I would have been able to honor my memories of him. In those moments, I could also express disgust at myself for not attending the funeral. However, my mother's version of what had happened is that she didn't go to the funeral and didn't want any of us to because Abbot Glab had advised against it. The monk told her that Dr. Siam's death was not a peaceful one because he had many enemies and there was a 'creditor' from his previous life who wanted to harm him. He said Dr. Siam's death was caused by a vicious form of black magic and if we attended his funeral, during which the black magic would be released, we might have been harmed by it as well. The monk thus came to the conclusion that it was best not to attend the funeral, as it would make us safe from that black magic.

I listened to what she told me and felt so awful. A question occurred in my mind whether what she said was true. Was it true that Abbot Glab did give her such advice? (I wasn't there when they talked about this matter, so I can't be sure.) More importantly, however, is how could my mother accept this kind of advice without any protest? But then I realize I know why. My mother had lost in a really important gamble of her life.

What is even scarier is that-- what if my mother is actually the one who came up with that story about the vicious black magic herself? What if it isn't the advice of the monk, but a story invented by a woman with a hole in her heart?

It is not only that my mother's affection and trust in others has greatly diminished, the love she once had for herself has also gone. If a person cannot even love herself, how could you expect her to have affection for others?

After hanging up the phone, a chilly feeling spreads through me and I feel like I have become paralyzed. I remain still at my working desk and cannot do anything. Words like 'ties' and 'kindness' spring into my mind, and I couldn't help wondering if they can totally vanish from a person's heart. I also feel that I'm among the heartless, as our family didn't attend the funeral, thus failed to express the easiest gesture of courtesy towards another human being. I feel so ashamed.

I recalled the first day Dr. Siam Duangsuk walked into our house and the day he left. Did he leave any traces? What are our memories of him? He came into our lives trying to sell his dreams, then left. Whether that was what he tried to do all his life or not, I do not know. But he was so easily erased from our family, as simple as that….

(The above view belongs to Prateep)

Act III: Dao's Predestined Life

Lonesome Me

The winter that visited us in the later months of 1974 came with a brutal chill that tormented the core of our flesh and bones. The piercing sound of the cold wind seeping through small cracks in the walls and timber planks of the floor forced me to get up before dawn, before our rooster started his morning crow, and even before the cuckoos had started to make their call that reverberated through the woods. I woke up before other members of our household. After washing my face and cleaning my teeth, I crept downstairs and loaded a cart with a few buckets before bracing myself against the chilly air and heading towards the village pond. Once there, I filled up the buckets with the freezing cold water from the pond, lifted them onto the cart, and pushed it home. After that, I had to pour the water from the buckets into the jar and treat it with alum before leaving it for almost half a day so that all the sediment dropped to the bottom. Meanwhile, I went upstairs to light the stove and cook sticky rice. I could hear our rooster crow to welcome the dawn and soon heard my mother emerge from her bedroom. My father, however, was still in the bedroom reciting his morning prayer before starting his daily routine.

Years later the image of such a morning would still remain vivid in my mind. Those activities had been my daily duty as I had to be responsible for all the household chores to lessen my parents' burden. My father often lamented about the hardships he went through for years in bringing up my elder siblings, who eventually disappeared one by one after they were able to stand on their own feet. Once old enough, my brothers wanted to get married and my father had to sell some of his paddy fields so that he would be able to afford the dowry for his sons, not wanting them to suffer from loneliness during the cruel winter time. My elder sisters were no better as they eloped with boys as soon as they reached puberty, and not long afterwards, they sent their kids to live with my parents. In order to be able to raise those kids and send them to school, my parents had to sell more paddy fields.

"This can't go on anymore!" said my father in exasperation.

“I’ve had enough of it myself!” complained my mother.

My parents were already quite sick of their grown-up children by the time I was born and they had determined to bring me up differently. They vowed not to spoil me the way they did with my elder siblings, and since I was little, they had made sure that I always helped out with chores. From the age of 5, I started to help my mother cook for the household and I was not allowed to hang out nor go to school.

“School is useless. It can’t even teach you how to grow rice,” my father said to me.

I agreed with him, and whenever I saw my nephews and nieces study or do their homework I felt that it was a complete waste of time. They would be better off trying to earn a living.

The fact that I have been able to survive proves that studying is not necessary. My life is living proof that people can make do without any schooling. Admittedly, it is a bit inconvenient if one cannot read or write, but because I can always communicate verbally, I don’t see that being illiterate is a big deal.

I turned 16 that 1974 winter and I sometimes experienced a strange sort of shivery sensation. Indeed, this feeling had started a few years back when I had my first period, and it had never gone away but was hidden somewhere inside me. It caused me to yearn for warmth from human touch whenever the dreadful winter arrived, and it reminded me of the warmth I felt when I was little and was allowed to sleep in my mother’s bed hugging her. Only this kind of warmth could lessen the chilly feeling in my heart. Whenever I went to the pond to fetch water and ran into a young village guy with piercing eyes, tanned skin, and strong muscles, I could not help imagine how pleasantly warm it would be to lie in his arms. This thought never failed to trigger a warm sensation in me.

My father sometimes asked me: “Do you know what love is?”

I told him I had no idea.

He then explained to me that the bond between him and my mother is love, which is when two people live together as husband and wife and have children together.

Children are an emblem of their parents' love, and children's love should be primarily devoted to their parents. He warned me not to give my love to any guy and not to follow the example of my elder siblings, emphasizing that I should only love my parents and love them to the utmost of my heart. He added that I did not have to worry about being lonesome as such feeling will fade away when the right time comes.

Each morning my father left home for his paddy fields and would not return till late in the evening. My mother, on the other hand, spent her day weaving downstairs, and I joined her after getting all the chores done, listening to radio dramas while keeping her company.

I once asked my mother why she always weaved when we never really wore the fabric she produced and she told me that the fabric was for someone else. When asked who that person was, she said he was a boss who collected fabric from villagers and sold it downtown. I had no idea what downtown is and my mother explained to me that it is a city area where things are sold and anyone wanting to sell stuff can do it there.

The more I asked the more I got confused because whatever my mother said puzzled me. Later one evening I asked my nephew whether he knew anything about downtown and he said he did, as he was from the city but had to leave it to come and stay with Grandma and Granddad. When I quizzed him about downtown, he described it as full of tall and grand buildings, well-dressed people, and lots of stuff for sale everywhere so people can get anything they want if they have money. But I was still unable to imagine what that kind of place looks like so my nephew took out a textbook from his school bag and showed me a page with a drawing of square buildings with lots of windows located close to one another and in front of them were roads full of traffic. I gazed at that drawing and, for the first time, was able to roughly figure out the difference between the city and the place where we stayed.

"Is it cold in the city?" I asked.

"Not at all. It was damned hot there," said my nephew.

I guess that could explain why all my elder siblings left our home village and headed for the city with no intention to return; they had been attracted by the warmth of the city.

From listening to those radio dramas, I had learned that there are not that many types of people: heroes (as announced by themselves), heroines, bad girls, villains, and those who enjoy causing misunderstandings between heroes and heroines. Based on my observation, bad girls are often city girls and sometimes I couldn't help wondering why they are full of jealousy and despicable thoughts if the city is warm and comfortable enough. They are so different from country girls who are portrayed as innocent and leading a simple life like mine. Still, having a city origin cannot be equated with having no morals as the heroes are also from the city and they are not vicious or mean. I think it was more to do with human nature—passion, greed, and anger (just like what the heroes in radio dramas said to the heroines). My father also told me so, claiming that it was based on the Lord Buddha's teachings.

My mother did not really want me to listen to radio dramas because, according to her, they could turn me into a woman with loose sexual morals if I follow the example set by those dramas. Whose example? I wondered. That of the bad girl? I don't think so. If people are inclined to imitate the behaviors of characters in dramas, they probably would choose those of the heroes or heroines who are perfect as their role models, so what's wrong with that? However, my mother said there was no point listening to those dramas, as they had nothing to do with my life. She said: "I haven't made a will and I have no valuables for my children to inherit and fight over."

My mother argued that radio dramas were from a different place, a place we had nothing to do with, so no need to waste time on them because listening to them could make one curious, over-inquisitive, and want to be someone else or have things like characters in dramas do. For example, you might want to have pearl necklaces or diamond rings like a heroine who got them from a hero, or you might want things that bad girls in those dramas have, such as nice clothes or super-duper cars. My mother then recounted what happened to Nao, a village girl who was the daughter of Koon, an elderly

man living next door. According to my mother, Nao was hooked on radio soaps and one day when she could no longer contain her curiosity, she left the village for the city without telling anyone. She spent some time in the city and then returned home acting all weird with her face full of make-up and her new flamboyant clothes. Her dad was at a loss as to what his daughter was up to, but rumor had it that the girl sold herself in the city in exchange for money. My mother said she did not want to see me end up like that and that was why she warned me not to spend so much time listening to radio dramas.

But all day long every day I did my best, like a good daughter should, in helping my parents by making sure that all the chores were done properly. So I did fulfill the duty I have towards my parents quite well, and my father told me I was my parents' beloved child. He also reminded me that I was well looked after since I was little, and that I was never required to do back-breaking outdoor tasks like other villagers' children. Still, even though I spent most of my time around the house, I was not immune to strange things from the outside world, for example, I heard about what happened to our neighbors and other stuff. These things set me thinking and triggered my curiosity, and I couldn't help it. I also felt that my lonesomeness did not really disappear by itself like what father said. It only seemed to disappear for a little while, but it kept coming back. My mother sometimes told me about scandals involving some teenagers in our village and warned me not to be like them. Well, she didn't have to, as I had no chance to be like them. I was home all the time and never had a chance to see what the world outside was like, even though the outside world kept visiting me and making me curious.

So I couldn't see any reason why my parents should forbid me from listening to radio dramas. I secretly disagreed with them but then I felt it was wrong of me to allow myself to have such a rebellious thought. Luckily, it was just a thought after all.

One day the boss stopped by to pick up the fabric as he had arranged with us earlier. Our house was his last stop and as my mother was putting the fabric in a sack for him, he looked at me with an intense gaze and I felt like I was melting away because of the intensity of his gaze. He was a quiet type but when he talked, his voice was powerful

and exuded confidence. He was a tall wiry man, perhaps about 15 years older than me. He had a dark brown complexion and thick dark curly hair. His intimidating eyes sometimes reflected sadness. He acted as if he wanted to say something to me but kept on hesitating, and in the end he said to my mother:

"Your daughter has grown up really fast."

For a brief moment, my mother looked uncertain before asking: "How is your wife doing?"

He looked embarrassed and did not respond to her question, then lowered his eyes and gazed at a weaved mat on the floor.

I didn't know what I was thinking at that moment because I touched his arm with my finger, which startled him and made him turn to look at me.

"Can you take me downtown?" I said to him.

He looked at me without saying anything but I could detect his faint smile. At that point, my mother yelled at me to go upstairs.

I believed what happened that winter day in the year 1974—when I naively asked the boss, who stopped by to pick up fabric, to take me to a market—was the start of the silent waves of changes that were to happen to my life. Even after several months had passed by, including days when he did not show up, the boss's name, which was Srisak, never failed to pop up in the conversations between my parents. My mother said he was a decent man who was really hard-working but he had a sad life because his wife was stricken with an unusual disease that made her helpless and totally dependent on him. He had to work alone to support the family and after work had to look after her. I feel so sorry for him, my mother said.

One month later my mother told me that Srisak's wife had passed away after years of suffering. Luckily, they didn't have kids together, and it should not be hard for Srisak to find a new wife as he was such a good and hard-working man. Women were going to run after him.

Another month passed by and Srisak stopped by again for the fabric. He still looked at me with the same bulging eyes with their intimidating gleams and did not utter

a word to me even though he attempted to do so. In the end, however, he asked me in a low voice whether I was still interested in going downtown. Upon hearing that, my mother turned to look at him and said: “Boss, could you kindly take her there so that she will know what it is like?”

That day I had a chance to sit in his ute, which he drove into downtown Udon. Once we got there, he took me to a market and I was so excited about it all. Yet it seemed to me that people in my village are more excited when they saw me sitting in a grand ute heading to the city. That was the first time I had a chance to take a trip to somewhere quite far away from home. He bought me a bracelet, and after that he drove me home.

Wow! This must be how a heroine feels, I thought.

A month later my father said to me that he wanted to have a word with me. The gist of what he wanted to tell me was that I had reached the age of 17 and therefore could be considered a young woman. He also complimented my good looks and added that it was because I was well looked after by him and my mother. He then told me that it was now the right time to pass on the love I gave them to someone suitable. He also said it was now an opportune time for me to show gratitude towards my parents for bringing me up by marrying Srisak.

But then who would look after you and Mother, I asked.

“Don’t you worry about that,” said my father. “If you try to please Srisak, he will look after us.”

My father advised me to always obey Srisak and never displease him, just like the way I treated my parents. He said I would learn new stuff I never knew about before.

“Do everything exactly as he tells you. At first, you just have to follow his advice and you will be good at it soon enough,” my mother said.

I didn’t say anything for a while. I had been living with my parents all my life and now I had to live with a stranger. I felt quite worried and I told my parents so. With tears streaming down my cheeks, I also told them that if I had to leave them, it would be no different from what my elder siblings did before.

My father consoled me by telling me that I was different from my elder siblings who ran away from home then caused my parents to lose their paddy fields and money. They created all sorts of trouble for my father and mother. However, my parents were willing to marry me off and they even got dowry money in return. Therefore, my marriage was actually a bliss for them and I had been a very good daughter to them.

After listening to what he said, I felt better and tried to wipe the tears off my cheeks.

“You won’t be lonesome anymore,” my father said.

That was the beginning of my journey from the plateau of the Northeast to the lowland of Central Thailand.

Life Lessons

As I was sitting in Srisak's ute and absent-mindedly gazing at the passing scenery on both sides of the road, I saw so many things that I had never seen before. Those spectacular images I saw from the windows of the ute that was heading towards the lowland of central Thailand gave me excitement yet my heart was also disturbed by anxiety, as the journey appeared to be a very long one. I felt as if Srisak was driving me further and further away from my parents' loving nest, towards the edge of Earth. That was how I really felt at that particular moment and that feeling triggered deep sorrow in me. It was like someone was clenching my heart and there was a big lump in my chest that suffocated me. Time and again, I had to turn my face away from Srisak and pressed my head against the glass window of the ute, pretending to gaze at the scenery outside and trying to hide my bitter tears and sobs from Srisak.

Srisak was a quiet man of very few words and he was like this even before we were married. His quiet nature remained unchanged throughout our marriage till the last day of his life. When he talked to me, however, both the tone of his voice and his manner of speaking indirectly indicated to me that I had to pay attention to what he said and obey him. In fact, whenever he talked to me, his intention was to teach or order me to do something and I was expected to take his teaching seriously and follow his orders. I also had to accept whatever he said to me without questioning. Our relationship was like this partly because he was older and more experienced, and knew better than me, and partly because my parents had repeatedly told me that I had to obey him and love him in order to make my marriage smooth. Following the orders of a more experienced husband and obeying him was a necessary ingredient in making marriage peaceful.

"Dao," he called my name as I was turning my face away to hide my sobs and tears. When I didn't respond, he said my name out loud again.

"Uh-hm," I responded.

"Turn your face this way," he told me.

I turned to look at him even though there were still traces of tears on my cheeks.

“Whenever I address you, you have to look at me and pay attention to what I have to say to you. Do you understand?” He looked at me briefly before turning to look at the road ahead. I nodded but he couldn’t see me because he was concentrating on the road.

“Do you understand?” He repeated his question.

“Uh-hm,” I responded.

“No, you have to say ‘I do, sir’. From now on you can’t say ‘uh-hmm’. You must replace it with ‘I do, sir’.”

“I do, sir.” I said.

“Very good. We are heading to a place where people don’t say something unintelligible like ‘uh-hm’ because they don’t even understand it. You have to say ‘Yes, I do, sir’, and if you don’t understand anything and want to ask a question, you have to ask politely.”

He noticed that I still looked puzzled so he repeated what he said again:

“To indicate to me that you understand what I say to you, you have to say ‘Yes, I do, sir’, and if there is anything you don’t understand or want clarification, you have to ask politely.”

“Uh-hm,” I responded.

As soon as he heard my response, he immediately turned to look at me with a cold and angry gaze. Then he let out a deep sigh and glanced at the road before pulling the ute over by the side of the road. He leaned closer to my seat in order to lower down the car window next to my side.

“Spit it out!” He ordered.

“Spit out what?”

“Spit that ‘uh-hm’ of yours out now!”

He looked very stern and that scared me. When he said ‘Now!’ again, I immediately spitted out my saliva through the car window.

“You have left ‘uh-hm’ here and once we get to my place, there is no more ‘uh-hm’. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do, sir.” I promptly answered him.

Since then it became clear to me that it wasn't hard at all to say 'Yes, I do, sir', but that was not because I had spit 'uh-hm' out of the car window. It was because I realized that whenever he asked 'Do you understand?' I was expected to say 'Yes, I do, sir' automatically. In other words, 'Do you understand?' and 'Yes, I do, sir' always exists side by side.

After that, he ordered me to wind up the car window while he steered the ute back onto the road and headed towards our destination.

"One more thing—from now on I will call your name only once and you must turn to look at me immediately. Don't make me do it again and again. As soon as you hear me call your name, you must say…." He paused.

"Uh…Yes, sir." I nearly forgot myself!

"Very good." He gave me his compliment and said: ' Now, kiss me on my cheek.'

I didn't quite understand why he asked me to do that but I kissed him as told anyway.

"This is a reward for your good behavior. When you are well-behaved, I will reward you by allowing you to kiss me." He explained.

I was so pleased that I could make him smile. I felt that he looked almost like a hero when he smiled and whenever I could make him smile, I felt I had become a real heroine.

It was quite amazing that he seemed to possess a mysterious kind of power that made me forget my sadness, like the sadness caused by my concern that I would not be able to see my parents again. (I could really sense that mysterious power of his.) Miraculously, he could pull me out of my sorrow and divert my attention to something else. My sobs and tears disappeared before I knew it. He was able to bring forth bliss into my heart, like opening a window of my gloomy heart so that light can come in and brighten it. Then he let me kiss his cheek as a reward, causing my heart to be overwhelmed by an elation that I had never experienced before.

"Don't cry anymore, okay? No one has died or suffered from any losses, you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are going to have a new life and start a new family with me. You left your parents' loving care into my care, so there is really nothing to worry about. Everything remains the same. Whatever you did for your parents, you still have to keep doing those things, but for me, not for your parents anymore. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I believe your parents have already told you that from now on the love, concern, loyalty, and obedience that you gave to your parents have to be devoted to me instead," he paused briefly. "There is nothing difficult in doing that because you only have to tell yourself that from now on the person you love and worship is me. When you were young, you worshipped your parents, but now that you are a grown-up woman you have to worship your husband, ok?"

"Yes, sir."

"Marriage is when a man and a woman live together as husband and wife. You are no longer a child. Soon you will become a mother, and I, a father, like your parents who lived together and you were born from them. They brought you up so that in the future you will become a mother, who gives life to a new generation. You understand what I said?"

"Yes, I do." I said, but I didn't quite understand it.

"No need to worry if you still don't understand what I'm telling you. It could be difficult for you as you have never been to school, but don't you worry. You are with me now so I can explain things to you and you will learn about them and have no problem understanding them soon enough."

I didn't respond and kept looking at the unfolding road ahead.

"Dao," he tried to get my attention.

I turned to look at him.

"Very good," he said.

It was not that I did not understand what he tried to explain at all, but, to me, it sounded like he was trying to make things more complicated and hard to understand,

even though he wanted me to get what he meant. He acted like he was a radio drama hero who was so very proud and would never stoop to the same level as his heroine, so the heroine had to stand on the tips of her toes, trying to reach him so that she could wrap her arms around his neck and kiss his cheeks to her heart's content. Kissing him this way was like trying to get hold of a ripe fruit on a branch high up on a tree; one has to somehow bend the branch down a bit to reach the fruit.

In fact, there was no need for Srisak to use those complicated words to make me understand what he meant. He could have told me that from now on your destiny and our marriage will be exactly like what happens between a hero and heroine in a radio drama. He could have said: As you have listened to radio drama before, you could just behave like a heroine, and I will act just like a hero.

If only he would explain it this way, I would have had no problem understanding him and knowing exactly what I should do from that moment on.

Oh, on second thoughts, it is clear to me that he is actually full of surprises! He makes things complicated to me so that it will remind me of heroes and heroines in radio dramas and make me able to figure out the proper behavior I should adopt. He has enlightened me and made me proud of myself again. My prince, you are so ingenious!

The first lesson about life imparted to me through that chat as I was in Srisak's car leaving the Northeast could be considered a rather long chat between him and me. Since that day he never wasted time talking with me for long but preferred to either order me to do this and that or focused his intimidating gaze on me when he was displeased with what I did. I felt that gaze of his was so dreadful.

Finally, my long journey had finished and my life at a new place started. He told me that this place was located in Saraburi Province's Kaeng Khoi district in Central Thailand, and I nodded to indicate that I understood what he said. Soon he turned his car off the main road into a small dirt road before pulling it over in front of a corrugated gate. He then gave me keys and asked me to open the gate for him. I got out of the car and walked to the gate to open it. As I was waiting for him to drive the car through the gate into the front yard, I observed the house for a little while. It was a big two-story teak

house that exuded a dark and gloomy atmosphere, although that could be because it was getting dark and somehow that made the house somewhat desolate and spooky. After getting out of his ute, he told me to shut the gate and latch it, and his voice pulled me out of my trepidation caused by the intimidating presence of the house. The way the house intimidated me was more or less similar to the way he intimidated me with his intense gaze…Or was it possible that the house represented the gaze of his late wife? This last thought made me feel somewhat shaken.

As I walked from the front gate to the stairs, I felt quite lonely. He probably sensed that so he asked me to walk closer to him and said: This is my house, and from now on, it will be your house as well. No need to fear anything, as you will soon be familiar with it.

As I was new to the place, I had no choice but to rely on him for psychological support. He then pointed at a switch on one of the front poles near the stairs, and switched the light on. The darkness was gone and he led me upstairs while indicating to me where other switches were, and I knew that from now on I had to be the one who turned the light on and off.

As I followed him to the main house with its light on to replace darkness, I felt less anxious. He was able to help me get used to the house a bit more.

He leaned on a sofa in the middle of the room and seemed to be quite pleased while I stood near a wall and opened a window to let the cool breeze it. He clearly appreciated the breeze so I proceeded to open other windows. I noticed a spirit house down by the side of the house so I asked if I could go down to pay respect to the spirit as I was a newcomer. He said that was fine, but he asked me to pour him a glass of cool water before doing so.

“From now on, when I get home, you have to prepare a glass of cool drinking water for me, you understand?” That was another thing I had to learn.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Subordination Through Punishment

Whenever he got home after a long day at work or sometimes after a business trip which took him away from home for a few days, apart from offering him a glass of cool water, I had to make sure that many other demanding things were properly done to please him. It could be said that those things were part of the ritual he expected me to perform.

I never asked what he did or how he spent his day (I dared not do so), but if he was in a good mood, he occasionally told me himself. About his job, I gathered that he drove to my village to buy hand-woven fabric, but what he did with it after that, I had no idea. I guess he was a fabric trader who often travelled around in his ute, and he might have had a shop that sold fabric or a warehouse to keep it somewhere (perhaps in Kaeng Khoi because his house was there). But all of this was based on my own speculation as he often left home and never returned till late in the evening, and there were times when he disappeared for several days. Every time he arrived home, he would beep the horn loudly for me to go down and open the front gate for him. Then he would get out of his car looking exhausted and I had to watch out for his mood swings, which often intimidated me.

One day after he got home, he threw himself on his favorite sofa. When I offered him a glass of cool water, he looked annoyed and pushed my hand away till I dropped the glass and nearly broke it. He told me that he preferred beer and ordered me to get it for him. He seemed to cool down after I poured beer into a glass and gave it to him.

"I had a tough day," he said and drank more of his beer. "That was why I was in a bad mood today."

I nodded.

"The world outside is so horrid and you can't trust anyone. You never know when someone will stab you in the back." He paused briefly and looked at me.

"Go get me some food. I'm hungry now."

I walked into the kitchen to prepare food for him and when done, I carried the food out and put it on a table in front of his sofa.

"You know what, sometimes I want to have your kind of life—just staying home and no need to see anyone. Such an easy life you are having." He gulped down the food and added, "but I'm a man, the head of the family, and I have to be a breadwinner. It is my duty, something I cannot deny." What he said made me aware of his importance and superior role. "Your job is to take care of housework, but mine is to work outside." He slurped the soup loudly.

Later he took out three 100- baht banknotes from his pocket and gave them to me while saying,

"Make sure you spend the money wisely. It is my hard-earned money."

"Yes, sir. I will." I responded.

At the end of each week, he gave me 300 baht to cover all the weekly household expenses, and I mainly used the money to buy meat and vegetables to cook for him. I didn't have to go anywhere to shop for meat and vegetables because I could buy them from a ute that passed by our front gate late every morning.

Thus, my daily life was virtually spent at home and I did not have close friends. (Even now I don't have anyone I can call my close friend.) But I didn't worry about that. When I first moved in, it seemed to me that some of my neighbors treated me like I was odd. When I emerged from our front gate to buy ingredients for my cooking from the ute and the neighbors happened to be nearby, they eyed me suspiciously and did not say a word to me. Sometimes when they walked past my house, they stopped and peered in curiously but did not approach me directly. Such behavior made me wary of them and not really want to make friends with them. Because they did not see me as one of them, I did not trust them. Those things didn't bother me though, as by nature I don't mind being alone. However, they made me suspicious about people outside. Srisak himself often repeated to me that people out there could not be trusted and he had to be cautious in dealing with them. He was sometimes upset when he got home after spending a day out.

All this made me think of people from the outside world as intimidating and I came to see Srisak as the only person I could rely on and trust.

Whether I should get him a glass of cool water or beer when he got home was no longer a difficult thing to figure out, as I had learned to use my common sense to help me with this matter. All I had to do was to pay attention to his mood signals and after living with him for a while, it was not hard to tell whether he was in a good mood or not. In fact, after living with him for three years those signals were no longer necessary for me because I simply said to him: “You have worked hard all day long. Why don’t you have a beer, honey?” I remembered clearly that the first time I approached him this way when he arrived home, he looked at me in puzzlement before nodding his approval. That night he gave me a big reward. He let me kiss him all over his body, not just on his cheeks. Nine months later I gave birth to our second son, but before getting to that bit, let me tell you about a ritual I had to go through every night before bedtime.

In the early days of our marriage, Srisak kept close supervision on all my household duties. It might seem like he was very fussy about everything I did and kept instructing me about the same thing again and again, but it was not quite like that. He generally gave his instruction about how to do a particular chore properly just once, but because there were so many chores for me to do, even more chores than when I lived with my parents, this gave the impression that I had to be instructed often.

What are the things that a wife has to do? Srisak once came up with this rhetorical question before lecturing me about wifely duties. Of course household chores are important duties for a wife, but her first priority is to look after her husband. To welcome him home after work at the end of each day, she has to make sure that the house is neat, that a cool drink is served to him, and that a new towel and a set of clean clothes are ready for when he wants to have a shower. While he is having a shower, she has to prepare food for him and make sure that the food is pleasantly warm while he is having his dinner.

After he finished his dinner, I had to clean up and do the dishes while he relaxed in front of the TV. After that, I had to make the bed for him, spread a mosquito net over the

bed, and open all the windows to let the cool breeze in. He would wait till he felt sleepy before entering the bedroom. The first time that ritual I mentioned started, he walked into the bedroom and sat on the bed with his feet on the floor for a while then he told me to sit on the floor near his feet before saying:

"My legs and hands toiled all day", he said. "My legs and hands are the tools to earn a living to support my wife and kids, and without them my wife and kids would suffer from hardships, do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"In India, a wife has to perform a ritual to express respect for her husband and to let him know that she is grateful for the hard work he uncomplainingly undertakes to earn income for the family. In this wonderful age-old ritual that is still performed by people nowadays, a wife, in order to convey her gratitude towards her husband, washes his hands and feet with water every night before bedtime. To me, this ritual is a good way for a husband and wife to thank each other. You show me that you are grateful for what I have done for you, and I'm thankful for your expression of gratitude.

He paused and looked at me, and I knew immediately that he wanted me to respond, so I nodded and said "Yes, sir, I understand."

"Thailand is a Buddhist country and Thai people are Buddhist. The beliefs in the law of karma, good and evil, ghosts and gods all came from the Lord Buddha's teachings. But Buddhism did not originate in Thailand. Do you know where Buddhism originally came from? " He paused for a while and I asked: "From which country, sir?" to show my interest.

"Buddhism was originally the religion of Indian people." He said. "Thousands of years ago monks from India travelled to this region—to Thailand, Laos and Cambodia--to impart Buddhist teachings, and because those teachings are great moral guidance for people, the influence of Buddhism continues to the present. Buddhism is suitable for Thai people. Similarly, the Indian ritual in which a wife washes her husband's hands and feet is suitable for Thai women."

After imparting such knowledge to me, he told me to go get a bowl filled with water and bring a clean towel along. Then he indicated that I should wash his hands and his feet before drying them with the towel. As I was squatting on the floor in order to clean his feet for him, I could sense that he was looking at me with great satisfaction.

As I was about to carry the bowl of water into the kitchen after drying his hands and feet with the towel, he called me so I turned to look at him. He then said to me:

"I really appreciate what you did for me." He said, all smiles, "Now you are not simply a wife, but you are an honored wife."

I felt like he had given me a great honor. I perfectly understand the meaning of 'honored wife', as heroines in radio dramas often think aloud (and listeners, including myself could hear them): "Being an honored wife is what women like us aspire to."

"And now I'm an honored wife too!" I said to myself, and how I wish that those heroines could hear me!

All heroines are alike as they have to go through the same sort of suffering (that was what I truly believed in those days); heroines are often misunderstood by their heroes because those heroes listen to bad girls who like to misguide them. In my case, even though at that point in my life no bad girl showed up yet, I think the outside world and its people could be seen as playing the role of a bad girl in influencing Srisak, and it seemed to me that Srisak also realized this as he was not dumb (although he was not that perceptive). Once he said "someone wants to stab him in the back" and I know this is just a saying of course because no one really wanted to stab him from behind. What he actually meant was that there were people out there who were ready to cheat, betray, or influence him in bad way. No doubt he was often in a bad mood when he got home and I had to bear the brunt of it.

About the dignified title 'honored wife' bestowed on us women by our husbands, this title does not remain with us forever, because the husbands can take it back (by not always referring to us as 'honored wife') and sometimes they might give it back to us (when we do things that please them). Thus, throughout a marriage, a wife has to deal

with this uncertainty and I myself often felt the trepidation of not knowing when the title would be stripped away from me and when it would be given back to me.

When I first got the 'honored wife' title, I was so pleased with myself. This, together with the increasing confidence I had in being able to adjust to the new home and my new role quite quickly (I added 'quite quickly' with pride), made me somewhat less careful in choosing my words when responding to what Srisak said to me. At first my response was merely "Yes, sir', but as my self-confidence increased, my response got longer and I might have referred to myself as the subject of my response, so it became something like "Yes, sir. I understand." Obviously, the title 'honored wife' made me bolder.

One evening, maybe 4 or 5 months after I moved in, as I was serving him dinner in front of his sofa, he looked at all the dishes I had just cooked for him with boredom. It was true that sometimes some of the dishes I prepared for him were similar to what he had other evenings, but I did try my best to make sure that there was enough variety. Also, I was pretty sure that those dishes I cooked were quite tasty, so I didn't quite understand why he was unhappy with them. He then said:

"I'm getting sick of Northeastern food." He frowned and put on a serious expression, "I can't have Northeastern food all the time so sometimes you need to cook Central Thai dishes for me for a change."

I waited for him to finish what he wanted to say as I knew he still had more to say.

"I'm a Central Thai man, and now you are also a Central Thai woman? So you should now learn to cook Central Thai food. You can't just cook Lao food for me."

"My parents love this kind of food." I said with no intention to challenge him or anything. What I meant was that whatever dishes I prepared for my parents in the past, I now cooked them for my husband because, to me, husband and parents are of the same status and should be similarly honored.

But he became furious and stared at me angrily with his bulging eyes .

"Are you talking back?" He raised his voice.

I jumped with fright and shook my head to indicate that I didn't mean to provoke him.

"You should know better than to argue with me," He lowered his voice when he noticed that I had no intention to challenge him. "I mentioned Central Thai dishes because I want you to learn how to cook them. You are no longer a Lao because you are my wife and you now live in Central Thailand." All of sudden, his mood took a turn for the worse again and he immediately yelled at me "Do you understand?"

I panicked and hurriedly told him I understood what he said, but as I was in a state of confusion I made a big mistake by referring to myself as "khoi", a pronoun used by a Northeastern person to refer to herself. It was like when one starts to make one mistake, more mistakes will follow in a row, and I was not sure why at that moment I chose to refer to myself as 'khoi. It could be because lately I was too confident about my honored wife title as I explained before. This, together with Srisak's bickering about me being a Lao or an Issan woman, which probably disturbed me, caused me to respond that way.

Like a lightning strike that immediately follows thunder, as soon as I uttered the word 'khoi', he slapped me in the face with full force and it knocked me off my balance, causing me to collapse onto the floor in shock.

"This is enough. I won't stand it anymore!" He yelled. "Don't you dare use any Lao word in my house! You can only use proper and polite Central Thai words. We have a television set at home so make use of it to educate yourself about those words. Don't act like an idiot! Do you understand what I want you to do now?"

"Yes, sir. I understand now." I said in tears.

"This is your punishment." He said and breathed in deeply before continuing in a calmer voice, indicating that he was about to lecture me. "When you do something wrong, you will be punished. Punishment is the consequence and your wrongdoing is the cause. Cause brings about consequence. Your failure to learn how to behave properly is unacceptable, and you even attempted to challenge me, the owner of the house you are now living in. What you did was so wrong. I provided a home for you but you refused to follow

regulations and rules, so you have to be punished. If you did not argue back, this punishment would not have happened."

"It's totally my fault, sir."

"It's good you admit that it was your fault." He looked very pleased and smiled after I said that.

He then asked me to sit next to him to have a meal together. As we were eating, he calmly taught me about how to use appropriate words to refer to things around me. His bad mood seemed to vanish completely and he even explained further why he was entitled to use a greater variety of words than I was. According to him, he could call me "Dao', 'you', you silly woman, etc. depending on circumstances (a year later he called me 'bitch' because I did something bad and deserved to be treated that way), but he made it clear that I had to refer to him as 'my dear husband'. Also, he emphasized that I had to use polite and appropriate expressions when talking to him (for example, 'let us eat' not 'dig in', 'watch television' not 'watching TV', etc.), and this is another rule established by him for our married relationship.

My Wonderful First Son

One afternoon not long after the day I was punished, he came up with an unusual plan by telling me not to cook that evening as he would take me out to have some fun. Later in the evening he told me to dress up in my best clothes (meaning the best ones I have in my closet, although he said to himself that I needed to have more clothes to wear when going out). Then he unlocked a small treasure chest that he had discreetly hidden inside a big cabinet and took out a gold necklace for me to wear. He had dressed up and looked great in his pale yellow short sleeve shirt and dark blue pants. He also wore a wrist watch with its black band and golden dial. His hair was neatly oiled and combed to reveal his wide forehead. His outfit and brown complexion made him look quite striking.

He drove his ute into downtown Saraburi and there I had a chance to experience colorful and bustling city life and lively commercial activities. These things might appear exciting, but they actually intimidated me. To me, the city made me feel inferior. Those city people looked gorgeous in my eyes, but I could feel that they look at me condescendingly. Being among city people made me awkward and uneasy and their gazes unsettled me. Luckily, Srisak was with me and I tried my best to look prim and proper. He kept instructing me about how to do things properly and I felt that there were so many rules to follow. My heroic husband, on the other hand, blended in very well with city people and, based on my observation, was in no way inferior to them.

He took me to a Chinese restaurant which was fully packed, and told me that this restaurant was very popular among city people. Then he ordered Peking duck, stewed pork leg in Red Soup, casseroled shrimps with glass noodles, and many others. He tried to teach me how to use chop sticks but I had never tried to eat anything by using just two sticks so I could not manage. In the end, he gave up and asked a waiter to bring me a spoon and fork. He then explained to me how to eat this and that dish, and which dish I should eat first. After introducing me to those dishes, he started to eat with enthusiasm. He gulped down the glass noodles noisily, then put down his chop sticks to peel off the shrimps' shell

skillfully. No way I could peel off those shrimps the way he did and he knew that because he left the peeled shrimp on my plate for me to eat.

I ate just a little of those dishes and he asked why I did not seem to eat much but didn't pay much attention to my response. They were all fantastic foods, he said, and people only ate them on special occasions, once in a blue moon. I knew he wanted to indicate to me that he took me to the restaurant because it was a special occasion. Whenever he asked why I did not eat, I tried to eat a little. To be honest, I didn't really like those foods because they were so oily, and I wondered why people found them tasty. The more I ate them, the more their oily taste made me queasy. And there were no fresh vegetables as side dishes to help get rid of the oily taste. These foods were totally different from the ones I was familiar with and had cooked for him. My dishes had different or contrasting tastes that blended together nicely – sour, sweet, salty, oily and spicy, and I always prepared fresh vegetables as side dishes. But those foods! They were all so very oily!

But I knew he took me to this restaurant with a particular purpose in mind, and as we were eating, he asks whether I knew the recipes or ingredients of this and that dish, and if it was possible for me to cook it. I certainly knew how to cook some of the dishes, for example, casseroled shrimps with glass noodles. For this dish, you need glass noodles, shrimps, pork belly, black peppers, garlic, ginger, black soy sauce, etc. However, I couldn't tell how they cooked Peking Duck, and he told me not to worry about it as he believed it was too hard for me anyway, adding that he took me to this restaurant because he wanted me to get to know more varieties of dishes and hoped that I could cook some of them for him in the future. I could definitely cook casseroled shrimps with glass noodles for him, but I didn't think I could buy shrimps from the ute that sold the ingredients I normally used. I probably would have to buy them and a few other ingredients from the fresh food market.

He seemed quite pleased with me and complimented me for being a fast learner. It was a bit strange, he said. You have never been to school but you can do many things. People can learn from experiences even if they have never been to school, he said.

"Life is like school" he summed it up. "You are a student and I'm your teacher."

"You are right", I said.

“I will have to reward you for this.” He said.

After that he ordered a dessert made from beans in syrup to change the taste.

After we got home, he was in a rush that we should get ready for bed and he told me not to bother about washing his hands and feet. From the way he behaved, I could tell that he desired me. In the past, I had to be the one initiating the foreplay by kissing him on the cheeks first. He would respond by kissing me back, first on my cheeks then all over my body. After that, he would climb on top of me and did what he needed to in order to finish. That night, however, he behaved rather strangely because after I kissed him, he moaned softly but remained still and didn’t respond by kissing me back. I continued kissing him on his face, the side of his neck, and his mouth. He soon told me to take off his clothes and I went on kissing him on his chest and stomach while he trembled in pleasure. He asked me to play with his manhood with my hands and mouth and I did what he asked me to. The dim light in our bedroom made it possible for me to see the face of my hero, who was obviously experiencing a pleasurable sensation and moaning as if he could not have enough of it.

Then he told me to sit astride him and gradually let him enter me. As I had never done something like that before, I was quite clumsy doing it but he didn’t seem to mind. He was losing himself in the heat of the moment and I also experienced a pleasurable sensation that spread warmth throughout my groin. It was deeply satisfying for me to be able to momentarily control him during those moments. I sat astride him, watching him moan helplessly, enjoying my totally superior power over him, and watching him go soft before my very eyes. After it was over, he seemed to fall asleep immediately. I couldn’t tell whether he pretended to fall asleep or he did actually fall asleep. He might have feigned sleep out of shyness.The next morning he didn’t mention anything about the previous night’s love-making, acting as if he was an angelic hero who had no interest in that kind of activity. He pretended that he engaged in sex merely because it was his duty towards me and because it had to be done for a reproductive purpose. He also acted as if he was above a desire for carnal pleasure and he wanted me to have better control over my desire. He made it clear that he didn’t want me to joke about that sort of thing in the daytime. (I knew,

however, that he liked it but wanted to suppress his true feelings.) As time passed, what he claimed was his real purpose in sleeping with me was achieved—I became pregnant and gave birth to our first son, the son that the father couldn't be prouder of.

This son was truly a great son for his father as he was like a representative of him and they shared so many similarities—looks, complexion, personality traits, etc. This son of mine acted as if his status was equal to that of his father and often demanded things from me. It was very hard for me to look after this son and his father at the same time.

It could be because I was still new to being a mother that made it so difficult for me to handle this son of mine (and this was so different from my experience with my two younger sons later on). He was so demanding and bad-tempered. He cried all the time, all day all night, and often bit me when he suckled. He also had a lot of health problems, as if he wanted to get attention all the time and made himself the centre of the universe.

I have to say that this son was his father's great son, based on my own interpretation of 'great'. What I mean is that he was his father's second self in the form of an infant. If you can, you may try to imagine what it was like for me to have two Srisaks in my home. Immediately after his birth he tried to get all my attention, stealing it away from his own father; father and son competed with each other to get the attention of their only 'slave' (It was not until years later that I realized that I was nothing more than their slave.)

As far as I'm concerned, despite the fact that they are father and son, there was also a sense of animosity between them. As they wanted the same thing from the same person, it inevitably led to tension. Since he was a baby, his father had showed displeasure towards him. This was because having to take care of the baby was the only excuse I had for not devoting myself to chores and looking after my husband, and he had to endure this as the baby was his own flesh and blood. Nonetheless, not long afterwards, he started to complain and lecture me for using the baby as the excuse for not doing chores properly. According to him, my excuse was simply not good enough because other 'honored' wives who had to look after their babies could still perfectly handle their household chores. (Oh my dear husband, based on what I had observed from TV soaps, those ladies could do so because they have their nannies to help them! At that time, I had started to challenge him in my

mind.) Later on, he also took it out on his baby, what the hell does this bloody baby want? Wait till you are a bit older and I will teach you how to behave!

To sum up, this son was born to become the other Srisak, and Srisak himself must have realized this so he tried his best to make his son behave the way he wanted, and if the son refused to do so, he would be punished. The rules he imposed on the son and the forms of punishment he delivered when those rules were not observed were no different from what I was subjected to before.

The right to punish this son of mine should not solely belong to their father. He was also my own flesh and blood so I believed I was entitled to the right to punish him as well. To be honest, I took it out on him quite a lot, but that could be because I was still new to being a mother. As a baby he liked to repeatedly bite my nipple as he suckled, and when I was at the end of my tether because it really hurt, I decided to put tiger balm on my nipples. When he cried as he wanted to suckle and I told him: No, you can't because my nipples really hurt, he wouldn't give up demanding that I let him suckle. His two little hands tried hard to grab my breasts. Ok, if you really want it that much, I said to him. Immediately after he started to suckle, he made a face because of the tiger balm, and I said to him: Now you must remember not to bite your mum's nipples.

When he was a baby and we were alone together, there were also other types of punishment I subjected him to. For example, when he was too demanding while I was really busy trying to get chores done before his father got home, I would have to resort to drastic measures since pleasing his father had to be my first priority. In a situation like this, I would point my finger at him and yell at the top of my voice. He would startle and became quiet for a while, but as time passed, this method did not seem to work anymore and I was forced to punish him physically. This sort of punishment was necessary, no different from when his father punished me. Punishment had to be delivered so that the wrongdoer would not repeat the same mistake. In my view, because Srisak's punishment of me worked, my punishment should also work with the baby. Thus, I pinched or slapped him on the mouth as punishment.

I punished my son this way because I wanted to please his father, making sure that he could enjoy himself when he got home without having to be annoyed about me not being able to get chores done properly. So you could say that it was for the sake of my husband that I punished my son.

Wasn't it my husband himself who often threatened to punish our son with this and that method when he became too demanding? I merely punished my son before his father could deliver his punishment, and it is certainly better for the son to be punished by me than by his harsher father.

But I dare say that, since he was baby, this son of mine wanted to harm me. He never let go of stuff and I'm sure he remembered that I had put the tiger balm on my nipples and had pinched and hit him. Those punishments did not make him feel any remorse or fear but they made him want to take revenge on me whenever opportunities allow. I sensed this when he started to behave differently. When we were alone together, he was no longer demanding but he would cry for this and that incessantly when his father was home. You see how self-centred this baby is? One day his father could no longer stand this demanding baby so he walked to the cradle, lifted him up, and shook him. Then he noticed bruises on the baby's arms and legs and started to quiz me about those bruises. I told him there were mosquito bites but he said impossible, as there were no red spots. I came up with the explanation that the baby had bruised his arms and legs by hitting them against something and he sometimes fell off the cradle when I was not looking because he was often restless. He rejected my explanation right away and because he could tell that I was lying, he started to interrogate me in earnest. He said: Have you become a liar? I tried to defend myself but he wouldn't let me and started to bombard me with questions that cornered me and eventually made me confess.

"You bitch! Did you hurt my son?" he snarled at me.

"No, I didn't, sir" I tried to deny it.

"Then how come he got all these bruises!" His voiced got louder and louder.

"They are from punishments, sir."

"Bitch!" He yelled.

He rushed towards me and slapped me so hard right in my face even though his other arm was still holding the baby.

“You have no right to punish my son. Your job is to look after him, not punish him! Make sure that you get this into your thick skull!”

“I will always keep that in mind, sir.” I hurriedly said this to appease him.

In my heart, however, I protested against him because this baby is also my son. But there was nothing I could do except swallow my bitterness. Worse, there was something else that is still vivid in my mind until now and it made me shudder whenever I think about it. When he saw that I was desperately seeking for words to appease his father, the baby, still held by his father, laughed out loud in pleasure.

This baby of mine must have felt very pleased that he could take revenge on his own mother.

My Second Magnificent Son

One of my guiding principles in life is that one has to remember past hurtful experiences so as not to let them repeat themselves. I actually learned a lot from my firstborn son and since the day I was punished by my husband, I told myself that I should not repeat the mistakes I made with my first son with my second son.

Even though I was generally busy looking after my first son and doing all the household chores, which were quite demanding and time-consuming, I still managed to find a bit of free time for myself when I got the chores done, let my son take a nap, and my husband being away at work. It was during such free time that I was able to learn more about things by watching TV.

Television had become my close friend after I had my first son. Before that I did not dare to make use of it, partly because I knew nothing about it, and partly because the TV set belonged to Srisak. Thus, I only touched it when I wanted to clean it and did not have enough courage to turn it on. Later, Srisak gave me permission to make use of it so that I could learn things from watching TV, but at first I was still not able to gather enough courage to do anything with it. All I did then was merely to glance at it when Srisak turned it on and observed how Srisak turned it on and off and changed channels.

Srisak liked to watch news programs and game shows. He also enjoyed watching comedies and music programs that featured Luk Grung songs[3]. On Sundays he stayed home all day watching TV and in the beginning I did not join him, but went into the kitchen listening to radio soaps or country music from my radio, as I was not familiar with TV yet. Sometimes Srisak yelled out at me to turn the radio volume down as it interfered with his TV.

One day a truck turned up and a few young men got off and started to set up a TV antenna and installed several lines. They spent hours doing this and once they were done,

[3] In the old days, these kinds of songs were usually associated with elite Bangkokians.

they brought in a new TV set to replace the old one. They took a while to plug in some lines and adjust things. One guy was in front of the TV screen while the other was up on the roof working on the antenna, and they kept instructing each other to do this and that until images appeared on the TV screen. They seemed pleased to see those images and Srisak looked totally satisfied. I myself was very excited to see colored images on the TV screen. Humans as shown on the screen had the same complexion as humans in real life and trees and fields on the screen were no longer in black and white and were exactly like what they should be. This color TV set entered our home when my first son was a little over one year old.

I got hooked on color television and this could be partly because of its colored images and partly because I had started to watch TV for quite a while before we got the color TV set. When I first turned on the TV and changed channels, I was quite excited to discover that television not only offered news and music programs, but also soaps, which I found really fascinating. Instead of having to imagine things I had heard about, they all appeared in vivid images before my very eyes. This is what a hero looks like, and a heroine looks like this. That is a female villain and this is a male villain. This is a mansion. Images like this enhance my understanding, and even more so when they are color images which appear so clear and realistic. I could see the beautiful complexion of a hero and heroine who, in my eyes, are so charismatic, as if they are god or goddess in disguise. And look at that! Those fruits are beautifully arranged in a bowl on a dining table. Like what Srisak had told me earlier, I could also learn more about polite and appropriate expressions from watching television.

Television not only opened up my horizon by bringing a world so distant from mine closer, but also made me become more familiar with people living in my neighborhood.

One day as I was buying things from the food truck that had just arrived in front of my house, the seller was enjoying a chat with a couple of her customers about a TV soap that was on the night before. The seller often had a friendly chat with her customers, but I never joined them. I generally just pointed at the stuff I wanted to buy, then paid and left. On that particular day, however, they were animatedly speculating whether the hero of that

TV soap would be able to eventually figure things out or not as the show was approaching its finale, and all the puzzles seemed nearly resolved. I felt I shared their excitement as I was also eager to see the hero understand things better. One of the sellers noticed that I was nodding along as they were chatting away and said to me:

"Do you also watch that show?"

"Yes, I do watch the show, Madam." I replied.

That was the first time I talked to 'strangers'. They looked somewhat puzzled upon hearing my response then whispered and giggled among themselves while commenting: "Oh Madam you are extremely polite!"

As time passed, those 'strangers' greeted and talked to me more when we ran into one another. They also persuaded me to watch such and such TV show and we struck up a conversation about it when we met again. One day a familiar face didn't show up so I asked the seller if she knew why 'that one' failed to turn up. The seller hid her smile before saying: "She is not 'that one'. We are all neighbors here."

The word 'neighbors' gave me a warm feeling and since then I considered all of them my neighbors.

The more we interacted, the more they became friendlier towards me and often asked me questions like: "What do you plan to cook for your husband this evening, Madam?" To which I replied "I was thinking about preparing Chicken in Yellow Curry for him."

I noticed that when they chatted among themselves, they often used unrefined and crude words, for example, when referring to their husbands, they often used impolite terms like 'bastard' or 'son of a bitch', etc. Fortunately, when they talked to me, they were quite polite and often addressed me as 'Madam' or "Lady' and referred to my husband with respect as 'Mr.". They also gave me compliments, telling me they thought my husband was so lucky to have such a wonderful wife who did everything to please him. Yet it is strange of him that he is hardly home, they said. Their compliments made me bashful and I had to hide a smile of pleasure.

Not long afterwards, a neighbor named Yeun offered to ask her husband to come over to help get rid of weeds. She said her husband was a handy man and he often helped people rid their land of weeds. I had no clue why she made such an offer because I could hardly see any weeds on our property and I could easily manage those very few sparsely visible clumps of weeds around the house. The property was definitely not full of weeds as she had described it. Yuen realized that I misunderstood her and proceeded to explain that she was talking about the land beyond the fence, and pointed at it. I looked at the land she was pointing at and could see that it was full of gigantic trees such as mango trees, tamarind trees, etc. and the ground was covered in weeds until it was nearly impossible to walk through. But that land was not Srisak's, and I told her so, as well as asking why they made the offer about clearing weeds out of it.

She then said to me "Oh Madam, you must have confined yourself to the house until you are hardly aware of what's going on! Don't you know that all the land I pointed at belongs to Mr. Srisak?"

I was puzzled and at a loss for words. It seemed to me that I wouldn't have known anything like this without this neighbor?

There was a time when I went out with a black eye to buy ingredients for my cooking from the food truck. Upon seeing me, one of the neighbors exclaimed in panic before asking "Oh gosh! What happened to you? Your eye is so bruised!"

"Oh, it was nothing. I slipped and lost balance."

"What! Slipped and lost balance? Perhaps you fell facedown against a stump as well, or else your eye wouldn't have been that bruised!" said another neighbor, who didn't seem to believe me.

"Your explanation is like what the good girls in soaps often came up with. Nothing but one thing could cause such a bruised eye!" Another one chimed in.

Then they went on and on and on about how heartless and beastly Srisak was to me.

"I was punished because I did something wrong. I deserved it and please don't blame my husband."

She is so pitiful, they said, and added that there was no way they would let a husband abuse them that way. They would fight to death rather than giving in.

I kept silent the whole time they were talking because I disagreed with them. A good girl has to accept punishment from her husband. Also, when delivering the punishment, my husband clearly explained to me why what I did was wrong and improper. I could not argue back, let alone fight back. In fact, it is not good to fight back because he is the one who looks after me, protects me, and keeps me fed. If I happen to be unhappy with the way he treats me or want to stand up against him, then I should give up all the things he has given me, including his protection, and leave this house on this piece of land that he owns. The other important thing is that most of the time, say, 350 days a year, he is good to me and our family, and if he is not that nice to me for merely 15 days a year, is it that hard for a woman like us to endure?

I don't know if my neighbors would understand me if I told them all of this. No way I could tell because I kept those thoughts to myself. Let them feel sorry for me and see me as pitiful. I myself feel very proud and honored to be with him and under his protection. I have a family here and have a good home. He owns a lot of land and has a good job. If he is not a good man, then why is he bestowed with such wealth and status? No doubt he is a decent man and that makes him deserve all he has now. His life is getting better and better and so is mine as I'm with him. If I look around, I can see no other family which is doing as well as ours.

Since then I started to keep a distance from my neighbors. I still greeted them but made sure we were not too close and I tried to avoid them. My husband didn't mind this at all. In fact, he encouraged me to stay away from the neighbors. When I told him about the neighbor's offer to have her husband come over to clear off the weeds, my husband initially looked surprised as he probably hadn't imagined that I would have time to socialize with the neighbors. Then he said he didn't want the neighbor's husband to get rid of weeds for him as he would just get one of his workers to come around to do the job, adding that he didn't like nosey neighbors snooping around. He also warned me to be careful when

befriending people. According to him, people out there are all insincere and they only act friendly because they want something from us. He said to me:

"You see, that neighbor Yeun befriended you simply because she wants to earn some money, not to mention her nosiness!"

He then became annoyed and complained about nosy neighbors who told me about how much land he owns, as if he also wanted to blame me for getting to know about stuff that is not confined to our domestic sphere.

To discourage and prevent me from socializing with our neighbors, he even went so far as to suggesting that from now on I should buy ingredients for my cooking from Kaeng Khoi market. I told him I would do so.

From then on, I travelled to Keang Khoi fresh food market more often. It was not that hard to get to the market because I could catch a mini-bus there and it took just about half an hour. The only inconvenience was that I had to carry my baby along with me. The first time I saw the market, I was amazed by its spaciousness and all the stuff available there. At first I didn't know where to start as there were so many things unfamiliar to me, things not available from the food truck. But believe me, women and markets are close friends and a woman won't get lost in a market even if it is her first time there.

This fresh food market allowed me to be able to cook different types of food from what I was used to, as I could buy shrimps, shellfish, crabs, fish, and all sorts of spices from this market. If I didn't know how to cook a certain dish, I could always ask for help from the sellers, who were generally more than willing to tell me what I could do with the vegetables or with one kilogram of the shellfish they were selling. All the sellers addressed me as 'Madam'. This could be because I had a refined manner, was always polite when talking to people, and dressed well. (As promised, Srisak bought me nice outfits for when I go out.)I also wore a gold necklace (with his permission) and other types of jewelry, such as a wrist watch and a bracelet that Srisak bought me after he had punished me.

One evening I cooked a fantastic dinner for Srisak and waited for him to return home from work. When I heard the beeping of his car horn, I changed the TV channel to his favorite one and rushed down to open the front gate for him. After shutting the gate, I

welcomed him home and we went upstairs together. He flopped himself in his favorite sofa, looking tired and hungry and asked what I had for dinner. I took this chance to offer him a beer:

"You have worked hard all day long. Why don't you have a beer, darling?"

He looked very surprised but said "Sounds good."

I poured the special beer I had prepared for him into a glass and handed to him. (It is not coincident that the beer is perfect like this. You need to put the beer in the freezer for a while to get it perfect like that.**)** He gulped it down and let out a loud burp that made me giggle. He laughed a little and said, today is a good day. Things flow smoothly. That glass of beer did work wonders. His mood was much better because of it and he no longer looked tired, but refreshed and pleased with me. As he was having a shower, I set the dinner table and when he came out of the shower and saw the food I had prepared, he exclaimed with great satisfaction: "Oh, my dear wife!" I noticed that he enjoyed the food more than usual.

After I tucked my son in bed, I prepared a bowl of water and started to wash my husband's hands and feet like other evenings. However, that evening the washing ritual was only about half way done. While I was about to dry his feet after washing them, he hugged and kissed me passionately on my mouth. I was pleased to be the object of his desire and was pleased with myself for doing everything right that day. I was also happy that what I did that day pleased both of us immensely. I kissed him back hungrily and we made love. Both of us tried to gratify each other and derived so much pleasure from our love-making that night.

However, that night there was someone else who witnessed our pleasure, even though I was not sure whether he witnessed it from the beginning or not. Even if he did, it was very unlikely that he would understand what was going on as he was so young. That night after we made love, I realized that my two-year-old son was looking at us from his bed. He lay still without making any noise and he was gazing at us while sucking his thumb. For a split second, his gaze made me shudder. My husband knew nothing about this because he fell asleep as soon as he had finished.

Despite the fact that my first son had seen us engaged in the act of love-making, my second son was conceived that night.

The Arrival of the Bad Girl

As I had mentioned earlier, my second boy was totally different from his elder brother. This second baby of mine had a lovely and clear complexion and was quite chubby. He was a good-natured baby who hardly cried or demanded attention. It could be said that he got his looks and personality from me, and it gave me immeasurable joy to hold him and nurture him. I derived great pleasure from looking after him, but I soon realized that such pleasure later caused me pain as it made my time of happiness with my baby boy fly too fast. My baby boy grew up so fast and all I wanted was for him to remain my baby. However, no one could stop the passage of time.

Srisak named my second boy Chidchai, and at the age of two he could walk around but was still unsteady. I often clapped my hands to attract his attention to make him walk towards me. He couldn't talk yet and sometimes he dribbled, but he was such an adorable toddler.

My first boy was no longer entirely dependent on me as he had attended the district kindergarten. A school bus and his homeroom teacher brought him home every afternoon, and once he was home, I got busier. He liked to tease his baby brother and treated him as if he was one of his toys—making him lie on his back, pressing his brother's hands and feet hard against the floor so that he could not move. This often made the baby cry and I had to distract the elder boy's attention by pushing a robot toy into his hand. Sometimes I had to bring the baby into the kitchen with me and keep an eye on him while I was cooking for his father, leaving the elder boy to play by himself in the front part of the house.

Soon both boys would have to attend school but I wanted to have a bit more time with my second boy.

I remember that when my second boy first went to school, I caught a minibus to see him, actually to see both boys, at their school every day during their lunchbreak, bringing them lunch and fed them myself. In the beginning it was quite painful for me to be apart from my boys. It took me almost a year to get better and I eventually was able to stop myself from visiting them at their school every day.

It had become rather desolate at home. My husband was rarely home. Before that it had been normal for him to be away from home for work a couple of days a week, but now he often spent a whole week or more away from home. Worse, it seemed to me that if he was home, it was only for the sake of his two boys, as he did not even want to look at me. I longed for kind words from him, but he no longer gave me any compliments, even when

I prepared fancy dishes for him. At dinner time, he showed little interest in food and became withdrawn. There was also no physical intimacy between us.

His behavior reminded me of a male protagonist in one of the TV soaps, the one who is inconsiderate towards the female protagonist and seems to want to pick on her all time, not to mention that he often says hurtful things about her birth and origins. It seemed clear to me that such behavior was induced by the influence of the bad girl, who must have charmed him with her sweet but poisonous words, making him unable to tell right from wrong.

Soon enough, my husband brought another woman home with him.

He told me that she was one of his business contacts and they planned to expand their fabric business by exporting their products overseas. She was a tall, gorgeous woman with a fair complexion and her makeup was perfect. Obviously, she was a worldly city woman who could charm Srisak with everything she said, and I could tell that he couldn't have enough of her charm. He then persuaded her to try my food, telling her that I was the best cook. She seemed to like my food and gave a lot of compliments. After dinner, Srisak drove her to the city (I guess she lived there) and it was already 2 or 3 in the morning when he returned home. I could smell cigarette smoke, alcohol, and unfamiliar bath soap from him.

The next day Srisak told me that he had brought her home so that I could get to know her. (For what reason? I wanted to ask him, but chose to remain silent instead, and he did not elaborate further.) From that day on, he often brought her home with him.

My heart was wounded but I didn't know how I could show it. I was in the same distressing situation as those good girls in soaps, but there was nothing I could do except keeping things to myself. As time passed, however, my suffering increased and started to come out with my tears. I cried in secret every night out of loneliness, and often I had to hug my children for comfort, drying my tears on the backs of my sleeping boys.

That woman had everything that fits in with the bad girl type so in my mind I referred to her as 'the bad girl'. When she was at our place, she always stood by the side of my husband and looked at me as if I was her maid. There was no point for me to get to know her because she never helped me with chores; her hands had never touched the dish-washing water; they ate and left the mess behind and I had to clean up after them all the time.

One day Srisak said to me: "I will ask Suda to come to live here with us."

I was stunned. She will come to live here? Where will she live?

I gathered my courage and asked with tears brimming in my eyes: "What sort of status will she have here?"

“She will live here as my other woman,” He said and his face was expressionless. “You are my wife, and she is my mistress.”

I shook my head and was no longer able to hold my tears. “I think I’m not your wife but just one of your mistresses.” I wept after saying this.

There were many things I wanted to say, to vent out, and to protest. Where is my place in this household of his? He rushed towards me and put his arms around me, something he had never done before, and it made me feel a bit better.

“You are not my mistress.” He tried to console me. “This house is mine and also yours. You gave birth to my sons, who are very important to me, so there is no way that you are merely my mistress.”

I gathered my courage and argued back: “But why do you need to have another woman.” We already have a hero and a heroine. If a bad girl is needed, what does this suggest? Obviously, scandal and disgrace! “Don’t you think it is immoral?”

He looked shocked and pushed me away, and said in anger: “Immoral? What exactly do you mean? You hardly know anything so don’t you dare to preach!.”

“There is nothing immoral! I’m a breadwinner and I have never failed in my duty. I’m a man so I’m entitled to have some fun in life, and Suda can give me that. She is nothing more than a woman who can give me pleasure, and it’s good enough that I let you know in advance that she will live here with me. I don’t even have to ask for your permission actually. ”

So he believed he had asked me for my permission? I could tell that his anger was rising and I did not dare to challenge him.

“What sort of damn morals are you talking about?”

“I heard about them from soaps.”

“Oh, so you are talking about the morals you learnt from those stupid soaps?” He sneered at me. “Those soaps hardly give you anything but a very limited understanding of morals. Let me ask you one thing. Are you saying that Indian men are immoral because those men have many wives? Look at you! You have no clue how to respond to this I know. No need to talk about a foreign culture then because you only have to think about those TV dramas about royalty in the old days, would you say that kings in those dramas are immoral because they have many wives and concubines who are eager to please them?”

I didn’t know how to respond.

“I was simply explaining things to you. You have to befriend Suda so that you can live together, and it’s your duty to do so. You understand?”

“Yes, sir.” I acquiesced, suppressing my pain.

After that, Srisak was busy with the new project of adding another bedroom to the house. He hired builders to do the job and bought a brand-new bed, mattress, television and a lot of other stuff for the room, a love nest for himself and his woman. He waited for it to be completed with great pleasure and enthusiasm. When he was home, he spent a lot of time in that room, daydreaming about the day of its perfect completion. In the middle of the room was the huge bed, and on it the mattress, bed cover, pillow cases, and blankets he carefully chose by himself, all in sweet and lovely colors.

Once that room was completed, he brought that bad girl home and told me that I should take the opportunity to befriend her and he would give her a big surprise. When she arrived, that woman was surprised indeed.

At first she even took the trouble of coming to see me in the kitchen and tried to strike up a chat with me. She asked what I had for dinner and said she really liked my food. I wanted to tell her no need to pretend because I know what she wanted, but I knew I should not upset Srisak and should not create conflicts so I played the game, telling her that I planned to cook such and such dish. She was so good at putting on an act as she went along with me, acting friendly. Then Srisak told her not to distract me and leave me alone to get the dinner ready, otherwise I might not be able to concentrate on cooking and it might spoil the taste of the dinner I was cooking. He took her to see their love nest and they disappeared into that room for a long while. They were so quiet and even though I tried my best to eavesdrop, I heard nothing, and it disturbed me even more.

When they came out of that room, I noticed a big change in the bad girl as we were having dinner together, all of us—Srisak, myself, our two kids, and the bad girl. The change in her was that she didn’t speak a word after seeing that room, and the one who organized that room to be built was unusually quiet as well, and this suggested some tension between the two of them. Srisak urged me to ask the bad girl if the dinner was to her liking, and I did what he asked me to. The bad girl merely nodded and smiled a little in embarrassment. In short, throughout that dinner, the hero tried to ask the heroine to ask the bad girl this and that. It was rather weird that the two of them didn’t enjoy chatting with each other like before anymore.

After the meal, the bad girl went out to the corridor. (She didn’t even bother to help me clear the dinner table despite the fact that she will be part of the family soon!) Shortly afterwards, the hero followed her, leaving the heroine like me to do the dishes by myself. But I overheard them arguing and it seemed to me that the bad girl was not pleased with the love nest. She said to Srisak that she is not a concubine like me. What! Why does she

have to bring me in? Why can't she just attack him? Anyway, this behavior of hers is quite predictable. I know that a woman like her would want to make things worse, so typical!

She said to Srisak that she was entitled to all the freedom—that she could go anywhere and do whatever she wants without having to bother about anyone. (Of course, I know that's what she believes!). She told Srisak it was unacceptable that he treated her that way. "Only your wife could tolerate that kind of treatment!" I heard what she said clearly. What is wrong with me then? Why am I never good enough for the hero, and why do I have to be insulted by the bad girl all the time? I nearly rushed to the corridor to hurl those questions at her, but I had to stop short because she then said "Don't you feel sorry for your wife at all?" I was unable to move and I went numb and was even trembling. My first thought was that she did understand me and it gave me a warm sensation. However, I quickly brushed off those positive thoughts about her. I wouldn't let myself fall for her tricks and it was clear that her seemingly kind words were poison in disguise.

I managed to pull myself together. Srisak is my husband and we have two kids together, so the right thing for me to do is to take his side. Right now that bad girl is hurting him and it is wrong of me to take the bad girl's side. I have to be Srisak's ally.

After telling myself this, I became calmer and decided to bring all the dishes into the kitchen. As I was doing the dishes, I said to myself:

"What's wrong with you? Srisak went so far as to build you a bedroom so that you could have somewhere to stay permanently, but you refused it. You want freedom? What an idiot you are! You are so dumb and you want what you don't really deserve. You can't even see that Srisak is so devoted to you and you have so much more of his attention than I do." But once this last thought occurred to me, I felt a sharp pang in my heart, and all of a sudden, it was like all the painful feelings were tearing my heart to pieces.

From that day on, the bad girl simply disappeared but I'm not sure whether this is a good thing or not because Srisak himself was hardly home and on a rare occasion when he was home, he looked so sad and forlorn, and I couldn't help feeling sorry for him.

All in all, however, I think I have to thank the guardian spirit who resides in our miniature spirit house. I had actually prayed to him to save me and my family from the bad girl who clearly brought with her trouble and bad luck. I begged him to help get rid of her and all the bad things accompanying her. And because he did help me, I proffered to him a succulent boiled chicken as my offering.

My Arrogant Son

Srisak was rarely home because he was chasing after that bad girl. That was what I believed, although it wasn't exactly the same as what happens in TV soaps, in which the bad girl has to hang around the hero all the time so that she could charm and seduce him. In our case, since that day the bad girl left, Srisak was pining after her and was trying every way he could to beg her to return to him. But it was fruitless, and when he was home, I could tell that he was so heartbroken and he kept saying to himself that the bad girl misunderstood him, totally misunderstood him.

What was worse was that their breakup affected Srisak's business quite badly. Once at dinner time, he confided in me that his joint business projects with the bad girl had no future and he could lose a lot of money he had invested. He also had other financial worries about the business deals he had made with the bad girl while they were in love. Srisak's desire to have some fun in life not only caused him grief, but also led to his financial difficulty. Surely, this would soon cause trouble to myself and our kids. He became a gloomy and bad-tempered man who got upset very easily. Not long afterwards, he decided to downsize his business enterprise and complained that the economy was going downhill. Even though he said I would never understand the problem he was facing, he often shared his worries and frustration with me when he was home.

Soon he took away the gold necklace he had bought me and started to sell some of his valuables. This was followed by his decision to sell some of the land to prevent his business from going bankrupt and to pay for household expenses.

During those years, when he was home, he made it clear that he was sick of me and annoyed by our kids. In a word, our existence was a nuisance for him.

And one night he seemed to reach the end of his tether. After tossing and turning in bed for quite a while, he sat up all of a sudden and said he was so annoyed by the noise from our kids' breathing. He then complained that he felt suffocated because the kids stole the air from him. Can't they see that he is dying? He works hard all day for the sake of his

family but they can't even let him breathe in peace! How dare they steal all the air from him!

"I can't stand it anymore!" He yelled.

He frightened me and I didn't know what to do. I had to ask what he wanted me to do and he ordered me to take the kids out and not to let them come near him.

Both kids cried in panic because his loud and angry voice terrified them. I tried to comfort them, telling them please don't cry otherwise their father would get more upset. Hurry up sons. Bring your blankets and pillows with you and follow me. We will sleep somewhere else. I took them to the room Srisak once wanted to make his and the bad girl's love nest, and lied down with them. My initial intention was to stay with them just for a while until they both fell asleep and then I would return to the bedroom. Soon I heard Srisak's snoring even before the kids went back to sleep. I gently patted my second son on the head and cuddled him, but the elder son turned his back towards me and soon dropped off. Once both sons seemed to be sound asleep, I felt relieved and fell asleep in the same bed.

The next morning Srisak asked me in annoyance why I didn't sleep in our bedroom and I explained to him that I worried that if I return to the bedroom, he might feel suffocated. He looked pissed off and said don't even think about challenging him with words and that I needed to know my place.

Since that night the room he first planned as his love nest became our kids' bedroom.

The kids are old enough to have their own bedroom. That was the reason Srisak gave me, but in my heart I protested against it because my second boy, Chidchai, was just starting his first grade. I couldn't cuddle my little boy and fall asleep together like before anymore. Things were different with my first son though, as he didn't really want to be close to me. The more he grew up, the more he wanted to keep a distance from me. Worse, as my second son became bigger, he followed his elder brother everywhere because they loved to play together. I knew that when sons grow up, they no longer want to be close to their mum, but even then, it still saddened me.

I wanted to have another baby.

Babies were the joy of my life because I could give them my full attention. Without them, I felt empty and lost. Kids' growing up was something painful for me because, starting from the day they could run, the first thing they wanted to do was run away from their mother's warm embrace.

Just look at my two sons who grew out of my flesh and blood. I gave half of my life and soul to each of them and physically they also resemble me. However, the older they became, the less I saw myself in them. But first let me talk about my eldest son.

As I have mentioned before, my first son seemed to be hostile towards me since the day he was born. He was Srisak disguising as a baby, and as he got older, the resemblance between the two of them became even more obvious. It seemed to me that the things he said and did were intended to hurt me (I wonder if he was aware of this.) For example, each day after he got home from school, he would spread on the floor and did his homework in a good mood, but when I went near him and asked how he was doing with his homework, he would look at me with annoyance and displeasure, exactly the same as his father's condescending gaze. It was as if, through such a gaze, he told me there was no point asking because I had no clue about his homework anyway. Then he would say: "Can you leave me alone? Don't you see that I'm trying to get my homework done?" Later on, he said, "Don't distract me, mum. Why don't you go and see how Chidchai is doing? " I don't know why my presence annoyed him that much, but I never really gave up. I would approach him again, asking him how his day at school was, or whether his teachers gave him any compliments, or whether he did well in the exam or not. This last question was one Srisak often asked his kids. When I asked my first son this question, it was like a knife that returned to stab me because he said: "Even if I told you, you wouldn't know a thing about it anyway." I lost patience and argued back: "What do you mean I don't know anything? If you do well in the exam, I will certainly be happy for you." He said nothing but laughed at me as if he found the whole thing so hilarious.

I don't think I made it up by myself that this son saw me as stupid and looked down on me. I know why he dismissed me when I asked him about his homework. It was because he knew that I could not help him with his homework, and once he said to me: "You can't

help me mum." Yes, it is true I can't help him if he sees his education as something so grand, so superior to his own mother.

It was so unfortunate that he felt that way and believed I was a stumbling block to his education. I still clearly remember what he said when he was in Grade 4 as it deeply hurt me. On that day, I asked him to help me with some chores as he was watching a cartoon on TV, but he refused to do the chores. Instead, he yelled at me claiming that he had already got his homework done so he didn't have to do anything. The chores were no longer his responsibility, as if he believed that education had elevated him and because of it he didn't have to do any menial tasks. Upon hearing this, I told him that he was being unreasonable and, as he was my son, he had to do what I asked him to. He wouldn't give in but told me that he had done his bit, so I should just get mine done, then challenged me: "Let's do it this way. I will do your chores for you, but you will have to do my homework for me, okay? This seems fair enough."

When he said that, I was stunned and speechless. It was so disrespectful of him to say such things to me. Knowing that I was lost for words, he laughed out loud. That monster in him laughed at me!

"You can't do my homework I know." He said. "It's because you can't read and write. How embarrassing is that!"

This time he did stab a knife deep into my heart.

But your child is yours always, even if that child might be possessed by a monster. While there were moments that I just couldn't love him (I won't deny this), but the bond between a mother and her child cannot be severed. When your child is in pain, he will cry for you, a cry from his instinct that he might not be conscious of, and when that moment comes, will you as a mother still hate him? My eldest boy often cries for my help anyway.

When your son behaves badly or does something despicable, his mother is the only one who is entitled to denounce and punish her son. There is no mother who would let others insult and hurt her children, no matter how degraded her children are. Only a mother has the right to sentence her children and punish them. No one else has such a right.

Once he started his Junior High, he not only looked down on my illiteracy, but also made it clear that he disliked me. He hated the way I talk and my manners. In fact, there was nothing about me that he liked.

What happened on that day is still vivid in my mind. It was national Mother's Day in August and students had been asked to invite their mothers to attend the Mother's Day ritual organized in the school's main hall. For this ritual, students had to prostate in front of their mothers and place their heads on their mothers' feet as a gesture of gratitude while the well-known song about mother's love was played. During the ritual, he did what was expected of him but I know that what he did was not from his heart (You might think I'm heartless to think badly of my own son). But what made me believe that he merely put on an act? It was because before the ritual took place, he had tried to come up with several excuses he could use for not inviting me to the ritual, for example, he intentionally misplaced the school's formal invitation meant to be given to me. He told his homeroom teacher that I would not be able to recover from my illness in time for the ritual (I later ran into his teacher and she asked me whether I was feeling better.) His plan didn't work because in the end Srisak got to know what he was up to and told him that he had to invite me to the ritual. When we got to the school, I could tell that he was ashamed to have someone like me as his mother. He looked embarrassed and worried that his friends and teachers would look down on him. Anyway, I was there during the ritual and was sitting on one of the many chairs in the big school hall when he prostrated in front of me and touched his forehead on my feet. Even though I know that he didn't do it from his heart, tears ran down my cheeks.

My eldest son was doing well in his studies and this made him believe he was above others. I often had to suffer from his lack of respect and consideration for others. He became worse and worse and totally refused to help with the chores, pushing the burden onto his younger brother, who uncomplainingly did the chores. I really appreciated his help and it brought great joy to my heart. The elder son, however, was often out all day. After he got home from school, he went out again to have his own fun and only got home late in the evenings. Once home, he would take off his dirty clothes and left them for me to wash. The

he would lie down comfortably in his father's favorite sofa and ordered me to bring him his dinner (I did what he asked because I couldn't see how I could refuse to feed my own son.) When I left the living room to bring him dinner as requested, he would take the opportunity to change TV channels even though he knew that I was in the middle of my show. This was how he behaved when his father was not home, acting as if he was the most important one in the household.

Sometimes I lost patience with him when I really wanted to watch a particular show and he changed to a different channel, so I argued with him. But once in the middle of our argument, he said something that really hurt me. He claimed that people were moulded by the shows they watched and that I was so hooked on soaps that I even talked like those characters in soaps did.

"Don't you feel that the way you talk is embarrassing?" He said, "You are so obsessed with soaps until you imagine that they are the whole world."

"Well, prove to me that there is a world that is different from the one in soaps then?" I argued back. "Soaps are about love, greed, passion—all these are part of our human existence, and I have learned a lot about this sort of stuff from soaps, even though I'm not as well-educated as you are."

"It's all because you are uneducated." He said.

"Tell me what exactly do you mean by that?" I protested. "What if I'm uneducated? What's wrong with that anyway? Don't you see that I have raised you kids by myself and that I have looked after our family well? I don't see the need of having to learn anything extra from school, and I don't think I need to be able to read and write in order to survive. In fact, let me tell you this, you won't be able to survive if you are left alone in my rural home village. What you have learned from school won't make you able to grow rice or feed yourself."

"Ha ha!" He laughed out loud. "Why do I have to live in your rural home village? I don't even think about visiting such a place."

"Stop that! I don't want to listen to it anymore." I tried to stop him from saying awful things about my origins.

“You are so easily influenced. I can’t understand why you imitate the way those soap characters talk. Speaking in your Northeastern dialect is even better than copying the way they talk.”

“You father wants me to talk like them.”

He laughed. “See what I mean! You are too easily influenced. Don’t you notice that others don’t talk the way you do?”

“Why do I have to pay attention to others? I’m already better off being myself. In fact, look at you, you often hang around people and cause all sorts of problems to our family. You should stay away from them and spend more time at home. This will be better for you. And your father is doing better than others. You never listen to me when I ask you not to hang around those you hardly know all the time, and your father said the same to you. You never listen to us and like to be an eccentric.”

He laughed again. This son of mine is impossible! He must have been possessed by a mischievous spirit. “It’s you who are eccentric. In fact, this family in so eccentric. You and Father are both eccentric.”

“You said Father is eccentric. I will tell him!” Chidchai cried out. He must have felt that his brother was going too far.

It seemed to work. Once Chidchai claimed that he would tell his father, my elder son laughed a little to hide his fear and said: “Go ahead you cry baby. It doesn’t worry me one bit.”

When Srisak was home, Chidchai did tell him about what his brother said, and the elder son was severely punished.

As this son of mine got older, he got more and more aggressive. He became a bad-tempered teenager who not only looked down on his mother, but also wanted to rebel against his father, although, with this father, he was still careful not to be openly rebellious. Worse, he made it clear that he disliked his own home. He sometimes yelled that he felt suffocated and that staying home would just drag him down. He said he wanted to leave.

He got what he had longed for after finishing Grade 12 though. He passed an entrance exam and was offered a place at the Faculty of Arts at one of the universities in

Bangkok. His father was so pleased with him, announcing that this son of his made him so proud and that he was sure that he would bring honor to his father. He was willing to pay for his university fees and gave him permission to leave home.

I was not that enthusiastic though. I don't understand why he let our elder son leave home so easily. It had always been so hard for us to get his permission if we want to go somewhere. I also don't quite understand what good will the outside world do to people. Some of us are allowed to experience the outside world, while others aren't. Srisak was fully involved in the world out there and my elder son follows suit. And now Chidchai also show signs that he is eager to do the same. I'm totally confused as I can't figure out why is it bad to just live here. Why is staying home equal to being dragged down?

To me home is peace, happiness and safety. What more could we possibly want then?

This World is a Drama

In those days there was a movie theatre in the downtown area of Kaeng Khoi district. The theatre was somewhat similar to a rice mill because it was built from timber and had a tin roof. There was a big fan that drew the air in and helped with the ventilation of the theatre. I went to this movie theatre once and it was quite memorable because my second son was with me at that time.

It was my second son who had asked me to go to the theatre with him one weekend. I can't remember the name of the movie now, and only remember that my son sincerely asked me to join him to go see the movie with him. He must have noticed that his mother loves this sort of entertainment and so wanted to please me. He was so different from his elder brother because he wanted to please me and also sympathized with me. He was in Junior High then and on that day we had a good time together, chatting away, holding each other's hand, as we walked to the theatre. It probably looked as if we were elder sister and little brother. My second boy was not ashamed of having a mother who couldn't read and write.

The movie we watched was so exciting and full of suspense. In a little over an hour of watching that movie I nearly spent out all my energy cheering on the hero and heroine. About the bad girl in that movie, she was really despicable and whenever she appeared on the screen, the audience showed anger at seeing her and some even booed at her.

I remember that the name of the actress who played the bad girl in this movie was Wiyada, and I think a few years back she received the Golden Doll Award for her role as a really nasty woman in a movie called *Deceitful Wife*, if I remember it correctly. However, many people were upset that she got this award and they claimed that by giving her the award, it gave the message that bad people would be rewarded in the end. Also, to give the bad girl an award like this could lead to moral degradation. Still after she got that award, she was offered the bad girl role in many movies. In those movies, she played the roles of a heartless woman, a sex bomb, and many other roles that all highlighted her evil. She never once

showed any remorse and often laughed in a way that hurt the ears of others. Later on she also played the role of the bad girl in TV dramas, for instance, in the one called *Prim, a Woman Driven by Desire*. It could be said that she was the object of distaste for many people.

Not long after I went to see the movie with Chidchai, I heard from a seller while I was doing my shopping at the fresh food market that our district had often been used as a locale for film shootings. If they were producing action films, they liked to visit forested or mountainous areas, or if they were doing romance film shooting, they often picked the Kaeng Khoi railway headquarter, or small alleys of the downtown area. Some sellers told me that whenever they heard that a film crew had arrived, they would immediately pack up all their stalls so that they could go and have a look at the hero and heroine. I heard them going on about the good looks of Sorapong the hero, who could expertly dodge bullets and was so good at marital arts. They also got very excited about the exquisite beauty of Naowarat the heroine, the kind of beauty you never get bored looking at. I heard all this from those sellers.

One morning as I was doing my shopping at the market as usual, I had the chance to have a first-hand experience of running into a film crew. And that was also the morning I met someone who would change my life forever.

That day the film crew chose the middle of the market place as their shooting location. Most sellers had abandoned their stalls and gathered around the area where the crew was doing the shooting, hoping to see the hero and heroine up-close. The shooting location was glaringly bright with a big spotlight shining right into it, and people were crowding around the hero, who was putting on makeup. They whispered among themselves, wondering why a man needs makeup. The heroine was also putting on makeup. I walked away from the crowd a little and approached a big ute that had lots of wires hanging from it. It was there that I spotted the bad girl Wiyada relaxing on a chair and in front of her was a table with a bowl of noodles on it. She was eating the noodles with chopsticks while chatting away with those sitting next to her.

The moment I saw her, I got furious. I could feel myself shaking and I was on fire. I kept glaring at her but it seemed to me that I was the only one paying her attention, as other people were enamored by the good looks of the hero and heroine. I think it was better to hang around the hero and heroines like other people, but for some reason I couldn't take my eyes off the bad girl. The more I looked at her, the more upset I became. Look at her! She could still enjoy herself even though people gave her little attention. She didn't have any regrets or remorse about all the wrong and immoral things she had done. In my ear, I could hear her unpleasantly shrill voice, and could recall all the rude and obscene things she said and did in the movie *Prim, a Woman Driven by Desire*. In fact, she was the same in all the movies she took part in--- always a bad girl who liked to seduce other women's husbands and who had nothing to say to others but distasteful stuff. She was definitely the perfect Bad Girl.

I was rooted to the spot and I kept looking at her until the time came when it was her turn to act in the same scene as the hero. I still kept my eyes on her as she was acting. For that scene, it seemed that she had an appointment with the hero in the city, and as soon as she saw him, she rushed towards him, placing her arms around him and chatting away. She also moved her face so close to his. She sickened me and I couldn't help imagining that she must have bad breath because she has just swallowed a big bowl of noodles. I wondered why the hero didn't push her away. Instead, he was friendly to her. All of a sudden, I realized that desire wouldn't spare anyone, not even the hero. When one is under the influence of desire, an unpleasant thing can be mistaken for a lovely thing. It was the same when Srisak was enamored by Suda and begged her to return even though she was no longer interested in him. I discovered that the evil within the bad girl was not confined to movie scenes because I could feel all the hideous things coming out of her and spilling all over the food she is gobbling down.

After that scene was done, the bad girl returned to her old relaxing spot and was in a good mood like before. A thought occurred to me that I should grab this great opportunity to do something drastic so I approached her even though I was extremely nervous and shaken.

The first thing I said to her was: “Madam, may I ask you something?”

The bad girl startled a little before turning to look at me. Then she said in that pretentious voice of hers: “What is it you want to ask me, darling? Do you want to ask how come I look so gorgeous?” She said and laughed out loud in an unpleasantly piecing voice.

“No.” I stiffened and raised my voice. “I want to know when you will stop being a bad girl and improve yourself somehow.”

She looked shocked. By now she must have realized that I didn’t want to be friendly with her.

“How do you know I’m bad? You have no right to say such things about me.” I could tell that she has started to reveal her true colors.

“I know well how bad you are.” I said. “You love to play the roles of a jealous woman, a sex bomb, and a bitch.”

She laughed out loud and said: “Oh, my dear. Those are part of my job. Don’t you understand that I was just acting?”

“Of course I know fully well that it was just acting.” My voice started to shake. “But you love this kind of role so it means that you are like those characters you play. Don’t you know that it is immoral to seduce other people’s husbands or destroy people’s families? You will burn in hell for sure.”

“What! You are cursing me?” The bad girl raised her voice. “This woman must be insane. It seems impossible to talk some sense into her. Can someone get rid of her for me before I get more furious and teach her a lesson myself?” She yelled out for help from the crew members.

At that point, the crowd gathering around the crew group started to pay attention to my lecturing of the bad girl.

“You are furious now? Do you think I’m afraid of you? It doesn’t worry me a bit!” I raised my voice: “Why don’t you show your true colors? You want to hit me, I know. You want to shout obscenities? Go ahead. I’m not afraid of you one bit. You are just a bad girl!” I yelled at her and added: “I’m just an ordinary woman and I’m a good wife

and mother. I'm impeccable and never once imagine about seducing other people's husbands or sons the way you do."

"This woman is driving me crazy. Get rid of her for me, can't you?" She whined.

Some of the crew members approached me and they asked what was going on while trying to prevent further exchange of words and pushing me away. The crowd, which by now was surrounding me, tried to put two and two together. When they heard what I said about myself being a good wife and mother and never think about seducing other women's husbands or sons, they realized what I tried to do. As the crew members were pushing me away, I yelled:

"Come and look at this shameless woman! She is trying to hurt an ordinary woman like me!" Then I turned towards the crowd: "Look what they are trying to do to me. None of us like the bad girl, right? We all despise her and what she has done."

Then someone in the crowd told the crew members to leave me alone and not to push me that way, and others said I was simply asking for justice and had decided to confront the bad girl to force her to explain why she seduced my husband. They believed I was extremely upset that the bad girl had seduced my husband and they sympathized with me and were starting to take my side.

Things happened so fast and I didn't have time to explain that the bad girl didn't seduce my husband but I was just trying to ask her when she would stop playing the bad girl role. The ensuing confusion, combined with the support I got from the crowd that was trying to tell the crew members to leave me alone, inspired me to take the next drastic action. After freeing myself from the crew members, I rushed towards the bad girl with the intention of attacking her. But before I could do that, someone forcibly stopped me by placing his arms around me then half lifted me up and half dragged me away.

He managed to drag me for a few feet before I shouted at him out of pain and anger, telling him to let me go.

"I'm sorry," he said after letting go of me. "Are you hurt?"

"Of course." I replied in annoyance. "Who are you? Why are you doing this to me?"

He apologized again and said he was a doctor. Upon hearing that I looked at him and could see that he was well-dressed. It occurred to me that he was probably a doctor as he claimed. He was not tall, just a little taller than me, and he had a light brown complexion, a round face, and a friendly expression. His eyes also reflected kindness. He turned towards the crowd and told them:

"There was a misunderstanding and I'm sorry about what happened." He said. "I'm a doctor and my clinic is not far from this market."

Some of the people in the crowd recognized him and the situation actually became better after he showed up. He turned towards me again and touched my neck and forehead with the back of his hand. Then he felt my pulse, and made a fuss over me. I could feel that he treated me with genuine concern.

"You are on fire," he said. Then he told the crowd: "This lady is not well." Shortly afterwards, whispered to me: "Please follow me. You are really ill."

"Am I ill?" I asked him in panic.

"Please don't ask me anything now. Just follow me, okay?" He told me.

He turned towards the crowd and the crew before apologizing to them for me. He also asked them to forgive me, claiming that I was unwell. Those people must have been wondering what exactly is going on. But at that point I was calmer and my anger was more or less gone. All of a sudden, I felt ashamed of what I had done and couldn't figure out what had become of me that transformed me into a totally different person. I heard he said to others that I was unwell, so I assumed that I was ill, and maybe it was the illness that brought about that transformation in me a while ago. I felt desolate and when he held my hand and led me away, I willingly followed him.

My Beloved Gentleman

That doctor brought me to his clinic and all the while he held my hand firmly until it hurt. The pain in my hand went up to my arm and then my heart. I had been troubled by desolation and shame, and now a strange kind of excitement made me rather dizzy and nearly choked. The doctor turned to look at me again and exclaimed: “Oh, you look so pale. You must be really ill.” I was convinced by his diagnosis and felt as if some kind of illness had infiltrated into my blood cells, making me cold and hot at the same time.

Once we arrived at his clinic, I saw a plump man reading a magazine behind a counter in front of the room that patients go in to have their health checked. The doctor introduced him as Dr. Somjai, his friend and business partner. Then he told Somjai that he was going to check what was wrong with me and led me into the room. Somjai nodded and we both walked past him into the room.

The doctor appeared to be a type who moves around doing this and that all the time. In fact, it seemed he was too much in a rush, maybe a fluster. Once we were in that room together, he grabbed a kind of stick, shook it a bit, and told me to open my mouth. He then placed that stick under my tongue. I was quite embarrassed because I found it strange to be asked to keep a stick like that in my mouth. The doctor had to encourage me to do it, explaining to me that it was merely a thermometer, a device used to measure my body temperature. The reason I was embarrassed was because I had never seen a doctor or gone to hospital before, so I was not used to being treated in such an intimate way. I was generally a healthy person and had never suffered from any kind of serious disease. On a rare occasion when I had a fever or headache, I simply bought medicines from a chemist, had a long sleep, or drank something I prepared from medicinal herbs planted around our place, and I recovered soon enough.

I felt somewhat strange when the doctor looked at me very gently as he placed that thermometer thing under my tongue. He stood in front of me and gazed at me for at least

a minute and I felt really shy. Then he had a look at his wrist watch and said politely that he would take out the thermometer now. After that, he had a good look at it and told me that my temperature was very high. He soon grabbed hold of another device and pulled my shirt sleeve up. I was embarrassed again because I had never let anyone but my husband see my naked arm. He told me he would check my blood pressure, and I let him do what he wanted, although I felt he was getting too close to me physically, something no one else except my husband had done before. His fuss over me made me very confused and overwhelmed.

The doctor left the room very briefly and came back in with a piece of paper in his hand. The he asked me to tell him my first name, last name, age and address—things he needed to record as patient's personal details.

"You have a fever, dear."

"I see."

"I will get you some medicines to help reduce your fever, okay?"

I then worried that I didn't have enough money for the medicines. The money I had was just enough for my shopping, and I didn't know that I would see a doctor, so I said: "Normally when I have a fever, I don't need medicines. To get well, I simply boil lemon grass to get its warm juice to drink and take plenty of rest."

He laughed, but not to ridicule me or anything like that. His laugh was quite friendly.

"Yes, you are right. Drinking warm water and taking a rest can make you recover from a fever, but if you want to get well fast, medicines are quite useful."

He insisted that I took his medicines, so I said: "But I don't have enough money for them…"

He laughed out loud again and said: "Don't you worry, dear. You don't have to pay for these medicines at all. See them as my gift." Then added, "Please come to see me again tomorrow because I want to do a more thorough health check for you."

"Oh, you need to do a more thorough health check for me? Do you think there is anything seriously worrying about my health?" I asked him anxiously.

“Please don’t worry. I just want to check things like your blood pressure and blood sugar to make sure?

Upon hearing this, I started to get worried: “Is there something wrong with my blood pressure and sugar level, sir?”

“Oh, please don’t call me ‘Sir’. You can call me Dr. Siam, if you like.” He said. “Would you mind if I call you Dao?”

I let him know that I didn’t mind.

“Dao, please just call me Dr. Siam, or merely Siam. And please don’t speak so formally with me. It creates a distance between us, you see.”

I hesitated and said,

“But I’m used to this formal way of talking.”

“You are used to it? Where did you learn it from?” He asked. “Is it from TV dramas?”

Like my elder son, Dr. Siam commented about the way I talk and I didn’t understand why this polite way of talk from TV dramas had caused so much trouble with my communication with others.

“It was not simply because of TV dramas.” I said. “From the beginning of our marriage, my husband ordered me to learn this polite way of talking and I’m used to it now.”

“So this means that you didn’t talk this way before?” He asked.

I nodded. “I was a Northeastern girl and I spoke the Isaan dialect, but my husband forbade me from using the dialect. He said it was backward and I had to learn to speak the Central Thai dialect.”

“But the way you talk is not like the Central Thai dialect. It is actually the way characters in TV dramas talk. People don’t really talk the way you do.” He said,

“My husband told me to learn a proper way of talking from TV.” I said.

I didn’t know what had become of me. Doctor Siam seemed to have a kind of power that could make me confide in him about everything. It could be because of his

caring voice, his affectionate laugh, and his friendliness that somehow urged me to tell him anything he wanted to know about me, things I shouldn't have told anyone.

"Is your husband very strict and controlling?" He quizzed me further.

I nodded and told him about all the various forms of punishment Srisak subjected me to. He kept asking me questions, one by one and slowly, and he was attentive to what I had to say. His eyes became sadder and sadder and he showed disapproval about things Srisak had done to me. It was like the flood in me was unleashed by his kind attention and I felt increasingly relieved and grateful for his kindness at the same time.

"And you believe that the bad girls in TV dramas are also bad in real life?" He asked.

"No, it's not like that. I can differentiate real life from TV dramas."

"If so, how could you explain what happened at the market a while back?"

"I simply asked her when she would stop playing the role of the bad girl because that sort of role causes moral degradation and social problems. She could choose to play any role but she likes to play a sex bomb and a bad person all the time.'

"That's because it is her job, my dear." He explained. "We all have different jobs that help us to make a living and support our families. Take this example. My job is being a doctor and my job responsibility is to treat and look after patients. But it doesn't mean that it is impossible for me to become a patient one day, as I may get sick, have a fever, or other illnesses like other people. This is because I'm a mere human and being a doctor is just my job responsibility. As a human, a doctor can get sick and die. Do you know what I mean?"

I had to confess that I didn't really understand what he was trying to explain. It was something incomprehensible to me and it seemed that he had changed what I could understand into something beyond my understanding. Still, strange feelings occurred to me as I was talking to him and they caused me confusion, but it was a kind of confusion mixed with smiles, genuine concern, and goodwill. I could sense all these positive vibes through the way Doctor Siam treated me and, because of this, I let him know that I would

be back to see him the next day. Then I told him I would have to leave him to do my shopping.

That night I had little sleep. I tossed and turned and my mind was disturbed and overwhelmed by all sorts of thoughts. Basically, I kept thinking about what had happened during the daytime, from one incident to the next and the next. First, I ran into the Bad Girl and that led to the arrival of my dear gentleman, (in the future I would refer to him this way, so let me borrow it from the future for present use). After that, I had a chat with him, the chat that healed the pain in my heart. Then he found that I was ill and he tried to identify the problems I had in seeing and comprehending things.

It was a long and peculiar night, during which guilt and exhilaration flooded my heart. Like what people say, it is hard to fathom the human heart. In fact, you can't even fathom your own heart, and for me that night, I didn't dare to explore the depth of my heart because it scared me and made me overjoyed at the same time. Yet my heart tried to draw me into its depth despite my resistance. I ended up struggling with it all night.

The next day around noon I went to see Doctor Siam at his clinic and found that he was alone. Dr. Somjai was not there. I had prepared lunch in tins for the doctor to thank him for giving me the medicines without asking for any money. When he saw the lunch, he looked very pleased and exuberant. He was not tall and he loved to walk fast. His good mood made him move even faster, and he looked as if he could fly.

"Sir..Oh, please accept my apologies, Dr. Siam, I'm quite ready for today's health check."

"No need to apologize, dear. Please relax when you are with me. Be yourself. You can speak the Northeastern dialect if you like." He said in good humor and tried to say a few greeting words in the dialect that made me smile.

"I will try to relax but I might need a bit of time to get used to being more easy-going. Is that fine for you?"

"No problem at all. Please take your time." He said.

I really appreciated his kind words. He let me be myself and didn't order me around, even though he was a doctor and could easily do so with his patient.

"Maybe you should have your lunch first before resuming your work?" I offered. "I have just cooked these things for you, and to make sure you can have them while they are still warm, I packed them in the tins and rushed here. They are still warm."

"That sounds great!" He said, and I was pleased that he went along with my suggestion.

When I got to his clinic, he closed it for lunch break, and to prepare a place where he could have his lunch, he pushed all his medical tools to the edge of his desk and placed the tins in the middle of the desk. Upon seeing the food, he said it looked delicious and encouraged me to join him for lunch. I told him I already ate and was happy to just sit and watch him eat. He seemed to like the food a lot, and all the while behaving in a very friendly and familiar manner. I found him really amiable. Once he finished the food (without leaving anything in the tins), he carried the tins to the back of his clinic to wash, even though I told him to leave them to me. I heard him cleaning up the tins and gargling with water before walking back into the room.

He took out a handkerchief to wipe his mouth and hands and was ready for my health checkup.

"I had very little sleep last night." I told him.

"How come? If you don't get enough sleep, your recovery will be real slow. Did you take the medicines I gave you?"

"Yes, I did. I couldn't sleep because all sorts of thoughts popped up in my mind."

"Could you tell me what troubled you?"

"What you told me about high blood pressure and blood sugar really worries me. Last night I was up almost all night thinking about this. For hours, I tried in vain to figure out what could be the cause of high blood pressure. Then I tried to forget about it for a while and focused on blood sugar instead. It occurred to me that I probably have a high chance to suffer from this disease because all my life I hardly taste sweetness. It seemed to me that from the time I was a young kid up until now when I'm a married woman with

two kids, I hardly receive any sweetness. There were only very brief moments when I got a bit of sweetness, but those moments are extremely rare. Thus, I believe there is too little sweetness in my life, and maybe this is why it's possible that I might have blood sugar problem."

"My dear, I feel so sorry for you." Dr. Siam appeared to be sincerely moved after listening to me.

"I'm lost for words. What you said is really moving. As a doctor, I won't comment on your understanding of blood sugar problem or diabetes, but what is so touching to me is the sentiment you have just expressed. You are so innocent and your plight really moves me."

"Could you tell me why?" I didn't quite understand what he meant.

"It is because what you said is from your heart, from the heart of someone who has been through a lot." He paused before continuing. "Those things you have experienced cause you pressure, and it is a kind of pressure that builds up over time until it becomes so dense in your heart and can't find a way out. Let me tell you, my dear, this pressure could develop into what we called high blood pressure, psychologically speaking of course. Let's put in this way. I suspect that you might have suffered from high blood pressure and diabetes because you have been under stress, under the pressure that cannot be relieved, like the air current in the blood flow that blocks or inhibits the movement of air and blood in our body. Your psychological health will be affected first, and then it starts to interfere with your physical health, making you feel dizzy, suffocated, or want to faint. You might have pain all over your body and then become more vulnerable to diseases…"

"Please don't continue any further. It makes me so scared." I stopped him.

He walked towards me and stayed very close to me, saying: "Please don't be afraid. I'm here with you so there's no need to fear anything."

He gently pulled me towards him so that my head could rest on his chest. I didn't resist as I was really scared and shaken by what he had described, which seemed really frightening and endlessly destructive.

“Don’t get yourself worked up by the outcome. Each outcome stems from merely one cause. I was just describing to you the outcome but I want you to focus on the cause. Do you want to know what the sole cause that brought about your current suffering is?” He worded his question as if he was talking to a child.

“Please do tell me.” I became very curious.

“It is all because you have been put under too much pressure until you have no joy in life. Once you discover the joy of your life, all the health problems that afflict you will be gone.”

“What should I do to discover the joy in life?” I asked.

“The joy is in yourself. You only have to listen to your heart’s desire and follow it.”

“I’m afraid if I follow your advice, it will be too selfish of me. My life is not just for me alone.”

“If you are happy, you will treat people around you with a heart full of happiness, but if you are suffering, you will interact with them with a heart full of sorrow. Don’t you agree?”

I think he was absolutely right so I nodded in agreement. I started to understand what he tried to explain to me and I could see how logical it was. He was amazing. He could reconstruct my understanding of life and he did it patiently and affectionately. I felt I was ready to follow his ‘diagnosis’…..following it wherever he led me to.

My Beloved Youngest Son

After that rendezvous with my hero, happiness left me so quickly. How unfortunate my life was. Things happened so fast and in a moment all my joy was gone.

After that day, Dr. Siam disappeared from his Kaeng Khoi clinic without telling anyone where he was heading to. He simply vanished without a trace. The clinic was left to be managed by Dr. Somjai, a lone figure there. I stopped by at the clinic once or twice and I noticed that Somjai didn't seem pleased at all when he saw me. He was weird, but I guess it could be because there was something about me that he didn't like. Once I decided to ask him: "Is Dr. Siam here today?" and he bluntly said: "No." He made no attempt to say anything else to make me feel better. The other time I dropped by, I asked: "Do you know why he left?" and Somjai dismissed me by saying: "Who knows what he is up to. It's typical of him to behave this way!" I was annoyed by his response. I began to doubt whether they were really friends. He talked badly about Dr. Siam, not really what friends should do to each other. I didn't really know how close they were but Dr. Siam once told me that they had known each other since they were kids. So what exactly did Somjai mean when he said "It's typical of him to behave this way!"?

Since that day, I stayed away from that clinic.

I was left with nothing but the emptiness and loneliness of life at home. It was not exaggerating to say that, to Srisak, I was merely a slave whom he abused physically and emotionally. As time passed, I was increasingly subjected to his emotional outbursts. He was hardly home though, and he had become a dark, brooding man who seemed to be haunted by a bad omen. I got wind that he no longer worked, and all his business enterprises had gone bankrupt. To survive and to pay his debts, he sold off the stuff he owned one by one. Worse, he was addicted to gambling and was spending money on women. He was home mainly to grab things that he could sell and once he got some money, he gambled until he lost everything. Every time he got home, he looked a

frightful sight and he often took it out on me. Our sex was loveless because he merely used me to vent out his sexual frustration.

Things also got worse with my eldest son. He was out all the time so I didn't even expect that he could help me with household chores. He was then nearly 13 years old, becoming a teenager who followed his pals everywhere. (I also worried that his other activities might include chasing after girls and being hooked on cigarettes and alcohol.) Whenever I started to lecture him, he would stare at me in contempt. His hostile gaze told me that he was convinced I was an idiot. As a little kid, he never did what I asked him to. When he got older, he openly rebelled against me. Because he was like that, there was nothing I could do to make him listen to me. Also, as he got older, I lost the courage to try to sort him out. I felt more and more intimidated by him and it became more or less similar to the way his father made me feel.

I don't quite understand teenagers. Once your kids become teenagers, it seems like the strong mother-child bond is severed. Even my loving younger son was changed when he grew into a teenager. He became a nice young man who was rather concerned about his looks. In fact, he was meticulous about the way he dressed since he was a little kid. However, when he was younger, his mother always came first but when he became a teenager, he started to pay a lot of attention to girls of his age. The attention he gave me automatically became much less. When he was a little boy, after I finished getting him dressed for school in the mornings, he would ask me whether he looked handsome or not, and I would tell him that he was the most handsome boy in the world. When he became older, he often made sure that he dressed well before leaving home. Every year on Mother's day, he would take me to his school to join the Mother's Day ritual, during which he would gently attach a jasmine flower on my blouse, kneel down in front of me, and pay me his utmost respect. Two years ago he bought me heart shaped stickers on Valentine's Day and once he got home from school, he excitedly ran to hug me and attached all the stickers he bought on the blouse I was wearing. When I asked: "Why don't you leave some for others?" He said innocently: "These are my hearts and I want you to have all of them." I was really moved and my eyes were damp as I watched him

hurrying away to get his homework done. For this year's Valentine's Day, he was still thoughtful as he attached one heart shaped sticker on his mother's blouse. He kept the rest for his friends at school.

Despite the fact that my life was so lonely and unhappy, I made no attempt to demand things from others. Dr. Siam had told me happiness was within us and we only had to listen to our heart's desire and follow it.

I did follow that voice and it led me inside myself. My desire was alive and warm within me and my happiness started to come into existence and form its own shape. A new life was born within me and it became more and more obvious as months passed. I was expecting another baby.

I was so happy with my pregnancy. This baby entered my life at a time no one paid attention to me. He rescued me from the emptiness of my life and gave me a new life. Srisak's long absence from home did not bother me anymore, and I was no longer troubled by my elder son's harsh words and the fact that he was hardly home. About my dear boy Chidchai, I know you always have me in your heart and I understand that you are a teenager so you want time for yourself. I now have someone that I could devote my attention to and cherish, so I eagerly await the day my baby comes out to see the world and opens his eyes to look at his own mother.

My youngest son's name is Maitree, and it is the name given to him by Srisak, who was quite excited about the new baby himself. He often teased the baby by calling him "Losty" because this baby was born 10 years after the birth of my second son, and Srisak didn't really expect him. That was how the name 'Losty' came about and it later became the nickname Srisak gave him.

I don't like this nickname at all because if someone's name could reflect his personality and behavior, this nickname is not really an appropriate one. Worse, if this name could determine his future and plight or reflect the core of his identity, it is definitely not a good name. Fortunately, no one, except Srisak, referred to my youngest son with this nickname. I myself prefer the name Maitree and his elder brothers also call their youngest brother Maitree.

Maitree grew up at a time our family was suffering from hardships. The worst one was the gradual but on-going deterioration of the head of the family due to gambling and womanizing. In terms of looks, Maitree, who was quite good-looking, resembled me more than anyone. Ever since Maitree's birth till when he was about 1 year old, Srisak tried in vain to find some similarities between this son and himself. When Maitree started to talk, Srisak discovered something that satisfied him, as he assumed that it reflected a resemblance between himself and Maitree.

By then, Maitree was already able to utter several words like 'mum' and a few others, even though they were not that clear. One day, Srisak was home and I wanted to show off that Maitree had started to talk so I approached Srisak with Maitree in my arms. Then I urged Maitree to say the word 'mum'. At first the little boy kept mumbling unintelligibly, but I did not give up encouraging him to say 'mum'. All of a sudden, Maitree said 'Bitch!' and it really shocked me. I was sure I would be punished by Srisak. To my surprise, upon hearing that word, Srisak merely looked puzzled before laughing out loud and said good-humoredly: "Look at him. He was cursing his own mum. This Losty of mine is so smart!" Srisak then came up with the conclusion that Maitree took after him after all. For my part, I believe Maitree must have heard this word from his eldest brother. As the youngest boy, he always hung around his elder brothers, but I suspected that the word must have come from the eldest son, as he often swore and shouted obscenities when he got upset. Most likely, the young Maitree simply parroted what he heard and he probably stored the words he often heard in his memory.

Despite the hardships of those years, I gave my youngest son everything he wanted. I made sure that he was fed well and slept well, and that he had plenty of warm clothes and toys, all of which were the ones that once belonged to his elder brothers. I kept him close to me at all times and I derived so much joy from watching him grow up—from a little baby who could only lie in his cradle to a toddler who could crawl around and walk. I also affectionately observed his development from a baby who could only grumble to a lovely kid who could talk and understand what I said to him. Watching

him getting bigger as the years went by made my love and concern for him get stronger and stronger.

Maitree at the age of five was totally different from his brothers. He was a taciturn boy who didn't mind being by himself. He loved to sit still, as if he was engrossed in thoughts since he was a little kid. He showed displeasure when being disturbed by others, and it was clear that he loved being alone. He said so little that Srisak sometimes said he worried that the boy could be a mute. However, each time Maitree said something when he got disturbed by his brothers, it often gave us a shock. I often had to stop his brothers from teasing him, causing him to get upset and shout obscenities. As he got older, Maitree became reliant on rude and obscene words as a way to make others leave him alone and to get what he wanted. He was not a really demanding kid, but when he set his heart on something, he had to get it. If not, he would start to yell obscenities.

Maitree's behavior did not bother Srisak much, partly because he was hardly home and partly because, of late, he had become lax about everything he once was so strict about. Before that, he exerted control over everyone in the family, but during that time it was like he lost his fangs and claws. Actually, to be more correct, I think he no longer paid attention to his family. And this made it possible for Maitree to become the way he was. From being a boy who yelled out rude words as his defense mechanism, he became someone who insisted on getting what he wanted, and eventually someone who was tormented by repressed emotional violence. I had observed this change in Maitree all along. He often had arguments with his two brothers and there were times when he clashed with Srisak, but Maitree had no problem with me. I remember the day Srisak upset Maitree, who immediately swore at him. On that day, Srisak was in a bad mood himself so he raised his voice and lectured Maitree, but this didn't work and Maitree yelled obscenities at him. Srisak lost patience and slapped Maitree on his mouth at his full force until the boy collapsed to the floor. I wept and wanted to help my son, but there was nothing I could do. I had to tell myself that Maitree deserved that punishment.

But Srisak's slap didn't cure Maitree from his aggressive behavior. Instead, the slap triggered something in Maitree and allowed the violence in him to rush out like a

flood. Maitree would not be defeated or become silent like what happened with his brothers after they were punished. Later on, whenever Maitree got punished by his father, he reacted by using both of his fists to hit himself. When this happened, Srisak would be stunned and unable to do anything. The boy would continue hitting himself until Srisak had to ask me to take him away. I kept trying to tell my boy not to hurt himself that way, and that it was very painful for me to see him do something like that. Hearing this, Maitree would cry and cry, as if his heart was breaking, and I was heartbroken to see him that way.

I explored the depth of my own heart and started to understand the true origin of Maitree's outburst of rage in front of Srisak. This rage did not come from Srisak but from something within me. It was the kind of rage that was about to transform into a fierce desire for revenge and it originated from the hidden seed from the very depth of my tormented heart. The seed was buried deep down and kept from view for over 10 years, then one day, I gave birth to Maitree and he had carried within him that seed from very depth of my heart and developed it as his identity. Eventually, the seed that was repressed for a long time revealed itself before my very eyes.

Oh, son, you are the embodiment of my desire for revenge.

Maitree was created to rebel against Srisak and there was nothing about him that resembled Srisak. He was not created from a kind of mentality that sought to ridicule, look down on, or stipulate this and that rule. In fact, he hated to be ridiculed, looked down on, or restricted, and he implicitly indicated to others to leave him alone. Obviously, he liked himself the way he was. If anyone dared to interfere with his life, he retaliated with vengeful intention.

Oh my dear boy, there is nothing about you that resembles Srisak, and as you get bigger, your physical appearance becomes more and more different from Srisak's. You are not tall like Srisak or your elder brothers, and your face is not striking like theirs. You do not have thick wavy hair like them, but your hair is straight, thin and dry.

But you are similar to your mum, so there is no need to worry about anything. If there is something that starts to bother you, let me be the one who worries.

You are the Beast

It must have pleased my eldest son immeasurably now that he could fly away from this warm, loving and safe haven of our family. I knew he had waited for this moment all his life.

This son of mine had a heart of stone, indifferent and without any nostalgic feeling for the home where he was born and hometown that had nurtured him all along. He also gave no thought to his parents and brothers. In short, there was nothing that moved him. He was so uncaring even to the point of being ungrateful! (I have to use this word even though I don't really want to.)

It could be because he had seen himself as the centre of the universe all along. As he grew into a teenager, his indifference towards his own family became even more obvious, and he always demanded things. When he failed to get what he wanted, he hurt others with harsh words. He liked to ridicule and mock, and what he said was like a sharp blade that cut into the flesh mercilessly. When his parents refused to give him what he wanted, he often acted as if he was above them and had more knowledge than them. Obviously, his education had made him ambitious and look down on his own family with whom he shares the same flesh and blood. He liked to boast about his education and claimed that it would elevate him higher and higher. He also looked down on his roots and the birthplace that had given him shelter, food, and protection. Regarding this superiority complex of his, I would say that he got it from Srisak. (But I only came to this realization much later.) He liked to back up what he said with things that seemed so distant and respectable, things that he claimed were reasonable and logical, and both important and necessary for humans. But those things belonged to a world so foreign to me, the world I could not comprehend. (He could make me feel guilty about my ignorance about that world as well.) It was often enough that he made me feel inferior to him, and when his father disagreed with him, he accused his father of being a dictator who lusted after power. Sometimes when I observed the father and son exchanging

words, I strongly felt that my eldest son was no different from his father. If the father was lusting for power, didn't the son also want to steal that power for himself?

He said it was important for him to leave home to find a better place for himself. According to him, now that he had passed the entrance exam and was offered a seat at a prestigious university, he had to continue his studies to obtain a Bachelor's degree, a Master's degree, a Doctorate degree, and to become a professor. He was so boastful and as he was planning his future, he already saw himself at the apex of his goal.

But all of a sudden, he was pulled back to the reality of the present by his own father, who at that point appeared to have the upper hand. In a dignified manner, his father said to him:

"I fully support your dream, ambition, and desire to pursue higher studies because I know how important it is to be well-educated. A Bachelor's degree will give you a better chance to get a good job and a Doctorate degree will bring you prestige and a lot of respect. I understand these things well enough and I know that those degrees will also bring pride, honor and dignity to everyone in your family. You will become a representative of our family. However, the main problem is that right now our family is having financial problems. I can probably afford the tuition fees, but because you will attend a university in Bangkok, there will be other expenses, like the accommodation fees and your daily expenses, which could be even more than the tuition fees. Have you figured out a solution for this problem?"

The eldest one was silent for a while before replying in a petulant manner: "But you will sort it out for me, won't you, dad?"

Srisak started to get annoyed and told his son he wanted him to figure out the solution by himself, not to throw the question back at him.

"But you go out every day." The son retorted.

His bold response made me panic. He had the guts to get back at his father. Like me, he knew what his father was up to when he went out. To mention what his father did in the open this way was my eldest son's way of announcing to the world that he knew about his father's clandestine activities—the activities that gave him forbidden pleasure.

He obviously wanted to make his father lose face in front of everyone in the family, naively thinking that it was a sure strategy to defeat his father. But he was wrong.

"Don't you dare get nosey about my life! If you don't stop it, you will get nothing from me!" His father threatened.

My eldest son's boldness evaporated.

Because he didn't want to figure out by himself what to do to be able to afford his higher education, he later tried to force me to help him out. (Doesn't good education provide one with the ability to come up with many alternatives by oneself?) He claimed that it was parents' duty to look after their children and make sure that they have the best access to education. Since it was a duty, parents could not deny it. Actually, this kind of duty was assigned to parents by the state, he said. I didn't really pay much attention to what he said because I found his tone of voice too offensive and demanding. Even if it is a duty or a necessity, I'm not inclined to help him if he uses such a tone when talking to me.

So I said to him: "My dear son, I have three sons and I have to look after all of you, plus your father. I'm also burdened by household chores. It's too much to ask me to deduct something from the money your father gave me for household expenses and give that money to you. There's simply not enough money because the money your father gave me is meant to cover everything—all sorts of expenses within our household and pocket money for you kids as well. Please try to see things from my perspective a bit. "

"You can just give me the money you want to give Chidchai and Maitree. Those two live here so they don't have to pay for food and accommodation. They don't have to struggle like me."

"That's unreasonable of you. Chaichai and Maitree's education is as important as yours, and I also need money to pay for food for our family."

"When it comes to what I want, you always have all sorts of excuses not to give it to me. You never have any problem about giving Chidchai and Maitree whatever they ask for. You can just say it to my face that you love them more than me!" He cried after saying this.

But I was convinced that his crying was fake. I could hear his sobs but there was not a single drop of tears. I think he was just trying to build up some sort of fake emotion to accompany what he said in order to dupe me. Even though I'm an emotional person, I'm not easily deceived and I'm sure I love my children all the same. In fact, it is him who has little love for me because he often says things that hurt me. But I will just keep this to myself.

"How can you say such a thing? This is so heartless of you and so unfair to me. Of course I love you. I do love you…" I said to him with tears brimming in my eyes.

He startled a little and stopped crying. He looked at me to ascertain whether I was sincere or not in saying that. Then he probably realized that I was in no position to help him so he sneered and before he walked away, he said: "Go live in your world of TV dramas!"

Deep down I knew that my eldest son would find a way to work things out for himself. He was smart and resilient, and that would help him follow through with his ambition. He did not have to fear destiny because he was equipped with the capacity to control his destiny. Such a conviction was from the very depth of my heart and it reflected the genuine compassion I had for my eldest son.

He soon left home for his studies, to live his life in the embrace of the capital city.

To be honest, it was better for me that the eldest son lived in the capital city far away from home. While it was true that each month I had to struggle to find some money to send him, the ordeal of trying to put together enough money for him only happened once a month. When he lived at home, he could cause me worries and anxieties all the time.

Our children's tuition fees had become a big burden and Srisak himself complained about this. It was hard enough for him to afford the eldest son's tuition fees, so a year later when it was Chidchai's turn to ask for his permission to go to the capital city to pursue further studies, Srisak stopped him and suggested to him that he should attend a college in town instead. I supported Srisak's idea because I preferred that he still lived at home. If he continued his studies at a college in town, he would still return home

every day. Realizing that he would not be allowed to study in Bangkok, Chidchai was disappointed and sad for a while but he soon got better.

But the problem was not over yet because in a few years' time Maitree would finish Grade 6 and had to go to Junior High, and that would mean more expenses for our kids' education. It seemed to me that with each passing year, we had to spend more and more on our children's education until I couldn't help wondering if education really brought about honor and wealth for the parents, or would it make parents poorer and poorer.

Due to the financial pressure, Srisak started to take it out on me, blaming me for living a life of comfort and lazing around all day now that I no longer had to look after our three kids.

"Let me ask you one thing, what do you do each day?"

What a question! He complained that he was hardly home because he had to shoulder all the responsibilities of earning enough to support our family without any help from anyone. Seeing me sitting around at home seemed to annoy him and he lashed out at me and kept complaining that I was having too much of an easy life. He ended up telling me to go out and earn some money instead of just waiting for him to give me money.

I was speechless. There was nothing I could do but what he told me to. I tried hard to figure out how to bring additional income to the family, but was at a complete loss. The only things I was trained by my parents to do and was good at were cooking and doing household chores, and no one could find fault with me as far as those jobs were concerned. But to figure out about how to get a job that could earn extra income for our family was really something beyond me. Maybe Srisak forgot that I couldn't read and write. I felt intimidated having to leave my comfort zone. In the end, however, I managed to find a job. It was recommended to me by people who claimed that it was a real easy job that didn't require much and it paid well.

My new job was selling illegal lottery tickets. To do this job I only had to walk around the neighborhood and customers would approach me themselves. After a while, some of those who knew that I did this job would sometimes visit me at home. You might

wonder how come it was possible for me who couldn't read and write to do a job that involves numbers like this. Wouldn't all the numbers and calculating be too much for me? Let me explain to you that when I said I couldn't read and write, it didn't mean that I didn't understand numbers. I do understand numbers and can write them down, as well as do the calculating. The thing I can't do is writing down my own thoughts in words. Now you can see that even though I didn't go to school, life experiences have taught me to understand numbers and to have basic math skills, especially for the type of job I was doing. Many of my neighbors were like me in that they couldn't read and write but they had no problem understanding the lottery. When they won the lottery, they can also do subtraction and addition to figure out how much money they would get. All these do not require knowledge learned from school. Regular practice and experiences taught them these things. Now you probably understand why I had no problem selling illegal lottery tickets.

But I have to admit that this new job of mine was a risky job. After doing this job for a little while, I was arrested, put in jail, and severely reprimanded. At that time Srisak was in another province but once he knew that I was caught by the police, he immediately drove straight to the police station to bail me out. When we got home, he made sure that I was punished in a way that I would remember forever. When my two younger sons got home and saw me covered in bruises, they were devastated. My second son wept, even though I didn't tell him what had happened. He could tell. My youngest son, who was then just a little boy, was also very upset. He walked to the front door and punched it as hard as he could in fury. He swore and yelled out: "I'm going to kill anyone who hurts my mum!"

But my dear son, that one is your father, and it is impossible for my son to kill his father. Patricide could happen in other families but it will never happen with our family. I believe that karma has its own way, and that sins won't go unpunished. Those who do bad things will be punished in the end.

Why did I say something like that? It was timely for me to do so because at that time Srisak's life was about to reach its end. His life had been in a state of decline and

degradation for years, and despite being given a chance to reform himself, he had chosen to indulge himself with evil. Thus, eventually death beckoned him.

Srisak's death happened later that year. I got wind that he died a terrible death. He was driving his ute along a lonely highway that passed through Ayutthaya. All of a sudden his ute lost balance and crashed against a big tree by the side of the road. It was a violent crash that nearly severed the ute into halves and it immediately killed Srisak. There was a young woman with him and she was severely injured. I don't really want to talk about this horrific tragedy anymore as the more I talk about it, the more awful and degrading it becomes.

He died a violent death. I have heard that only horrible, degraded and sinful people met this kind of death. Good people will be spared such a horrific end. In my opinion, Srisak deserved it. His bad Karma had finally caught up with him. Still I prayed that his soul rest in peace.

Happiness Forever After

Srisak's death had released my heart and my soul from the obligations that imprisoned them. I was finally able to taste freedom.

A simple funeral was arranged at a local temple. Acquaintances stopped by merely as a formal farewell gesture and a courtesy from those who lived in the same community. I couldn't blame them though. Srisak hardly tried to make friends with any of our neighbors and he even discouraged me and our kids from doing so. Throughout those years that we lived together, he didn't seem to have many relatives. Not surprisingly, those who attended the funeral from the beginning to the end consisted mainly of our immediate family members: my eldest son who came from Bangkok, Chidchai and Maitree. Also at the funeral were a few neighbors whom I was familiar with because we bought cooking ingredients from the same ute that came by to deliver them every morning. These neighbors gave me condolences and offered to lend a hand if I need anything. They told me that I'd better not keep my distance from them anymore now that I was a widow and thus set free from Srisak's domination. They seemed genuine in wanting me to be one of their friends.

Losing Srisak made me utterly sad because he had always been the one who planned everything for our family. Without him I didn't really know how to carry on with my life and I felt like I was a small ship lost in a vast ocean….

Srisak hardly left anything for our family as he had wasted almost all of his wealth on gambling and womanizing. The only thing that was passed on to us was our current house on a 1 rai[4] piece of land. After the funeral was over, I nearly went crazy trying to figure out a way to help our family survive and to support my three young sons who were still studying. My eldest son was in his last year at university and at first I thought he could help his mother and brothers get through the crisis, but I was disappointed. He left

[4] 1 rai= 1600 square metres

for Bangkok as soon as the funeral was over and never once rang home. I had to be the one who kept ringing him to remind him not to forget his mum and his brothers as we were of the same bloodline.

That year, Chidchai decided to cut short his studies after he got a diploma from a vocational college and started to look for a job. Luckily, in Kaeng Khoi, the town where we lived, there were various types of industry, for example, power plants and factories that manufactured cement, toilet and bathroom equipment, processed food, and many more. So it was not that hard for Chidchai to find a job. As for my youngest son Maitree, after Srisak's death, he showed a clear sign that he was sick of school and he started to skip classes. In the end, he stopped going to school altogether.

"Why do you quit going to school, son?"

"It would be hard for you, mum, if I continue going to school. It's better if I quit and get a job to relieve your burden." Maitree replied, trying to please me.

That was why I let my sons do what they wanted. In fact, what they did showed that they understood me and our family's situation very well. About my eldest son, I didn't send him any money after the death of my husband and he managed to find a way to pay for his studies by himself. The fact that he didn't bother me with money suggested that at least he was aware of our family's financial situation even though he hardly visited us.

It was a challenging period that our family had to pass through together. Still, deep down I was quite content and enjoying a peaceful life. We did simple stuff to earn our living and we tried not to spend much. My beloved sons were living with me and they were working and earning their own income. They looked after me when they could and I didn't expect anything more than that. Living in a humble and modest abode, my heart and soul were gradually filled with happiness, and I didn't mind cooking, doing household chores, and doing the laundry for my working sons. Each month after receiving their wages, they gave me some money for household expenses. After dinner, we, mother and sons, often enjoyed drinking together and we were completely at ease with one another as if we were friends.

I became the head of my family and I had all the freedom I could wish for. Before that, I had been confined by instructions, orders, and threats. I had also suffered from physical abuse. As a mother, I would never treat others the way Srisak had treated me. The life I had lived so far also taught me well about suffering and obstacles, and my life can be compared to a lengthy TV drama that was divided into many episodes. I realized that the final episode of my life was approaching. How did I know? I knew that because I had been through so much for so long. I had encountered and survived distressing, traumatizing, and terrible times throughout the complicated drama of my life. Gone were the episodes of my life in which a beast who had initially disguised himself as a saint revealed himself to be a terrible monster. Also over was the episode that depicted the death of that monster, which was brought about by his own horrific deeds. My children and I had gone through agitating incidents and hardships, and as the final episode of my life was approaching, the only thing I was waiting for was peace. I was certain that peace alone would provide the drama of my life with a happy ending.

I was right. In 2003, five years after the death of Srisak, peace paid me a visit when I got to know a man introduced to me by the owner of a cooked-to-order food stall. Her stall was located by the side of the Friendship Highway and near the beginning of a small alley leading to my house. The stall owner told me that that the man was looking for a piece of land on which he could settle down and start his business. According to her, one day he stopped by to order food from her stall then he looked around and told her that he liked the area, as it was near a highway and thus quite good for anyone who wanted to start a new life. He said it was a pity that he didn't know anyone living in that area. The stall owner thus offered to help ask around if anyone wanted to sell a piece of land. Hearing that, the man looked pleased and excited, and from that day on, he often showed up at her stall.

Through the arrangement made by the food stall owner, I met that man, who told me that his name was Thai. He said he was from another sub-district of Kaeng Khoi and he was looking for a small piece of land where he could open a garage. According to him, he only needed a small portion of land in this area. He liked the area because its location

was good for business, being near the Friendship Highway and cement factories, and therefore ideal for his garage. He asked if I might be interested in selling him a small portion of my land, and promised that he would pay me a very good price for a portion located near the highway.

I didn't agree to sell part of my land to him right away as I needed to think it over. I told Chidchai and Maitree that someone was interested in buying a small part of our land for a big sum of money that would be enough for our family to live on for a long while. Chidchai then came up with a very good idea about investing that sum of money so that more would come out of it. He made some quick calculations in his mind before suggesting that I should build a row house with a number of rooms to be rented out to migrant workers who flocked to our district to look for jobs. According to him, a building with five rooms would be enough and he suggested that I should charge 1000 baht rent for each room so as to earn 5000 baht in total each month, and in this way, I would have a regular monthly income. His idea was wonderful and I told him that I was keen to put it into practice.

During my next meeting with Thai, I took him to our land so that he could look around and I asked him to indicate to me how much land he wanted to buy. He pointed to a Moringa tree and said he only needed the portion of land that ran along the alley up to the Moringa tree. I told him I didn't mind selling that section of our land to him, but I couldn't sell more than that because next to that portion of land was a deep well which was an important source of water for my family. For years, we had used a pump to draw water from that well for household use and drinking. Thai assured me that he didn't need a bigger piece of land than what he had pointed out to me, which, he said, was roughly about 400 square metres. I knew nothing about land measurements but I had no problem understanding what Thai meant because I relied on the location of the Moringa tree as the boundary of the portion of the land Thai wanted to buy. Thai was a friendly person and that made it easy for me to make a decision to sell him part of our land.

Since then, we became good neighbors and whenever I walked past his garage I greeted him or stopped by to have a chat with him. That was why I got to know more

about his family background and, to my great surprise, I later learned that he was actually Dr. Siam's younger brother! Life's destined path was amazing! I told Thai that he looked similar to Dr. Siam, his twin brother, whom I knew because I was once his patient. I also said to him that Dr. Siam had disappeared for years and I didn't know where he was. Upon hearing that, Thai looked like he had enough of Dr. Siam, and said "He must be doing crazy stuff somewhere like what he had always done." Thai's comment was similar to what Dr. Somjai made before about Dr. Siam, so I decided not to say anything anymore.

As for our family's plan to earn more income, I had hired a builder to build a five-room row house constructed from bricks and cement, and after a couple of months it was completed. Soon all the five rooms were rented by migrant workers, and the financial status of our family became more stable.

Then another good thing entered my life. One morning, as I was doing my shopping in the town of Kaeng Khoi, a familiar figure approached me from the opposite direction. In fact, I did try to avoid him, but it was too late because he was soon by my side and asked how I was doing and said it was more than 10 years ago when we last met. He looked cheerful like before, as if there was nothing that disturbed his mind. Perhaps what happened between us years ago had left him nothing memorable or disturbing…Feeling somewhat hurt, I said to him:

"I'm doing alright. There is nothing much in my life and I spend each day looking after my kids after my husband passed away."

"My dear, please don't act as if I'm a stranger. We were so close before." He said, "I'm very sorry about your husband. When did he pass away?"

I told him that my husband died many years ago and he nodded a few times, as if he didn't know what else to say, so I said: "I'd better say goodbye now, Dr." He looked deeply hurt by my cold and distant reaction, but as I was about to walk off, he asked aloud: "Please wait a second. Would you mind if I pay you a visit sometime?"

It was clear that other people around us could also hear what he said. I didn't say anything in response to his question. All I did was turn to look at him quickly before walking away.

That moment I experienced a strangely wonderful feeling. It was as if I had done something brave and had won a personal triumph. I had allowed myself to follow the uttermost desire of my heart—the desire for happiness.

When I got home, I anxiously awaited the arrival of happiness. Would that hero follow the path of my desire and find me? I knew for sure that one day he would find me. He was the only thing still missing from the drama of my life but he would soon be with me, together with all the bliss and peace. Once Dr. Siam paid me a visit, the drama of my life would reach its ending.

Volume IV

The Problems and Solutions for the Ghost Writer

19 March 2004

On this date six years ago my father passed away. What an apt coincidence that today I also got a phone call from my mother who rang to ask me to take a trip to my hometown in order to deal with an important matter. My mother's voice over the phone was full of enthusiasm and excitement, and I couldn't remember when was the last time her voice was this cheerful and full of life…

Yes, it has been seven years since I left my hometown hoping to fulfill my educational and professional aspirations and make a great future for myself. Those aspirations are still with me, of course, but my educational and professional goals have become so dim to me. Years ago my naïve pride whispered to me in my ear: "If you cannot claim success, don't even think about going back." I'm not sure I memorized that sentence from which book, but when I was a teenager I faithfully and passionately held on to it. Years later, that sentence has taken control over my mind and imprisoned my whole being in the jail of my pride and arrogance. I refuse to abide by a simple obligation like making a monthly visit to my birthplace. I also cut myself off from the past, having no contact whatsoever with my old classmates and beloved teachers from my childhood years…

And now have I realized that I had been foolish? The answer is no. I'm not the type of person who can be swayed easily.

For this reason, during these past seven years, I never visited my hometown. It pleases me that my mother has to ring me, and it makes me happy to hear the anxiety, worry, and concern in her voice….

After the death of my father, my mother has become more lively, and this I could tell from her voice over the phone. I have been quite cold to her though. She often told me about how she had been spending more time with her neighbors and about her dream

project. In fact, she rang me today because of this dream project of hers and she began seriously:

"It's a waste to leave our land like that without doing anything with it. Cement factories and machine shops are mushrooming everywhere in our town and they have attracted a lot of migrant workers from the Northeast."

Before she could explain further, I interrupted: "What are you going to do with that land? Do you want to sell it? Don't even think about it!"

"Let me finish first before making up your mind about it, ok?"

"I know you are about to sell Dad's land!" I cried out in protest.

"I only want to sell 800 square metres of that land and that means we will still have one rai[5] left. The person who wants to buy it wants to set up a garage to fix tractors and earth moving and mining equipment, and I want to use the money from selling that land to build a row house with a few rooms to rent out to migrant workers."

"I see now what you want to do. What do you want me to do then?"

"I need your signature to complete the land sale. There are three names on the title deed, yours, mine, and your brother's. People from the land department told me that all of us had to sign to acknowledge the transaction."

I let my mother know that I will let her do what she wants with the land. The truth is I don't really care about that plot of land. My initial objection was primarily aimed to make my mother feel uncomfortable and guilty…

You see, I have been dominated and influenced by the middle-class's capitalist outlook so anything that can make profit is good. And my mother is right—what's the point of leaving that plot of land unused and neglected. The past won't resurface from it, and actually a suitable place for the past and memories are albums of old photos kept in display cases.

I love my father, but this love does not extend to the plot of land he once owned. I have no attachment towards the land on which I was born and no love for my hometown.

[5] 1 rai= 1,600 square metres

However, there is no point announcing that I hate my hometown, as the main reason I left it was more to do with personal frustration and a desire to pursue my personal aspirations and dreams.

Whenever my mind wanders off to my birthplace, I see images of drought and sunlight dancing on the abandoned and neglected fields, of newly widened roads and dusty wind from factories that manufactured cement, and of roaring machines and the smell of fumes. I also see the faces of my ex-girlfriends in factory uniforms. Those girls were willing to invest in surgeries to make themselves look prettier, hoping to land a secretarial job and work in an office. In my hometown, young men of my generation loved to have fun speeding their motorbikes. One by one they got killed in motorbike crashes when they were still young, and those who survived became truck drivers for cement factories. This kind of job, however, only served as a cover up for their involvement in the thriving drug trade. They raced their trucks on a road that headed towards change, and many of the victims of such reckless driving were from the same village as the drivers who fatally hit them. Whether deliberately or accidentally, those truck drivers also ended up selling drugs to their own folks. The locals either fell victim to drugs or got hit by trucks and, gradually, they died out and were replaced by new settlers drawn to the town's gigantic factories. One could see that change was everywhere.

There is nothing that binds me to that ugly land of my birth. I have no tie or attachment whatsoever with it and I couldn't care less about it. But my mother is adjusting herself to the newcomers and she is the one who can adapt and survive well amidst changes.

I told my mother that I was not yet ready to visit the land and house that once belonged to my father. I don't want to struggle to come to terms with past memories evoked by my old home on that piece of land, and for this reason I asked my mother and my brother to meet me at the district's land department. When everything is done, perhaps we could have a meal together at a nearby restaurant, and after that I could probably excuse myself, telling them I have to return to Bangkok. I could put on a

frowned and moody expression with sadness and regrets in my eyes, as if I'm still grieving over the death of my father.

After waiting for a while, I see my mother and my brother walking through the front door of the land department office. My mother is beautifully dressed up in a brand-new tailored silk dress of sparklingly green shade. Her face has been carefully powdered and all the wrinkles on her forehead and around the corners of her eyes have been concealed by make-up. She also wears bright red lipstick. No drop of sweat is visible on her face even though she has walked a long distance through strong sunlight before she gets there. My mother looks very beautiful, perhaps as beautiful as the way she looked on the day she married my father.

My 16-year-old brother is standing by her side. He is of a medium height and his skin is burnt because of outdoor laboring work. His arms look muscular and their muscularity makes his veins and bony knuckles more prominent. He is wearing a uniform provided by a cement company. He briefly glances at me and gives me a timid and distant smile before avoiding my gaze and looking down at one of his hands which is holding my mother's arm. I walk towards them and greet them.

"You have grown up a lot," I say to my brother by way of greeting, and immediately feel that what I say sounds stupid and meaningless. He smiles and avoids looking at me by gazing down at his own hand that is lightly squeezing my mother's arm as if to ask her to respond to my greeting for him.

"Your brother has got a job now and he gives all his salary to me," my mother says proudly.

"What about his studies? What qualification does he have? Did he quit school after finishing Grade 4?"

"I don't think he needs anymore schooling. I can't afford it and it is good enough that he is working and helping me out."

In response to what she has said I shrug and do not hide my disapproval.

"If he has more qualifications, he can find a job that pays more."

“It was hard enough for me to pay for your studies.”

“I don’t understand why you can’t think beyond this.”

“Why are you trying to convince Maitree that it is better for him to leave me like what you did? I’m happy that he stays home and looks after me. Don’t you see that I’m getting old?” My mother retorts.

“Ok, ok. No point arguing about this. I understand what you want now. Let’s get going with that land business.” I change the topic and walk ahead of them into the land department office.

The atmosphere in the office is quite stressful, as it is dominated by the loud and intimidating voices of land authorities throwing questions at those who want to have issues about their land deals sorted out. The noise from office workers efficiently typing up things and the disorderly movement of people also contribute to the tense atmosphere.

When it is our turn, my mother starts with a friendly chat with one of the land officials and hands her a title deed taken out from her handbag. The official puts on a professional look and inspects the deed while asking about other documents. It seems to me that my mother has sorted out all the messy stuff beforehand and all that is needed to be done now is to sign in front of an official to approve the deal. I’m quite impressed to see my mother transforming herself into an expert in this matter. She probably has visited the land department many times earlier and has prepared everything in advance before asking me to come along. And all she wants now is my signature.

“This is him, right?” The land official asks and gives me a friendly smile that makes me very wary.

“What is all this about?” I ask in shock, making no attempt to hide my suspicions.

The official’s smile suddenly vanishes and she looks irritated.

“So whose land do you want to sell? Haven’t you discussed things among yourselves before coming here?” She asks in annoyance. My mother looks clueless as if she doesn’t understand what the official means.

Someone must be playing a mischievous trick and we will soon know who the real mischievous one is.

“Can you please explain things to us again?” I ask the land official politely.

“You want to sell 800 square metres of your land, right? The three of you are the co-owners of the entire plot, which is about 1 rai and 800 square metres, or to make it easy, 2,400 square metres in total. This means each of you is entitled to 800 square metres, and my question is whose 800 square metres you want to sell.” After the land official finishes her explanation, I indicate that I understand what she tells me. By now things have become clear to me… I turn to look at my manipulative mother, who remains unperturbed.

“Please just sign here. I have already dealt with other matters.” She says while asking for a pen from the official.

“In short, you want me to sell my share of the land, right?”

“Please try to understand, son. Your brother and I still live here so we need to ask you to sell yours. However, the remaining land still belongs to the three of us, as my name is still on the title deed. Because you hardly visit home, I feel that the land is less important to you than it is to me and your brother.” My mother hands me a pen and I take it from her without being aware of doing so.

“The land is important to me too. You are selling Dad’s land!” I try to argue but, all of a sudden, I run out of things to say. As soon as I accuse my mother of selling my father’s land, it occurs to me that the one who is selling it is actually myself, and my signature will forever register my estrangement on the title deed. Why didn’t you lose any tear at Dad’s funeral? Why didn’t you visit home more often? Did you, an expert in human thoughts and feelings, make a mistake by not putting on an act? Those nonsensical questions are popping up in my head as I gaze at the pen in my hand, reluctant to sign that document…

At that moment I recall an incident that took place years ago during my high school vacation break when my father made me work as an apprentice at the cement company where he was foreman.

“Plant it there! You coward! Try not to look so clumsy, can you?”

“But Dad, this is a detonator!”

“I know! That’s why you have to know how to handle it well. In the future you will work here and others will treat you as their big boss just like what they treat me now. Is it ready now?”

“I suppose it is okay now.”

“Let me check. Okay, let’s get down from this cliff everyone!”

“Yes Boss!” My father’s men were trying to ingratiate themselves with him by readily responding to his order.

As I stood at the foot of the cliff, the hot breeze of the afternoon and the dust were blowing against and biting my face, causing it to feel so irritated and itchy. Where we stood was the service and rest area for excavators and a viewing spot where one could see the mines and hills surrounding the cement factory. My father’s arms were tightly wrapped around my shoulders and we both focused our gaze on the cliff in front of us, trying to suppress the anxiety and excitement within us. Then we heard a warning siren from the cliff.

“Don’t you dare blink, son! It is the most fantastic thing I have seen in my life,” my father said and became very silent again as if he had stopped breathing. We heard another siren warning workers to get away from the cliff, and then the last warning. I could feel my father’s hand squeezing my shoulder as if to remind me to stay alert:

“You were the one planting the detonator this time, aren’t you proud of yourself?”

All of a sudden I startled and turned my face away in shock. My father was using his rough hand to protect my head against the forceful gusts of the explosion and I felt like my head was growing smaller and was vanishing into his palm.

As I’m dragging the pen to form a signature that seals the land sale deal, I can hear the reverberating explosion of that cliff that was bursting and shattering into small pieces.

17 June 2007

Among his early diary entries is the one dated 19 March 2004, which was later transformed into his first short story. The story is narrated from the first person point of view; the protagonist narrator being Prateep himself. In this story, Prateep takes a trip to his hometown, the trip that not only forces him to confront the haunting fear of the past but also to erase his name from the family's title deed as requested by his mother. After the death of his father, the ownership of the land was passed on to three people: his mother, himself and his brother. However, his mother later wants to sell Prateep's share of the land, hoping to use the money to build a row house to be rented out to migrant workers. (This is because, for years, Prateep has hardly visited home and is totally indifferent to what is going on at home. His mother therefore assumes that he has no need for the land they co-own.) Prateep has no choice but to sign the sale document of his share of the land, as his mother's argument for selling it is not unreasonable. In fact, her argument echoes Prateep's shameful lack of attachment to his birthplace. Yet that transaction shatters his selfhood and spiritual being, as it triggers a voice from his own conscience that taunts, mocks, and reminds him that his most intimate tie has rejected him, a punishment for having been indifferent to his own roots for so long. Throughout his teenage years, all he desired was freedom. He wanted to free himself from confinement and restrictions in order to fulfill his rebellious spirit and individualism. However, once he attained the freedom of his yearning, he suffered from loneliness and loss. Nonetheless, those feelings and experiences are part of youth and they help young people find their own path in life and remain true to themselves.

He wrote that short story in early 2004 and once it was finished, he felt so proud with its passionate and fiery words, its forceful and aggressive sentence structures, and its bold and complicated narrative strategies. The story reflects the overwhelming energy, innocence, and arrogance of a youthful spirit that wants to show off its ambition. Three years have gone by and he has reread the story many times on different occasions and

found many flaws in it. The desire to show off is one of them, and there was the limited vocabulary scope, the naïve metaphor, the bold and judgmental directness that lacks refinement and sophistication. These flaws emerge because the story was born out of the fiery state of youth. However, as time passes, he no longer sees them as flaws but as strength because, in their extreme hunger for life, they aggressively and boldly convey the naivety and directness of thoughts, attitude, and youthful spirit. In his present state, he can no longer produce a story with such freshness and innocence.

The passage of time has definitely earned him more skills, experience, and expertise. The overwhelming energy of youth has been transformed into calmness and refinement, while youth's ambitious agility has changed into the ability to derive pleasure from slowness. He no longer sees life as awaiting him in the future, but as being with him in his present moment. Each passing second and minute has become meaningful and worth contemplating. He was no longer constantly driven by the desire to move ahead fast and passionately. Each day brings him adventure, no less than what the future promises, and he has learned to truly dwell in the present.

He has read that short story once more and, even though he feels proud of this fictional work, he wonders if he could depend on its non-fictional elements to help him recall some past experiences. Apparently, as he was the one who created the short story himself, he should be able to tell which factual elements he could rely on at this moment when he is facing the problem of having life's realities trying to compete with fictional constructs.

Thomas Mann made an insightful observation in "Tonio Kroger", his rather long short story, that "the literary man does not understand that life may go on living, un-ashamed, even after it has been expressed and therewith finished. No matter how much it has been redeemed by becoming literature, it keeps right on sinning-for all action is sin in the mind's eye…"

At the moment, he is confronted with life's sinful acts or the continuation of what he had written in that short story, despite the fact that he already provided an ending for that short story. Thus, what happens is "life may go on living, un- ashamed, even after it

has been expressed and therewith finished. No matter how much it has been redeemed by becoming literature, it keeps right on sinning." He therefore has no choice but to face life, as if it is a sequel of what has happened in his short story.

It has been three years since he has visited Kaeng Khoi, his hometown. In fact, Kaeng Khoi is only about 100 kilometres from Bangkok but the thought about taking a trip there never entered his mind before. Whenever his mother rings him to chat and ask how things are going with him, he never mentions anything about visiting her. He bitterly tells himself that there is no existing bond between himself and his birthplace, and as time passes, the only thing that provides some sort of connection between him and his hometown is his sense of obligation towards his mother and younger brothers. (Unlike in his short story, in real life he has two brothers.) Every time his mother rings him, his conscience is always disturbed by her expectations, requests, and numerous problems. As a 31-year-old eldest son who isn't financially secure enough to offer much help to his family, he is often haunted by guilt.

His mother's phone calls tend to make him anxious and tense as they remind him of his family's hopeless situation, something he has tried all his life to flee from. While he is lucky enough to escape its grasp, his mother and brothers are being dragged down into its pit and they are calling for help from him.

Take for example his younger brother Chidchai, who got married at 26, and since then has been drowned by a vicious cycle of debts. His lifestyle actually corresponds with the government's plan to reinvigorate the economy. The government and other organizations successfully convince people that hard-working young people's dream of an affluent life could be achieved through loans, regardless of the fact that they might not be able to pay back those loans. After being married for a while, Chidchai and his wife become deep in debt, and soon their marriage collapses. Chidchai moves out to live with his mother just like before his marriage, and she cooks and does all the laundry for him. He goes to work every day and tries to use what he has earned to pay back his loans. One day, however, the police come to arrest him, claiming that one of the loan sharks had

placed charges against him. Because of his mundane middle-class aspiration to start a family, own a car, a digital TV, and Golden Retrievers, Chidchai is forced to get involved with police, trial, court, and suffers from it. He has to pay an expensive price for his dream as there have been surcharges all along.

His two Golden Retrievers look thin and ruffled. In the afternoon when it gets so hot, one of them often lies on the bottom step of a staircase that leads to his mother's front door, while the other takes a nap on the cool cement floor of his mother's bathroom. Later, when it cools down, both dogs love to come out to chase his mother's free- range chooks and she has to tell them off. She not only has to cook for her two sons, but also has to feed the two dogs. Not long afterwards, one of the dogs gets pregnant and gives birth to a large brood of mongrels. Chidchai no longer pays any attention to his Golden Retrievers. To him the Golden Retrievers and the mongrel puppies represent his failed marriage and futile strive for affluence, and he wants nothing to do with the dogs.

But his mother still looks after them, making sure that they are fed and have enough energy to chase her chooks around. This is no different from the way she takes care of Chidchai and Maitree. Despite their failure and defeat, they still have their mother who always makes sure that they can somehow survive and won't go hungry. She cannot just ignore their suffering.

The failure in Chidchai's life leads to his self-destruction. Late one night when he is quite drunk and tired, he tries to drive home from Saraburi but ends up heading straight into the rear end of a parked trailer. Luckily, he only suffers minor injuries. The car, however, is badly damaged and his mother has to pay a local garage to fix it. She also has to buy a whole new front part of the car for him.

The most worrying case is his youngest brother, Maitree, who is about ten years younger than him. Everyone was surprised when his mother became pregnant with his youngest brother because by then his father was quite old. Ever since he was a baby, Maitree had always been stubborn and bad-tempered. Once when his mother was breastfeeding him, he nearly bit off her nipple. When he began to talk, his vocabulary was full of rude and obscene words, which he utilized as a weapon against those who had

upset him. At the age of three, he often threw a tantrum and shouted profanities at his parents. Luckily, Maitree was born after his father had become much older and had mellowed down. When Chidchai and himself were kids, his father would never allow such behavior to go unpunished, and they were fully aware that not only was their father strict, but also extremely violent when punishing his kids. He remembers that once, as kids, he and Chidchai were teasing each other while they were having a meal and that made his father really mad at them. He stared at them with a furious expression on his face before getting up and kicked them both at full force, throwing them straight against the room partition. After that, his father picked up their plates and hurled them across the room. As a kid, he experienced all sorts of punishment from his father who turned into a monster when his anger got the better of him. His punishment got worse when his kids did things that he disapproved of, as the expectations he had for his children would not let him go easy on them. Once his father threw a brick at him and it cut open his forehead, and as he lay bleeding, his face soaked in blood, his father walked towards him to see how good he was at aiming. Then he walked away indifferently, and he remembered hearing his mother's sobs before losing consciousness.

Maitree was lucky that his father regarded his aggressive behavior as something funny. All he said was: "This son of mine has guts. He won't give in to anyone. I like it!"

Towards the end of 1998 when his father was killed in a road accident, Maitree was in Grade Four. He had never done well in his studies and often gave his mother a lot of headaches. After the death of his father, he quit going to school altogether and his mother could not force him to do anything as he was so stubborn, hot-headed, and verbally violent. At that time Prateep was a final year art student at Silapakorn University and was being swept away by freedom and youthful rebellion. To him, images of the past and of his family were like a painful wound and bitter agony that he didn't want to see or acknowledge. He had tried everything he could to flee from his family and his birthplace. Deep down inside, he feels that he doesn't belong there and he always hates and feels alienated from his roots. After his father's death, he believed that the last bond between

himself and his family had been cut off and his mother and brothers were reduced to mere images of the kind of life he was totally estranged from.

After his father passed away, Maitree went off the rails and caused his mother all sorts of problems. He was involved in violent brawls and heavy drinking and his mother had virtually no control over him. When Maitree was around 15 years old, his mother started to suspect that he used speed available from stalls located along the Friendship Highway, which served as truck drivers' stopping points. She soon forbade Maitree to go near those stalls and even locked him up in his room. Maitree protested by trying to hurt himself and destroyed things, and he even threatened to hurt her. She eventually lost her patience and became very upset:

"I'm your mother. If you hurt me, I'm going to kill you with my very own hands! If I know that you are stupid enough to try those damn drugs again, I'm going to slit your throat when you are asleep. You wait and see!"

She later forced Maitree to look for a job, and for a few months he worked as a temporary factory worker. He kept changing his job and in the end he was unemployed again. He hung around the house doing nothing until his mother pushed him to get off his arse and find something to do. He got hold of another job but once he got his salary, he spent all of it on the first down payment for his new motorbike and left the rest of the installments for his mother to pay off. She was mad at him but she loves him too much to refuse to help him out. However, he was a lost cause. His after work drinking bouts had destroyed his conscience and he showed neither guilt nor shame about his incurable parasitic behavior.

Maitree knew that his mother would always be there to help him. She would yell at him for all the trouble he caused her, but she would still take care of him and feed him and would never kick him out. After a while, Maitree hooked up with a girl and she moved in to live with him in one of his mother's rental rooms. The room became their love nest and his mother was the one who cooked and cleaned for them. She even had to give him some money to buy liquor when he asked for it. Maitree and his girlfriend often drank together until late at night and his mother let them do whatever pleased them

without complaining. The girl never helped his mother with chores. She didn't even bother to greet his mother and she mostly shut herself in their room. One night, however, she invited a man to drink with her in their room while Maitree was out doing his night shift. His mother couldn't stand what the girl did so she told Maitree about it. Being head over heels in love with the girl, he defended her and got upset at his mother. Several days later, his mother kicked the girl out, but Maitree followed her and, in tears, begged her to come back. It turned out that the girl had already got herself a new lover and she wanted nothing to do with Maitree.

Maitree was heartbroken. It was as if all the light had gone out of his life. He shut himself in his room drinking and weeping all day all night, and his mother had to try her best to console her youngest son.

She rang Prateep and told him everything, but all he could do was silently curse this good-for-nothing brother of his. He was also furious and ashamed as he knew that he could do nothing to help them. Maitree's life is no different from the sad plight of small people portrayed in sensational news, and even though Prateep feels sorry for them, he also sees them as foolish.

Some nights he contemplates the troubled lives of those people and even dreams about them. Where do their problems originate from and how to solve them? Who and what is to blame? The government? Society as a whole? Or is it the fault of those people? Do they only have themselves to blame if their lives are flooded with trouble? Could it be that dealing with problems is actually part of life's struggle? Or is it because there is something wrong in the social structure that drags life down to a state of horrific degradation? How to make sense of the despairing and pitiful state of those people?

And now that sort of distressing and hopeless life is getting closer and closer to him as it has become part of his mother and brothers' lives. He heard all about it from his mother, who also told him about the numerous health problems she is now battling or trying to keep under control—ailments like diabetes and coronary heart disease, etc.

She later begs him to give Maitree a call to cheer him up. According to her, he is the eldest brother who is better educated than the rest of them and she believes that he can give Maitree sound and sensible advice:

"Please help your brother. Give him advice about life and tell him to follow your example so that he can stand on his own feet and stop being such a burden on me."

But what advice or example can he give Maitree? Look at him, he is a writer who has no security in his life. If his mother complains about money, can he help her? Or if she becomes sick and is admitted to a hospital, will he be able to help? If it so happens that today or tomorrow, he is diagnosed with lung cancer caused by heavy smoking, he will just wait for death. He won't let his mother spend any money on treating him. He has vowed to devote his whole life to his writing career, seeing
himself as willing to labor purely for the sake of creativity and dedicating his entire existence to the exploration, investigation, comprehension, and revelation of life and the world so that he could articulate their beauty, meaningfulness, sacredness, and dignity through narratives . He has been working hard and the thought of giving up has never entered his mind. His strong faith in the power of narrative has led him to break up with other more viable alternatives in life. By holding on to his faith in creativity, the path he has chosen cannot bring about comfort and security to his mother and other family members.

Because of such a selfish choice that excludes his family, if he drops dead now his mother should not have to spend any money on him. If there is anyone who has to pay, that one has to be his own fate and he will thank it with a loud and mocking laughter filled with fury, and with the crazy desire to cling on to life. That is how he will thank life.

"Tell him to go to hell!" He shouts down the phone line, and at that point the image of his own death and his youngest brother's life merge as one. He expresses what he wants to tell his brother to his mother, imagining that he is also yelling those thoughts out for his own fate to hear.

"How could you say that?" His mother reprimanded him.

That evening he rings Maitree and tries to cheer him up, treating him the way an elder brother should treat his younger brother.

21 June 2007

'…life may go on living, un-ashamed, even after it has been expressed and therewith finished.' Maitree is still unable to stand on his own feet and he never seems to learn from past experiences. He is often swayed by bursts of emotions and repeats the same mistakes again and again.

Maitree had moved to Chonburi to work at a construction site there, partly because he hoped that doing so would help him forget his ex-girlfriend. However, after less than a month of being there, he rang his mother and asked her to send him some money, claiming that he was broke and couldn't wait till the end of the month for his wage. His mother later got to know from a friend who worked with him that Maitree had started to drink again. He got drunk every day after work and he owed owners of liquor stalls near the construction site a lot of money. That was why he had no money left despite the fact that he got paid weekly.

He later made a trip home to bring his motorbike back with him to Chonburi, even though his mother was the one who had paid monthly installments for that bike. He wanted to use that motorbike as a warrant that made it possible for him to continue buying liquor on credit and get himself drunk every night. Two months later, he left his job and returned home with a lot of debts for his mother to pay off, just like what he had done before.

As an eldest son, he not only listens to his mother complaining about all the problems caused by his brothers, but also tries to send her a small amount of cash he could spare. Only when his manuscript gets published can he (a ghost writer) send her a bigger sum of money.

Every morning Maitree asks his mother to give him some money to buy petrol for the motorbike he rides to work and in the evenings she has to pay for his liquor as well. After a while, because of his young blood and lust, Maitree gets himself a new girlfriend, who is one of his mother's tenants. Unable to endure loneliness, he asks her to move in with

him and, since then, she doesn't have to pay the rent. The inevitable result is that his mother loses some of the income she uses to pay for Maitree's motorbike petrol and liquor.

Maitree tries his best to cement his relationship with the girl and he eventually asks his mother to go see the girl's parents with him so that he can ask for her hand in marriage. However, his mother refuses to go along with him even though he claims that the girl's parents really want them to get married as soon as possible.

"You are still relying on me for money. I can't believe you want to get married. Why don't you try to be more realistic, son?" His mother tried to put some sense into him.

When Prateep has a chance to talk to Maitree over the phone, he bluntly dismisses the latter's wish to get married. He says to his youngest brother: "Pay for the wedding yourself if you want to get married. Unless you can stand on your own feet without having to bother mum, don't even dream about getting married. Get yourself a condom before screwing that girlfriend of yours!"

Prateep's younger brother, Chidchai, also has problems dealing with women. After his wife fled to Bangkok, leaving all her debts behind, Chidchai went back to live with his mother and not long afterwards he had a new woman, who is from a well-to-do ethnic Chinese family and is a few years younger than him. In the beginning, Chidchai's new relationship didn't bother his mother because he kept things to himself and never told her what was going on with his life. When his mother got to know more about his new woman as he sometimes brought her home with him, she had no problem with her. Chidchai, however, was unable to forget his ex-wife even though they had been officially divorced. He was struggling to come to terms with their breakup despite the fact that he had started a new relationship with another woman. Every week he drove to Bangkok to see his ex-wife and he still kept their wedding photo in his room. That photo was quite large and ornately framed and he had carried it from a house that was once their love nest. By then the house was already appropriated by the bank due to their huge debts, and the wedding photo was the only possession left to be a memento of his failed marriage.

One day Chidchai brought his new girlfriend to his room and after she saw that wedding photo, she made fun of him. He felt ashamed that he still could not decide which woman he wanted to be with, and since then whenever the new girlfriend visited him, he hid the photo from her.

Prateep heard about all this from his mother, who found it both sad and funny that her second son has been enslaved and tortured by the one-sided love he has for his ex-wife. In fact, both sons of hers have allowed themselves to be blinded and destroyed by love and the stupidity of youth. According to his mother, they hardly have any love and devotion left for their mother. What about himself? When love is concerned, he is actually no different from his younger brothers. He has to admit that he also worships love, even though he has yet to form a serious relationship with someone. It seems like his mother's three sons have all been cursed to chase after love until they are totally consumed and burnt to death by it—a kind of destiny that his mother and other people see as stupid and crazy. His mother confided in him over the phone that she had no idea where her sons got this destructive streak from, as their father had never been romantic. In fact, throughout his entire marriage, their father was the exact opposite of a romantic person. He never once revealed his gentle or passionate nature and he showed no sign that he was in love with his wife. His mother therefore, couldn't understand why her two younger sons are so different from their father. As he was listening to his mother, he could feel that at that moment it was as if her mind was drifting away as she tried in vain to search her memories for a moment that his father appeared to her like a loving husband.

He felt quite sad. His mother's three sons rarely do anything that gives her the impression that they love her, and because of this, she could not tell whether they have any affection for her. She only sees them giving all their love and devotion to their women.

He tried to make his mother feel better by saying: "We are men
like dad, but it is from you that we know love and sacrifice."

Love causes problems or problems lead to love? If his mother's three sons are so passionate and willing to pursue love, then they surely follow her example.

Regarding his mother's circumstance, he has been trying to find out whether love comes before problems or vice versa. Things are so weird and confusing. After his father passed away, his mother tried to figure out what to do to enable the family to survive financially. She came up with the idea of building a 5-room row house so that she could rent out the rooms to migrant workers who come to our town to look for jobs. She therefore needed the money to build the row house, and the opportunity to get hold of this money came with the arrival of a man named Thai, a new settler who wanted to buy a piece of land close to the main road from his mother. He wanted to buy approximately 200 square metres of land from her, but the reality was his mother knew nothing about measurements as she had never been to school and could not read. Her solution was to indicate to Thai that the piece of land she wanted to sell was the plot beyond the Moringa tree, which stands some distance away from the front yard of her house. That tree was thus used as a boundary by his mother. Next to the tree and closer to the house is an old well which has been the essential source of water for his family ever since the early days of his parents' marriage. His father got someone to dig up this well and inexhaustible underground water has been drawn by a pump for the family's use. The well and its water can therefore be considered his family's underground treasure. Thus, to his mother, only the plot of land further from the well, beyond where the Moringa tree stands and closer to the road, could be sold.

Land close to a road normally fetches a good price and, with the passage of time, its price tends to keep increasing. His mother got over 200, 000 baht from selling that plot of land to Thai, and both seemed happy enough with the deal. Thai built a medium-sized garage with its side partition next to his mother's remaining property, and the partition was seen as a boundary between their properties.

He remembers clearly how he felt that day when his mother asked him to sell his share of the land. It was as if something inside him was shattered by a powerful and destructive force, and he later transformed that emotional upheaval into valuable material for his short story. On that day, however, he hardly paid attention to the details of the transaction, as he was overwhelmed by bitterness and self-pity. He was consumed by anger and sadness because his family, represented by his mother, had decided to deprive him of the right to inherit the land. He could not understand why he was the one whose name had to be written off from the title deed when in reality he is the one most likely to be able to keep the land for his family. If there is anyone who won't be tempted by an offer to buy their land at a high price, and who has the strong determination to keep his father's land within the family forever, that person is no one else but him. Isn't that obvious to others in his family? If his name is no longer on the title deed, there is no guarantee that in the future others won't sell the remaining land and end up penniless. In fact, his father's land has been diminished with time, from about 2 acres in the beginning to 600 square metres when his mother wanted to sell 200 square metres more to Thai. His mother eventually sold that 200 square metres of land to Thai because he was so engrossed in bitterness and self-pity, and from this self-pity sprung one of his short stories.

Unlike in the short story, in real life his anger triggered him to spite his mother by announcing in front of everyone in the land department office that he had no need to sell his share of the land, and if his mother was desperate for money then she should just sell her share of the land. His reaction shocked his mother, but he was too furious to bother about her feelings. How could his mother do this to him? She had asked him to travel all the way from Bangkok to erase his own name from the title deed! After making her lose face in front of others, he stomped out, leaving his mother and brother to sort things out by themselves. Once he was back in Bangkok, he kept his distance from his family and treated them with indifference. In the end, his mother had to sell hers and Chidchai's share of the land to Thai.

His coldness and indifference towards his family's plight at that time has led to unforgivable damage. He realized that when he visited his hometown again to sort out the messy land transaction that took place a few years ago. The problem emerged when Thai wanted to get a formal title deed, and the land he wanted to claim as his was not just the plot he bought from his mother; that plot had actually been fenced off by the partition of his garage. It became clear that Thai wanted more land than what his mother had agreed to sell to him and he claimed that half of his mother's land was actually his. He also had a written proof of his claim—what was stipulated on the land sale document on that day, the day he left his mother and brother in the land department office and returned to Bangkok in anger and self-pity. His mother cannot read so she didn't know what was written on that document, and his brother was so timid and willing to let his mother handle everything. And he left them to deal with things on their own! That was why things are so fucked up!

When he arrives at the old family home to help his mother sort out the land problem, he discovers that the top floor of the spacious two-story timber and cement house is virtually abandoned. His mother and brothers have moved down to live in the three downstairs rooms, and only his father's framed photo remains upstairs in the main bedroom. Apparently, his ghost occupies the top floor all alone at night. His mother only goes upstairs once in a while during the daytime to cook, and the top floor looks desolate and is in a dilapidated condition.

Chidchai, Maitree and his girlfriend, and his mother live in their own separate rooms downstairs. His mother's conflict with Thai worsens as time passes. As the hostility and tension between the two parties increases, they are always looking for opportunities to hurt each other.

26 June 2007

Where is the wound and how come the inflammation lasts this long?

Is it because his mother cannot read and write? Perhaps her illiteracy makes her outlook, perception, and the way she handles things no different from villagers of the bygone era. Using the Moringa tree as a landmark, she had indicated to Thai verbally and with the gesture of her hand the exact boundary of the piece of land she wanted to sell to him. She wanted to sell it for 230,000 baht and at that time Thai seemed pleased with the deal. Soon afterwards, Thai's garage was built on the land he bought from his mother and one of the side partitions of the garage has served as the demarcation line between the two properties, replacing the Moringa tree, which had been cut down.

His mother's village mentality convinced her that the verbal agreement she had with Thai about the land sale was clear, definite, and unarguable. She wholeheartedly held on to that agreement and did not suspect that anything bad would come out of it.

However, Thai, whose outlook is different from hers, has his own way of mapping and assessing the price of the land. He asked an official from the land district to map and assess the land he wanted from his mother. For her part, she showed no objection to what he did as she thought he would abide by what they had verbally agreed. Thai was aware that his mother couldn't read or write so he volunteered to help take care of the bureaucratic aspect of the land sale transaction. His mother let him handle them all by himself and paid no attention to the written details of the transaction. She didn't know that the land official had measured all the land she had, which was 1 rai and 600 square metres and set the price for it at a little over 400,000 baht. When asked to sign the document, his mother simply signed because she didn't doubt Thai's commitment to their verbal agreement. A few years later, that document she had signed becomes the evidence against her, as it stipulates that she had sold half of her land to Thai, something she had been entirely unaware of.

Thai was with her on the day she went to the land department to seal the land sale deal, and she didn't suspect that he had a different plan. As she assumed that he and the people at the land department did things the way she wanted, she went along with whatever they asked her to do. She feared that if she asked questions or showed any doubt about what they were doing, it would be like she made a fool of herself. His mother dared not argue with government officials, as in her world the bureaucratic system and its officials occupied a sacred position that represented authority and justice. Also, on that day Thai stood next to his mother, encouraging her to sign, and she assumed that he was acting out of good intention, like a nice neighbor is supposed to. It was also on that day that her eldest son yelled at her and caused her to lose face in front of everyone. She felt the need to save face and convince others that she was not the type who would go back on her word so she urged Chidchai to sell his share of the land together with hers. His mother had no idea what those formal words on the land sale documents meant. Those words are typical of bureaucratic language, which is often confusing and hard to decipher. Nonetheless, at that time his mother had no doubt that what was written on the documents she had to sign would lead to the same end as her verbal agreement with Thai—the sale of her land from the side of the road up to where the Moringa tree stood for the price of 230,000 baht. And when the land official told her that it wouldn't be enough to sell only her share of the land, his mother was somewhat confused. The official had to explain further that to get 230,000 baht, she would have to sell more land. At that point, she didn't quite understand what the official meant, but she didn't hesitate in pushing Chidchai to sell his share of the land so that there would be enough land for the 230,000 baht price. Her assumption was that you could sell a piece of land for any prince you want. She didn't know that before the sale was made, Thai had asked someone from the land department to assess the value of the entire land she owned. That official had told Thai that the official value of all the land she owned was 430,000. It was clear that his mother and Thai held completely different views about the transaction. She ignorantly signed the sale document, partly because she was pushed to do so by the intimidating land official, who made no attempt to hide her annoyance and wanted his mother to get it

over and done with so that she could move on to deal with the next person waiting in line. In the end, his mother signed the documents and urged Chidchai to do the same.

Looking back, from that day on, it was apparent that Thai started to change.

As Thai's garage was being built, he told his mother that she could no longer use the land that lay in between their properties for growing her vegetables. He also asked her to remove her bamboo bench from under the Moringa tree and soon he put up a fence with barbed wires to mark a clear boundary separating their properties. As Thai's cold and distant behavior towards his mother was increasingly obvious, she reacted by telling Thai how the noise from his garage that was open all day all night had been disturbing her and that he should do something about it. Thai simply ignored her complaint. Worse, he began to say horrible things about her, calling her an illiterate idiot and saying all sort of offensive things to her face. He remembered that his mother complained over the phone about what Thai did to her. She also mentioned that Maitree was so upset with Thai and nearly got into a fight with him. She was worried that one day Maitree would attack Thai because this youngest son of hers was used to using violence in dealing with conflicts.

Did all this happen because Thai was full of greed? Or was it because Thai genuinely believed that his mother was trying to cheat him? Thai often told others who lived in the same neighborhood that his mother was selfish and that she worshipped money more than anything. He even said to his mother that he knew from the very beginning that she asked for an exorbitant price for that piece of land he bought off her. According to him, to demand 230,000 baht for that plot of land was way too much. It was possible that Thai's attitude towards his mother was not that good since then.

For his part, he got to know about the conflict between her and Thai by piecing together what he heard from her. On the day he arrived in his hometown, he visited Thai at his garage to see if he could somehow find a way to resolve the conflict between Thai and his mother. But Thai showed no interest in negotiating with him. Nothing could

change his determination to claim ownership of half of the land that originally belonged to his mother. He took a trip to his hometown hoping to help his mother settle her issue with Thai, but it became clear to him after seeing Thai that the latter was not going to back down. Still he wanted to get to the core and the origins of the conflict.

Thai accused his mother of being mean and unfair to him, claiming that he had trusted her all along. He said she had sold him 50 square metres of her land which was right next to a canal for 230,000 baht. However, later when he asked someone from the municipality to mark the boundary of the land he bought, he found that it had been eroded by the flow of the canal that ran straight to his mother's back yard. Thai firmly believed that his mother benefited from the situation, as the canal's flow caused erosion to his land but added more land to his mother's backyard. Convinced that her backyard had been expanded because of the loss of his land, he later went to see her to talk about the matter and to ask her to give him more land.

His mother reacted by curtly telling him that she would not give him anymore of her land than what they had previously agreed. At that moment, her gut feeling was that Thai's logic about his loss and her gain of land was unreasonable. Later when Thai's claim about the expansion of his mother's land proved to be true according to the information provided by people from the municipality who had measured it, his mother decided to consult one of her neighbors about this matter. The advice she got was that, in practice, the expanded land could be used and occupied by owners of adjacent properties. Legally, however, his mother's land ownership as registered on the title deed does not increase. If the title deed stipulates that she owns 400 square metres, then that is what she legally owns, and if one day people from the land department show up and claim the expanded land as public property, his mother has to go along with them. That was what the neighbor told his mother.

With this new knowledge, his mother insisted that she would not give anymore of her land to Thai. Thai was furious and accused her of being heartless and shrewd. He retaliated by paying truck drivers to unload earth into the canal and that nearly blocked

all the flow of the canal water. After that, he occupied and made use of the filled up area himself.

As time passed, Thai became rich and influential and he bought land on the other side of the canal before proceeding to fill up the canal so as to join the land he owned on both sides of the canal. His behavior and attitude were both intriguing and puzzling. He seemed to crave for respect and acceptance from people in the neighborhood. His garage had been expanded because he had acquired more space from filling up the canal. He boasted that many big wigs whom he was pretty close to came to his garage regularly to have their cars fixed. Among them, he claimed, were heads of the district organizations, government officials, lawyers, policemen, and military men. Then, one day, a new street sign with the words 'Master Thai's Alley' inscribed on it was posted next to a small nameless alley to the front of his mother's house. Thai was so pleased with the sign but his mother was obviously annoyed. She described Thai's behavior as provocative. When chatting over the phone, she poured out her anger against Thai:

"That bastard is a troublemaker and he is so greedy that he doesn't mind grabbing things that belong to other people. All the guardian spirits here know what sort of guy he is. They know who among us are decent people and who are crooks so let's wait and see if they would let a crook like him prosper. "

But Thai put his mother's guardian's spirits to shame by buying another nearby plot of land, forcing his mother's house to be stuck in between the pieces of land that now belonged to Thai. On one side of his mother's property was Thai's garage while the other side was right next to his newly purchased land. Thai didn't just stop at that. He went on to pay people he knew from the municipality office to measure and mark the boundary for his property. He claimed that part of his mother's 5-room row house was located on his land and the people from the municipality office supported his claim by drawing a boundary that ran straight through the middle of his mother's row house. Thai was elated and demanded that his mother pull down half of her row house that was on what he claimed was his land. His mother was devastated and she rang him, hoping to vent out

her anger and frustration. He could do nothing to help except listen to her, but soon he got upset, lashing out at her, making her feel worse:

"See! What has happened is all because of you! You took him in yourself and I don't think anyone can help you out of this mess!"

At that time his mother was in despair and was about to pull down half of her row house. Fortunately, a land officer from the land department showed up to mark the land boundary and that officer told his mother that the land owned by Thai didn't extend to where her row house stood. When they told Thai about this, he was furious and refused to acknowledge the boundary set by the officer from the land department. He claimed that he had asked people he knew from the municipality office to measure the land and they informed him that his land included the area on which half of his mother's row house stood on. Upon hearing what Thai said, the land officer became hostile and coldly told him that people from the municipality office were not authorized to do such a thing and only those from the land department had the authority to carry out the task. His mother was over the moon that things turned out to the disadvantage of Thai, whom she saw as a type who liked to cause trouble. She didn't forget to profusely thank the guardian spirits for delivering her out of the crisis.

The incident embittered Thai even more and he accused his mother of conspiring with the land officer to take advantage of him.

He later plotted against his mother by trying to curry favor with government officials, especially those who worked for the municipality office and had measured the land for him before. This same group of people later helped Thai by pointing out to him that the documents legalizing the land sale between Thai and his mother indicated that Thai was the co-owner of his mother's property. This, they remarked, means that Thai could occupy more land than what his garage was built on. In fact, they claimed, Thai could claim half of his mother's land as his, as his mother and Chidchai had already sold their shares of land to him. Thai saw their advice as giving him a great opportunity to usurp ownership of half of his mother's land. He came to see her with the land sale documents and threatened to use them for his advantage.

His mother, however, would not listen to him and repeated what she had told him earlier: “You won’t get anymore land than what I agreed to sell to you. You still don’t get it, do you?”

His mother said she could not understand why Thai was demanding her to give him more land when two years ago he had told her that he only wanted enough land to build his garage on, and they had used one partition of his garage as the boundary between their properties for two years with no issue. To her, it was weird that Thai suddenly came up with the request for more land after two years had passed by.

To ask people from the land department to measure land, it is compulsory that all owners of the land are present when submitting the request. Thus, Thai alone could not demand that the land be measured and its boundary established. This matter had dragged on for quite a while. Prateep, as one of the co-owners lives in Bangkok and hardly visits his hometown. Thai had been harassing his mother by asking government officials who were his acquaintances to frequently visit his mother’s property under the pretense of inspecting it. Obviously, his intention was to intimidate his mother who still insisted that she would not bend to his demand:

“Over my dead body! This is my land. That is my well. It’s a bloody lie to claim that I sold him half of my land. Even if I have to go to court, I won’t give in!”

Thai challenged her by saying: “No court will listen to your rambling. They will only pay attention to the land sale documents. I bet the court will not only grant me the right to claim the well as mine but will also let me take me take possession of all the land all the way up to your front door!”

After that trip to his hometown, he dwelled on all the possible factors that led to the boiling conflict between his mother and Thai during the past few years. When he met Thai, he told him that he wanted to compromise and offered to move the boundary between their properties a little further into his mother’s land, although no further than where the well lay. He let Thai know that he made such an offer because he believed that compromise was a crucial thing for people who lived in the same neighborhood. Thai

hesitated a little before rejecting the offer and arguing back that he didn't think the offer was fair. Why should he accept just a tiny strip of land when it is stipulated in the land sale documents that he owns half of his mother's land?

By then he could see that any attempt on his part to persuade Thai to accept the offer would be fruitless. Thai kept saying that he was taken advantage of by his mother and her family. He insisted that the canal had caused his land to erode and that his mother gained more land from the erosion.

As far as he is concerned, however, Thai is trying to take advantage of his family, and the only way to deal with this is to let the problem drag on without letting people from the land department get involved.

Still, part of him hates to leave things unresolved like this. Deep down, he prefers to find a way to sort it out somehow and if the worst comes to the worst, that is, if his family loses half of their land, one day in the future he might be able to save up enough money earned from his writing career to buy a piece of land and build a small house for his family.

But how would his mother handle the loss of her land? That piece of land is not a mere piece of earth for her, but it is her whole life and being. She has lived on that land since she was in her late teens after she got married. She raised a young family with my father on that land and her three sons were all born there with their umbilical cords buried somewhere under it. Years ago the three young boys' baby teeth were thrown onto the roof of the house, and as time passed, they fell off the roof onto that piece of earth where they were eventually buried. His father's ashes were also there. Twenty years have gone by and his family's history and memories are bonded with that piece of land, from which they grew and flourished. It is indeed the land of their lives.

Would he be able to act indifferent to the plight of his family and his roots?

6 December 2008

It was in the middle of the night when a mobile phone left in the study rang three times in a row and went silent. When the phone rang for the fourth time, he struggled out of bed and went to the study, feeling both sleepy and annoyed. Picking up the phone, he shouted down the line in annoyance:

"Bloody hell! Don't you know what time it is?"

He heard nothing from the other end of the line and was about to hang up when a woman's voice with an upcountry accent said: "Son, wait!" He felt sick of it as lately he often got late night calls from strangers who apparently rang his number by mistake. In response to the owner of that voice he said:

"I think you've got the wrong number."

"This is mum," the voice at the other end of the line said.

"You've got the wrong number. Please recheck, ok?" He repeated and hung up the phone before throwing the mobile phone on a desk. He actually wanted to throw it against the wall to vent out his annoyance but he could not do that because he still needed the phone. Recently, he got too many stupid calls from strangers. Some rang to ask if this and that person was there and when he told them they had the wrong number, they simply hung up and didn't even bother to apologize.

Last night he woke up because his phone was ringing and when he picked it up, all he could hear was a buzzing noise. After a while, however, he heard something that sounded like someone was weeping. A few nights ago he also got a call from a stranger who sounded like an old woman. She asked to speak to someone he didn't know and told him that she really needed help because she got lost. He bluntly told her: "You've got the wrong number!"

Last week he heard the news about a gang of criminals who randomly picked people's phone numbers then rang them and tried to trick them into believing that their

kids had been kidnapped in order to demand a ransom from them. The news about what those criminals did made him wary of calls from strangers and he felt he could not tell whether they were genuine or not. On the other hand, when viewed from a different angle, this kind of mistrust could also destroy the hope of people who find themselves in desperate situations late at night and really need help. What if the person who was weeping at the other end of the line that night was in a life-endangering situation and genuinely in need of help? The danger is certainly real for her but he hung up on her because he thought the call was a trick used by a gang of criminals to deceive him. Without help, she might have been killed in the end. He brushed that possibility off. He could never believe that something like that had happened otherwise he would be tortured to death by guilt.

His mobile phone rang again. He swore but when he looked at the screen and realized that the call was from his mother, his expression changed. He signed in exasperation as he had no idea why his mother chose to ring him at that particular time.

"Prateep!" His mother's voice was panic-stricken.

"What the heck is it, mum?"

Among all the people he knew, his mother was the worst when it comes to picking a time to ring people. She often rang him late at night and asked him to help solve a weird problem for her.

And she did the same this time. In a desperate tone, she asked him to help solve another problem. She told him that because she didn't have a chance to go to school and his two brothers were not that well-educated, he was best suited to figure out the solution to this problem, being the best educated and the eldest brother.

Listen, his mother said: Your brother Maitree is in trouble. He attacked Thai with a billhook and nearly chopped off his neck. I don't know if Thai is dead or not but he collapsed and was convulsing in pain when I last saw him. Maitree has gone crazy. He locked himself in his room, threatening to cut his own throat with a knife if anyone bursts into his room, and he has been in his room for more than half an hour now. His wife and I have been trying to calm him down. When I asked him what he was doing, he said he was

packing his stuff because he wanted to flee. I don't know what to do! Please help me, son!

After listening to his mother, he tried to get her to give him more details about the latest and, by far, the most serious trouble his family found themselves in. As he was doing that, his hands were shaking and his throat felt dry, knowing that in this kind of life-or-death situation anything can happen to make things worse or more complicated. He decides to tell his mother that they all should go to the police station right now because Maitree needs to turn himself in and let the police know about the crime he has committed. Best to go to the police before they come to arrest him, and don't even think about escaping because it will make things worse and much harder to fix. Let the law deal with barbarism. If Maitree still takes refuge in barbarism, he could perish because of it. Go to the police now, he says to his mother. If all of you are still home, it could provoke Thai's family to do something to hurt them in retaliation. Seek protection from the law, he urges her before adding that he will wait for their call. Once they are at the police station and have reported the crime, they should ring him immediately. He will take a trip home tomorrow to see them.

After that, he sits at a desk in the study room and imagines what might be happening. Sangwan—who is Thai's wife, Sumon—her teenage son, and a few of their workers may have hurriedly carried Thai to their ute and driven him to a hospital. Their shock and fear for Thai's life soon turn into anger. (His mother has earlier told him that Sumon pointed at Maitree and hatefully yelled at him before rushing to the hospital: "I'm going to kill you tonight!")

After less than an hour, Sumon leaves his mother and workers with his father at the hospital and rushes home on a motorbike. He creeps into his father's bedroom, takes out his pistol, and strides outside straight towards Maitree's room. The latter still locks himself in his room and his mother, his wife and Chidchai have all gathered in front of the room. They try to beg Sumon not to create more bloodshed:

"Please calm down! Let us not hurt one another anymore!" That's probably what his mother says to Sumon.

But Sumon is unlikely to listen to her. He was maddened with hatred and set on exacting revenge for his father: “You bastard! You tried to kill my dad! I will kill you! Come out, you animal!”

Upon hearing that, Maitree would probably be seized by fear for his own life. Is offering death to others the same as having death handed over to oneself? Perhaps Maitree would be so panic-stricken until he could not utter a single word. But Sumon does not hesitate. He rushes towards the front door of Maitree’s room and kicks it with full force, destroying the door and sending the latches flying everywhere. While others are paralyzed by fear caused by the rush of adrenaline, Sumon spots Maitree, and before anyone can do anything, he pulls the trigger and fires a few shots. The dark room is brightened up momentarily from those shots and Maitree’s lifeless body lies still.

Barbarism is paid back by barbarism. An eye for an eye, and everything is resolved. If things turn out this way, the blame would be shifted to Sumon and Maitree’s death would have washed him clean from his crime. Eventually, Thai might die, but Sumon, as the one who committed the crime, would still have to go to jail. By then, the two families would have suffered enough from the losses and would stay away from each other.

However, what if barbarism increases in sophistication due to the power of the mind? Maitree’s silence might have engendered a more sophisticated level of barbarism in Sumon’s heart, changing his raw anger and hatred into a cold-blooded and more ingenious tactic that can inflict as much pain on his enemy as what he has caused him. Sumon’s rage and thirst for revenge have not evaporated but he becomes better at handling them after realizing that he is in an advantageous position. He has a gun so there is no need to kick the door to force it open. He occupies a superior position to others and he could control and make the situation unfold the way he wants. (See the outcome of silence? See how silence can have a significant role in all this?)

“You killed my dad! Now it’s your mum’s turn to meet the same fate !”

In a split second, Sumon stretches out his arm and points the gun towards his mother’s head before pulling the trigger. (Even if Sumon takes his time with the gun and

Maitree decides to rush out of his room, it would still be too late, as Maitree's life is no longer what Sumon wants. What he wants now is his mother's life and the consequence of killing her. Maitree would suffer in exactly the same way Sumon has suffered before. Nothing is more just than this.) He points the gun at his mother's forehead and shoots her at close range. His mother's lifeless body lies still on the ground. Another life is lost, as simple as that, and it is no different from the way Maitree has previously taken Thai's life. In this way, Maitree and Sumon are forced to accept the fruits of their crimes in a more or less similar manner. Sumon would have to go to jail for killing Maitree's mother. The atmosphere of sadness would dominate the two households and the shocking atrocities would forever act as a reminder for them to stay way from each other.

Barbarism is thus resolved by barbarism. This can be seen as a just, decisive, and highly efficient way in fixing the problem within one night. He would wait for a call from his family in the tormenting silence of the night, and then, after almost an hour, his phone would ring. Once he picks it up, he would hear Chidchi's voice telling him painfully: "Mum has been killed!"

He would sigh; finally this problem has been successfully solved.

However, the reality is different. When his phone rings and he picks it up, he heard Chidchai asking him in confusion: "We are at the police station now. What should we do next, bro?"

He feels a sudden surge of exasperation. His family seems totally incapable of finding a way out of their own mess. They are no different from thirsty people who ask others what they should do to quench their own thirst. If only he could haul a whole river, he would certainly drown his family with it!

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He didn't rush home the next day but waited until a few days later before taking a trip home. It was because after his mother and brothers went to the police station to report the crime, the police didn't immediately detain Maitree. Instead, they let him go. Chidchai told him over the phone that the police gave Maitree credit for turning himself in. They believed that he had no intention to flee so they let him go home and they said they would stop by later to investigate the crime scene in order to gather details about the case and report them to the public prosecutor.

Prateep rang Maitree and said to him: You have done the right thing by going straight to the police and letting the justice system look after you. If you run away from it, there will be more problems for sure. You did what a real man is supposed to do—accepting your mistake after you have done something wrong. That's how it should be. Maitree mumbled his agreement and Prateep continued by warning him to stay away from Thai's family members. You can still leave home for work and all that like what you did before, but try your best to get out of their way. It might make them get madder seeing that you are still allowed to walk free.

He also chastened his brother for his heavy drinking habit and told him to give up drinking as it is detrimental to his judgement. His mother told him that Maitree had been drinking on the day he attacked Thai. Looking back, he could remember how alcohol had often changed Maitree into a monster who did all sorts of destructive things. His behavior totally changed when he was drunk; alcohol transformed him from a quiet and timid young man into an aggressive thug who always wanted to get in a fight and look for trouble. Even his mother could not stand him when he was like that. She had tried to make him change his behavior, but he reacted aggressively. They fought and nearly killed each other. Thus, as an elder brother, he told Maitree not to touch alcohol anymore and Maitree promised he would stay away from it.

A night later he rang his mother to ask how things were and whether Maitree still went out to work like before. He also wanted to know whether people from Thai's family had been harassing her. She told him that Sumon approached her front yard a few times a day, hollering and demanding to know whether Maitree was home or not. He threatened to shoot Maitree to death with his father's gun. At other times, Sumon yelled out that his mother is going to lose her youngest son soon, that Maitree's wife is going to be a widow, that the whole family would never find peace or happiness, and that they would lose their home and everything they have.

Listening to his mother, he could tell that she was very worried even though she said she was not afraid of Sumon. According to her, he kept harassing them with this and that threat and bragged about how his bikie friends were willing to help him. Sometimes Sumon and those bikie friends of his gathered in front of the garage and kept their motorbikes roaring in order to intimidate his family. They also said they were waiting for Maitree to return home from work so that they could beat him up. His mother's fear for her youngest son's life was palpable as she imagined all the horrible things that might happen to him after hearing all those threats from Sumon. He tried to calm her down and tell her that it was best not to react because Sumon and his family were obviously upset and wanted revenge. In fact, it is probably better that they could verbally release their seething anger instead of doing something violent straight away.

His mother then told him that Maitree himself was consumed by fears and anxieties until he couldn't sleep, and yesterday he had to drink to calm himself down and keep his wild fears under control. Once he knew that Maitree had started to drink again, he got very upset. He had told that idiot to quit drinking! Why does he start to drink again? But his mother immediately defended Maitree. She said he drank by himself in his room and that she felt sorry for him because he said he wanted to die. She let him drink to relieve his stress so that he could get some sleep, and that she kept an eye on him while he was drinking.

He was speechless for a moment then he told her that if Maitree gets in trouble again because of his drinking habit, she should never ever ask for his help. The fact that

his mother allowed Maitree to drink again outraged him and once he started to vent his anger verbally, he couldn't stop it. I can't imagine you let him drink again! Once he is drunk, do you think he will let Sumon yell out threats from the front yard without doing anything? I bet he will rush out and confront him and any damn thing can happen when he is drunk! He went on bombarding Maitree with angry words before reminding his mother that he forbade his brother to drink so that he would be able to have some self-awareness. Maitree had to be punished by being forced to live with his own fears and anxieties resulting from the terrible thing he did. He needed to reflect on his own life and realize for once that his life had been a total mess that affected everyone in his family. Prateep told his mother that Maitree should be forced to acknowledge that his mother and brothers had been through hell because of his stupid actions, and that they had no peace and had been suffering because of him. If Maitree was forced to confront his fears and anxieties, there might be a chance that he could become a reformed person who feels guilty for causing so much trouble to his family. However, his mother had let him drink and set him free from those moments of fear and anxiety. She allowed him to walk free from the painful burden that should be his and let others shoulder it for him!

His mother interrupted him by saying: "I'm keeping an eye on him. He won't cause anymore trouble."

Once more, what she said made him speechless.

He tries to get to the core of the problem again. Maybe drinking was not the thing that made Maitree the way he is. His mother is the one who has spoiled him by allowing him to do anything he wants without any attempt to make sure that he does the right thing. It's quite odd that his mother always gives in to this youngest son of hers ever since he was born. As a baby, Maitree used to bite his mother's nipples when she breastfed him, but she did nothing to stop him. Also, when he was a bit older and started to yell obscenities at her and his father, she made no attempt to stop him from doing that. After his father passed, she could not make Maitree go back to school, and all she said was: "He doesn't want to study anymore." As simple as that!

After giving up studying, Maitree mostly hung around at home doing nothing. His mother complained a bit, but she still cooked and washed his clothes for him. When he wanted to drink, she gave him money to buy alcohol. When he wanted a new motorbike, he only put a small down payment on the bike and his mother paid all the rest of the cost for him. It's true that she did complain about his good-for-nothing lifestyle but complaining was all she did because in the end she always helped him out and looked after him. Maitree himself knows this very well—that, regardless of what she may have said, she will never cut him adrift. His mother only tried to fix her youngest son's problems based on each specific circumstance or condition. Her way of dealing with his problems is no different from an exam question that offers only two choices for exam-takers to choose from.

Question 1: Maitree is really worried and stressed out because he has just assaulted someone. What should he do?

A. Just endure the stress and worries
B. Try to find a way to relieve his stress and worries

Maitree and his mother never try to think beyond the frame of this line of thinking. For example, they would never ask why they have to address the above question or why the above question originated in the first place. Such are the rules of life those two have established together, like a series of questions, each of which has only two choices to choose from and they only have to pick the correct one.

Question 2: Mum, can you give me some money to buy some booze? If you refuse to give me money, I will…

A. buy it on credit.
B. do all sort of horrible things to get the money.

Earlier, he tried to tell his mother that she had been deceived by Maitree into believing that for each of life's questions, there are only two choices to choose from. The truth is, he realized, his mother has not been deceived by Maitree, as she is actually one of the willing participants in establishing the structure of life as if it is a series of questions with only two answers to pick from.

Question 3: A bottle of booze can help how many people to relieve their stress and get some sleep?

A. One
B. Two

Last night his mother was with Maitree while he was drinking. Because she was drinking with him, comforting him, and letting him know that she shares his suffering, she was sure that he wouldn't go out and cause more trouble.

Two days later he takes a trip home. Before that, he has asked Chidchai to go to a local market to buy him a gift basket, which he plans to bring along with him when visiting Thai at the hospital. He wants to meet Thai to apologize for what his brother has done to him. He knows that Thai is still alive, based on the phone conversation he had with Chidchai in recent days. Luckily for Thai, even though Maitree used a billhook to attack him and its blade went straight to his neck, he is not severely injured as the blade is blunt. The curved part of the billhook blade accidentally went right into the curve of Thai's neck and hit his jaw. The result was that his jaw was fractured but the blade didn't cut deeply into his flesh. He sighed with relief after getting this information from Chidchai.

As he is sitting on the back of a hired motorbike which rides past Thai's garage heading towards his mother's house, he notices that Thai's wife, Sangwan, Sumon, and a few of their workers all stare at him with hatred. Once he arrives at his mother's house,

he sits down on a bamboo bench downstairs while his mother gets him some water to drink. He glances at a billhook resting against a cement wall and asks his mother whether it is the same one used by Maitree that night. She nods. That billhook is still occupying the same spot like it did before it committed a crime. That spot is near the entrance to the downstairs area of the house, right in front of his mother's bedroom and near the bamboo bench on which Maitree and his mother often sat together to relax. He suspects that the night Maitree committed the crime, he was drinking with his mother on this bench. After listening to his mother recount to him what happened that night, he knows that his guess is right.

It was just a couple of weeks after Loi Kratong festival and the festive mood, often prolonged until early December, was still everywhere. People were still enjoying themselves drinking and having fun. According to his mother, a party had been going on at Thai's garage for many nights. Likewise, his mother, Chidchai, and Maitree's wife were drinking together on the bamboo bench downstairs and Maitree, who was already a bit drunk, joined them later. His mother told him that on that day the drinking and partying at Thai's garage had started since the afternoon. Like many nights before, the party proceeded into late at night with blasting loud music and a racket from exploding cherry bombs, which were much louder than regular firecrackers. People at Thai's party lit those cherry bombs and threw them in all directions with no regard for anyone.

Perhaps out of drunkenness and anger against his mother who refused to give him half of her land, Thai had been throwing cherry bombs into her property in the middle of the night for 3 or 4 nights in a row. The loud explosions from the cherry bombs had been driving his family nuts. They had no clue what Thai hoped to gain from doing that, but they had tried their best not to react. However, their patience ran out the night the crime took place. His guess is that his mother found Thai's behavior unreasonable and she could not see how he could justify it. She probably couldn't help complaining and cursing Thai while she was drinking with her two sons. Whenever a cherry bomb thrown from Thai's garage exploded in her front yard and made a loud bang, she probably swore at Thai: Why the hell does he do that? Driving people nuts with those stupid bombs! I

have no peace because of them. I can't sleep and it's no good for my heart. I'm going to have a heart attack because of those bombs! Listening to their mother complaining, Chidchai and Maitree were probably disturbed by her irritation and anger. As sons, how could they help and protect their mother from being provoked and mistreated by others? What can they do to ensure that their mother could enjoy a peaceful sleep at night? However, when another cherry bomb was thrown in and exploded near the bottom of the staircase at the front of their house, all the two sons did was endure the ear-splitting explosion, resume their drinking, and prepare for the next shock caused by another cherry bomb. Their mother, on the other hand, got up immediately and headed off to Thai's garage.

Once there, she angrily yelled out: Why do you keep lighting those bloody cherry bombs? You have been doing it for three or four nights in a row already? When will you stop doing it? In fact, I would have been able to endure it if you hadn't thrown those stupid bombs into my front yard. What the hell do you do that for? Do you want to provoke me or what? Thai rushed out to confront his mother. He swore at her and yelled out that he had the right to do whatever he wanted. Both got into a heated argument and infuriated each other. All of a sudden, Thai punched her, but just a split second after that, she heard a swirling sound behind her and saw Thai's neck being struck by a billhook with the force that sent him to the ground. She turned to look behind her and saw Maitree standing there. A moment of shock soon turned into chaos as Sangwan rushed towards her husband while Maitree's wife and others tried to prevent more violent confrontations. After that, his family walked home in a daze and sat together in the downstairs area trying to figure out what to do. It was then that his mother decided to pick up the phone and ring him.

He remembers that on that night, after telling his mother that Maitree should go to the police, she handed her phone to Maitree so that he could talk to him. He asked Maitree in annoyance:

"What the hell did you do that for?"

"He hurt mum!" Maitree replied.

He wondered why Maitree had to carry that billhook with him and what sort of demon had whispered into his ear, telling him to hurt Thai that way. When asked, Maitree said he just picked up what was available nearby and that billhook was close at hand. At that time, his instinct told him that something bad was going to happen for sure after his mother got up all of a sudden and went straight to Thai's garage where Thai and a group of young men were drinking together. Apparently, from Maitree's point of view, picking up the billhook and following his mother was something reasonable to do in that circumstance. In fact, Maitree, who purely relied on a son's instinct to protect his mother, simply told him that:

"I sensed that something bad is going to happen for sure and my hand automatically reaches for a weapon."

Question no. 4: Pick which side is going to lose

A. Them

B. Us

That was probably how Maitree perceived the situation-- bad thing is going to happen resulting in losses, so he has to decide who will be the one suffering from losses. Maitree already made a decision without consulting other family members.

Our family is now the defendant whereas that family is the plaintiff.

After listening to his mother telling him about what happened that night, he walks around the house and finds remnants of cherry bombs scattered in the front yard by the side of the house next to a chicken coop. (That night his mother's chooks probably panicked like mad because of the loud explosions from those cherry bombs, whose bits and pieces are still evident all over the place.) His mother certainly didn't make things up. Nevertheless, he is in despair as his family is the defendant despite the visible evidence of the leftovers from those cherry bombs.

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He forced himself to grab the gift basket and headed towards Thai's garage. He hated to do it and couldn't help imagining all sorts of things that could happen when facing Thai's family, but he had to tell himself that is was necessary to see them. Once he got to their place, Thai's family members gathered around him and appeared very hostile and Sumon was nearby kicking this and that to intimidate him. He tried to stay calm and greeted them politely before sitting down on a granite bench on the front yard of the garage. He told Sangwan that he came to see them to apologize for what had happened and that he felt very sorry that something terrible like that had taken place. He said he fully understood that they were very upset and didn't want to trust his family. As he was talking, he could feel the hostile and suspicious gaze from Thai's family members who responded to what he said with coldness, animosity, and provocation. They all viciously attacked his mother and brothers, and he had to tell himself not to react or argue back, reminding himself that Thai's family was hurt so it is best to let them vent their anger.

Later, he mentioned to Sangwan that he wanted to visit Thai at the hospital, but Sangwan objected, claiming that she didn't like the idea because she didn't want to put her husband at a risk of being fatally assaulted. He shook his head and put on an embarrassing smile before telling her that someone like him was incapable of murdering her husband at the hospital. Sangwan responded by saying: "You all are brutes! If your brother could attack my husband like that, you can too!"

At that point, he wanted to get up and leave but had to force himself to stay put and calmly told them that his family really wanted to apologize for handling the conflict so badly. (Of course! By now you all should feel sorry!) However, the crime had happened, and, as the eldest brother, he wanted to apologize for what his family did. (Well, it would be better if you try to teach your folk, especially your mother, to toe the line!) Upon hearing such a response he was speechless for a while. (I could easily gun down that bastard! Sumon yelled out for everyone to hear.) He put on a stupid smile and

said his family was willing to pay for all the expenses incurred by Thai's hospitalization. However, Sangwan immediately rejected his offer and added that she wanted Maitree to serve the longest possible jail term. Accepting money from his family would help Maitree in court, something she surely didn't want to happen! "I'm not dumb and you can't use money to buy me!" she said.

He responded by saying, looking back, the real cause of the conflict is because the two families could not agree on the land issue, would it be better if we settle this issue once and for all, as it is the root of the problem? We live close to each other and see each other every day, and it is probably best not to let the argument over the land drag on. So should we try to find a way to clearly demarcate the land in a way that satisfies both sides?

"Don't you act like a smartass!" Sangwan snapped at him. "These are two separate cases so don't you try to pretend that they are one! Your brother trying to murder my husband is one issue (He tried to correct her by saying that it was just a physical assault, but she wouldn't listen.), and the argument over the land is another issue. Don't even think about convincing me to go along with you. I'm not that ignorant about legal stuff and I have a lawyer to help me. In both cases, my family is in a much better position to win than yours, and we will make sure to teach your family an expensive lesson. Your brother is going to jail and rot there for 20 years at least, and half of the land is going to be ours. End of story! You and your family have no right to negotiate."

He had no idea how he could just sit there and let them hurl insults at him. Afterwards, he got up quietly and calmly, even though he was boiling inside.

"Even if that is the case, I still want to apologize and I hope Mr. Thai gets well quickly," Of course, what he said was not from his heart.

Perhaps there are people who like to benefit from their own unfortunate circumstance, hoping to gain something and wanting to take advantage of others. They might try to use their own tragedies to move others so that they could get something in return. For example, a young girl who is not yet 18 decided to prostitute herself, but when she got caught, she claimed that she was lured into the sex industry and was raped. She

pushed the blame onto a mama-san or a pimp and cried for help from a high-profile social worker. In short, she took advantage of the circumstance and tried to make a scandal out of it. Maybe someone had whispered advice into her ear, suggesting to her that by exposing the human trafficking ring, she could contribute something to society. In this way she was transformed, from a girl who wanted money to buy an iPad, into a victim whose plight saddens others. People like this do exist, he believes, and they are more or less similar to Lolita, Humbert's nymphet.

He is boiling with fury. Maybe he has ruthlessness and evil in his blood, just like what Sangwan accused him of. Whereas his brother reveals those traits through violent actions, he reveals them through his evil thoughts, which occur to him often while he pretends to be extremely polite to others, or laugh at something he does not find humorous at all. When interacting with people, his thoughts are the opposite of his outward expressions. Only with his family does he not put on an act, and that's why he treats his family with no consideration. He chooses to be nice to others who are not his family members, and just a while back, he was extremely polite to Sangwan and told her how sorry he was for what had happened. He has no idea how he can live with his own hypocritical nature this long!

How did this destruction befall his family and then pass on to him? He walked home and once he got there, he looked at his mother. In the first place, his mother was the one who placed the problem into his hands: Help me son. I really don't know how to fix this problem. He could not push the problem back to her as he could imagine all sorts of worse things that could happen if he refused to help.

A few days ago he contacted a lawyer to seek advice about what had happened to his family. The lawyer exclaimed, "How awful! It's really serious! Gravely serious!" perhaps in the hope of demanding more pay for handling this hard case.

But who is going to pay the lawyer?

"I certainly cannot afford it, son. If they are going to throw him in jail, so be it!" His mother then complained that it was so unfair that Maitree would have to go to jail for trying to protect his own mother. After counting the number of years he had to spend in

jail, she looked shocked and announced, “If I knew things would turn out this way, I would just tell Maitree to chop off that bastard’s head!” In his mother’s eyes, if Maitree had killed Thai, the time he would have to serve the sentence in jail would hardly be more than what he got now. Therefore, it would be more worthwhile to kill that hateful man. His mother also believed that they did not have to hire a lawyer if they simply let Maitree go to jail. He had to explain to her that it was not quite like that because they would still need a lawyer anyway. “I don’t have any money.” That was all his mother could say. His younger brother Chidchai couldn’t offer any help either as he was still deeply in debt. His mother often gave Maitree money but he spent so much on his drinks that he owed several liquor stores a huge amount of money. All the expenses of the family seemed to be his sole responsibility. Fuck them all! He shook his head and felt so irritated.

If someone died, it could have served as a priceless lesson or as a sin that keeps haunting someone or some people. However, in reality there was no death and the person who was nearly killed would eventually recover. He felt bitter pondering over all this. Why? There should be death. Take a look at fiction, where death is so significant. In fiction, death can occur at the beginning of the narrative, or it can function as a rising action, or as a resolution. Death can be placed anywhere in a narrative to achieve a desirable effect. Death is crucial in fiction; it can be seen as a necessity, a form of justice, or a moral of a story.

But in real life death is seen differently; everyone tries to reject it, to leave no room for it in their relationships. Death cannot exist, cannot become real, and it is not the same as justice. In fact, in real life, death is nothing; we hope that awareness, conscience, moral lesson, and change can take place without death. No wonder real life is suffering as it tries not to die, refuses to die and heals itself. Life rejects death, which is so simple and just, and struggles to find something else it can hold on to in order to give meaning to its existence.

If Thai were to be killed that night, or if his mother were to be killed, things would have been over by now. Life would not have been prolonged or forced to search for other

things to attach itself to, things like law, justice, trial, or social judgement. There is no denying that death treats humans with indifference.

In fiction, death occupies a sacred position, having its own throne in front of which life stands and waits for justice and morality to be delivered by death's hands. Once death strikes us with its fatal hammer, we simply accept it without questioning, appealing or trying to revoke it. Once death strikes us (and orders us to die), we accept it. As simple as that!

As a storyteller (though merely a ghost writer), it is not surprising that he strongly desires death because real life does not offer it to him. In fiction, deaths of characters are common and can easily happen. Characters die in order to maintain their own honor or dignity, or to reinvigorate their readers.

There are probably some types of people who hope to gain something from their own unfortunate circumstances, but he cannot tell whether Sangwan and her family belong to that type or not. Apparently, his family is not like that and neither is he. Nonetheless, because his mother has handed this problem to him to solve, as a writer, he concludes that death is needed to resolve it.

"Son, tell me what that Sangwan bitch said to you," his mother said. He was annoyed by his mother's blunt, hateful and unrefined way of talking about people she disliked. She probably acquired this way of speaking from watching TV soap operas. Why can't she rise above lowly emotions and try to be a bit more civilized? He felt a sudden rage against his mother.

"It was all because of you! All because of you!" he yelled at his mother. "It was all because of your greed and your stupidity! You can't even read or write and those TV soaps you watch all the time have made an idiot out of you. You signed anything people asked you to, and see what happens? They tricked you to give up half of our land, and no way you could get it back because you already signed the land sale deal! If you go to court, there is no way you can win because no one will listen to you even if you break your throat shouting again and again that you only sold this or that bit of land. You have no written evidence, but that family has the sale documents with Chidchai's and your

signature on them. You made a mistake but you wouldn't accept it. Your stubbornness led to disaster and you have brought the disaster into our family, nurturing it with your stupidity, stubbornness, and your unthinking devotion. No doubt those two kids of yours can't think. Their thinking faculties have been paralyzed, and they can't stand on their own feet. They totally depend on you because they know that you will let them stay with you, feed them and do the laundry for them. They also know that you will clean up their mess for them. Without you, they will be totally helpless!"

His mother looked wounded. Her lips shook and her eyes showed pain. Lucky for him that he was not pampered by her, otherwise he would be hopeless like his two brothers. He left home when he was not yet 20, managed to get a degree, and has been able to support himself financially after he finished his studies.

He was so upset and nothing could stop him from venting his anger. He would only stop if the earth sucks him down and buries him. Wasn't that the thing he secretly longed for? He had been hurling abuses at his own mother and the only person who could compete with him in this regard is the infamous Kong Khao Noi[6], who killed his own mum!

"Drag me down! No need to wait!" (He told the earth.) He then strode towards his brother's room and started to yell abuses at him.

"I wonder why you are still alive! Do you still have any brain left? Where is your conscience? You are just an animal! You brute! You have caused trouble to your mother and brothers all your life. Why are you still breathing? Why don't you just drop dead? Death will be good for you, and it will make that family happy. Your death will unburden

[6] According to a well-known folk legend, Kong Khao Noi is a young farmer who hits his mother on the head in a hunger-induced rage after noticing that a lunchbox his mother prepared for him seems to contain only a tiny amount of rice. He later finds that the lunchbox actually contains so much tightly packed sticky rice that it is impossible for him to finish all in one meal. To his shock and great sadness, he soon discovers that his mother is no longer alive. The blow on the head has inflicted a fatal injury on her. To show his repentance, he builds a stupa in honor of her.

mum and free me from all the pain you have caused me." He shook his head and let his brother know that he was so disappointed in him. Maitree was sitting in the darkness of his room and he looked so pathetic. "And today you didn't go to work, right? I bet your excuse is that you are too distressed to work, and you will say the same thing when you sit down to drink tonight! You bring disaster to our family! You destructive son of a bitch!"

He then catches a bus to Bangkok. The burning hell inside him slowly diminished. His daily life in Bangkok isn't that hectic. His main struggle is with silence and his own thoughts, and on a day he feels bored, he often sits on the passenger seat of a motorbike taxi that takes him through the winding and unfamiliar alleys of the capital city. Then after a while, he usually gets off the motorbike taxi and takes a stroll before catching another motorbike taxi to get home. Some nights he sits at a bar in a Japanese restaurant whose patrons are the Japanese working for Japanese companies in Thailand. Those Japanese come with their colleagues or bosses, and at first they eat and drink quietly but then they get more jovial after a while. He likes that kind of restaurant. Listening to foreigners laughing and chatting away in a foreign tongue gives him a warm feeling and fascinates him at the same time. The night after that trip to his hometown, he visits a Japanese restaurant and drinks several cups of Sake while chain smoking and exhaling so much smoke until it looks like thin mist spreading all over the restaurant. Then he walks into a restroom and cries soundlessly as he does not want to disturb others with his sobs. After that he asks for the bill and catches a motorbike taxi home. Once there he resumes his crying. He feels like his heart and whole being are stricken with pain and sorrow because he has said horrible things to his mother and youngest brother. He will never forgive himself for doing that. Once uttered, those horrid words do not simply affect those they are directed at and they are not handed over from him to them. Instead, those horrible words are still within him and they squeeze his whole being so forcefully until it becomes out of shape and starts to fall apart, just like when one washes clothes by hands and squeezes them so forcefully until all the seams are damaged and broken. He feels like

he is no different from a shirt that was once complete with its neck, sleeves, pockets and all, but is now reduced to a badly damaged shirt that is about to fall into pieces.

He thinks about the terrible things he has said to Maitree and his mother, and horrific images of destruction appear in his mind and he feels like his whole being is washed and soaked in them.

15 December 2008

He got a call from his mother after three days had passed by: “You must be pleased now!” she said, sobbing “Chidchai is dead!”

Chidchai’s death is another type of ridiculous matter that has no connection whatsoever with the disaster befalling his family due to Maitree’s action.

Chidchai had his own problems and what brought about his death was the accumulation of all the things he himself did. His death was something that stood on its own and had nothing to do with his family. When his mother said that he must have been pleased knowing that Chidchai was dead, she was blaming him, but that kind of blaming is actually misplaced. He didn’t want Chidchai to die, although Chidchai’s death that happened at that particular point in time perfectly highlights the destruction suffered by his family. His mother then took the opportunity of using Chidchai’s death to blame him.

However, in that kind of state when he is already soaked in disaster, he accepts the blame his mother placed on him without arguing back. If his mother wants to believe that his cruel words are as powerful as a court ruling, then it’s her choice. Actually, there are many other cruel words he can utter.

Chidchai’s death was totally caused by his outlook in life —that of a rising middle-class who aspires for a luxurious lifestyle and blindly follows novel dreams encouraged by society. Though that type of dream is commonplace, it made him feel that he was different from those on the lower rungs of society, from the older generations, and from the rural life that surrounded him. Those dreams made him imagine the image of the middle class as cool and fantastic, totally removed from the primitive rural. Many people of Chidchai’s generation also believe in this desirable image of the middle-class, as it has been similarly fed to them from factories that come in the form of government, TV commercials, and various issues of the national blueprints for economic and social development. Because of this, these insignificant rising middle-classes have embraced a new self-image and were convinced that they constitute a more novel generation and a

more novel future, even though they still live in a primitive rural land. They slowly change themselves before embarking on changing the earth they stand on. However, before they can reach the success of their dream, so many of them are dropping dead every day, and Chidchai was merely one of the dead. Moreover, Chidchai's death is a type that had already been determined in advance. It is the type of death that has always existed alongside those dreams. (You could say that even though that sort of death has not been advertised like the dreams Chidchai and others bought into, it is actually their ultimate ending.) In other words, those dreams implicitly imply this kind of ending.

After the love nest of Chidchai and his wife was seized by the bank, the wife changed her first and last names and moved to live in Bangkok to start a new life. Chidchai returned to his birthplace alone and penniless, but their mother welcomed him with open arms and unchanging love. She nurtured him and gradually healed and reconstructed the shattered parts of his soul until it became whole again. She also persuaded him to become a monk for a brief period of time in the hope that doing so would help rid him of bad luck. Deep down, she also wanted to rely on his monkhood as a means to help her gain enough merit to be reborn in a better world after her time in this world ended. Chidchai went along with her, even though being a monk proved unhelpful to his restless state of mind.

Immediately after leaving monkhood, the first thing he did was to head to Bangkok to find out where his wife lived. Once he found her, he gave her all the money he acquired while he was a monk through donations from the faithful. He spent a week trying to beg her to come back to live with him and to start their lives together again. Even though he tried to rekindle the sweet times they once shared and used all the persuasive words he could come up with, things didn't work out for them. She wanted him to live with her in Bangkok but he couldn't do that as he couldn't imagine how his mother could manage if he lived so far away from her. Chidchai was convinced that his mother needed him and wanted him to live near her. He couldn't make himself believe that it was actually himself who needed his mother and couldn't stand to live away from her.

Chidchai pined for his ex-wife and after he got home he was bedridden for a few days due to lovesickness. All the time his mother tried hard to make him feel better, and eventually Chidchai was able to pull himself together. He started to look for a new job, and later on got a job at a power plant. He worked extremely hard so as to resurrect his and his ex-wife's financial situation from a bankrupt state. Being a very determined type of person, he managed to earn enough money to pay back all their creditors, even those loan sharks who had sent the police to arrest him. His mother couldn't understand why he had to help his ex-wife pay her debts and she made her disapproval clear to him. She said to him: "What has that woman done to you to make you so infatuated with her? Did she give you a love potion to drink?" In response, Chidchai simply told his mother that once he was done with fixing this financial mess, he would certainly repay her for all she had been doing for him. Upon hearing that, his mother's face lit up and she cherished his promise in the depth of her heart.

But Chidchai never did what he promised her. He created private living quarters by using one of his mother's rental rooms, and there he had a very comfortable bed, a cable TV with a flat screen, and a computer. He drank imported liquor and experimented with drinking wine. (His mother and Maitree, on the other hand, drank moonshine, and it was only once in a blue moon that Chidchai would share his expensive imported liquor and wine with them.) He also bought a brand new car on installments and soon there was a new woman in his life.

She was well-to-do and had her own business retailing and wholesaling clothes. Chidchai often brought her home with him. Although his mother was not exactly pleased with their relationship, she felt that Chidchai's new girlfriend was better than his ex-wife as the former didn't seem to want to interfere with or control the way Chidchai handled his money. She appeared as a person who wouldn't cause Chidchai trouble, and because of this he didn't seem to care for her that much. He was a type that was fond of trouble and deep down he always looked for it. Chidchai's relationship with his new woman lasted less than a year, and the breakup was caused by something so trivial—Chidchai's

insistence on keeping old wedding photos of himself and his ex-wife instead of discarding them.

On one level, Chidchai seemed independent enough, as he spent most of his time going out and when he got home he shut himself in his room, taking a rest or sleeping. His mother only saw him when he wanted something to eat after waking up. In sum, Chidchai's life was mostly spent outside home and his mother had no idea what he was up to each day. With Maitree, however, things were totally different because his mother got to know everything in the life of her youngest son. Unknown to his mother, Chidchai led a life of extravagance that he couldn't afford, and when she quizzed him about what he had been doing, he ignored her. If she persisted, he would say he could look after himself. He purchased all sorts of things that made his life comfortable and convenient, including a new car, and many of these things were bought on instalments. Occasionally, when his mother wanted to buy food and vegetables from a fresh food market and asked him to drive her there, she had to pay for the petrol. Everything Chidchai owned was merely superficial and in order to maintain an affluent image of himself, he had to work extremely hard to earn enough money to keep those superficial items with him. It was therefore not the right time for repaying his mother as he had once promised her.

His mother earned very little from her rental rooms and two of the rooms were occupied by her two sons who didn't pay her any rent and didn't even think about helping her shoulder the financial costs within the household. More electrical appliances contributed to higher electricity and water bills that had to be paid by his mother. She also had to find enough money to pay for the meals she cooked for them every day. Where did the she get the money from? Part of the money came from the monthly allowance he sent to his mother. Apparently, his whole family relied on him for financial support, and it is through a shameful job that he earned his income, a job as a ghost writer, the one who hides in the shadow and cannot assert his true identity. It is a job that he cannot be proud of because he has to write in order to please others and follow their instructions. This kind of writing is a way to earn a living but in doing it, your self-

esteem and courage are undermined and when you look at your reflection in the mirror, you feel disgusted at yourself.

However, as far as his job is concerned, he knows that he cannot blame his mother and brothers. No one forces him to do this job and he does it willingly, not because he wants to help his family, but because he has issues with revealing his true identity. That is why he has to keep this diary secretively. What a pathetic person he is, and so full of self-pity too!

Chidchai was hooked on nightlife and he frequented bars and pubs in Kaeng Khoi, Tan Diew, and Mueng Saraburi. He went to those places alone and always looked for a young girl to sit and drink with him. One day, he saw a girl whose personality fitted the type he was often drawn to—someone with issues or likely to cause him trouble, and Chidchai fell head over heels in love with this girl.

The girl was only about 16 or 17 years old, almost 10 years younger than Chidchai. She was still a student and was at an age when having fun was the topmost priority in her life. She was very fond of nightlife and had clearly gone off the rails. They met each other at a bar in Tan Diew district and became romantically involved. She was the star of that bar and winning her heart was seen as a victory for a clubber like Chidchai.

He often brought her home with him, and his mother said:

“When they are home, they spend all their time in his room and only come out when they want me to cook something for them to eat. They really take me for granted and this kind of behavior gives me a heartache. That girl is still in school uniform. She is so young. Chidchai always drives her to her school and picks her up, and I never heard him complain about the cost of petrol. When he is back from work, he takes off his dirty clothes and leaves them for me to wash, but I have seen him washing that girl’s panties for her.”

What she told him seemed trivial but the way she described them implied that she felt what Chidchai did for that girl was actually what he should have been doing for her.

She also made an observation about his financial support of the girl: “I’m sure he pays for her studies. I saw him give her money before she was about to go to school.’

His family’s fate was like a snake that kept chasing its tail. His mother doted on Chidchai, but he was the type who always let his infatuation of and passion for a woman get the better of him. In this way, he was a replica of his father whose infatuation with his mistresses dominated and ruined his life. When his father was still alive, his mother always waited for his love and attention, but after his death, she chased after Chidchai’s love and attention instead.

After the incident in which Maitree attacked Thai, Sumon (who is Thai’s son) never let his family members live their lives in peace. He tried every possible way to intimidate them. Chidchai was a coward and he hated brute force, something he saw as belonging to rustic folk and beneath him. When he felt that Sumon’s toxic verbal treats had spread its venom onto his girl, he moved her to a new rental place and paid the rent for her.

But the girl wasn’t Chidchai’s doll. She began to feel that a relationship with one man is boring, and started to frequent those pubs and bars where she hung around a lot in the past. She often spent a whole night there. After Chidchai finished his night shift, he went out to look for her in those places and found her surrounded by teenage boys. This upset him and he made his displeasure clear to her. He also let others know that she was his, and this annoyed the girl, who by then was already sick of him and wanted him out of her life. In order to stop him from pursuing her and eventually rid herself of him, she became very friendly with one particular group of teenagers. When one party wants to break up but the other party still believes that he is the sole owner of her heart and body, a commonplace but terrible incident often takes place.

Chidchai was pathetic and pitiful. He didn’t know that what he actually worshipped was trouble in life. He thought he was following the dream visions of the middle-class, of the refined city dwellers, and he expected that he would be treated with respect. He hated the vulgarity and crudity of the rustic folk, and he assumed that because he himself had transformed his identity, attitude, heart, and soul, others would similarly

have changed. He was wrong because some people do not change. Furthermore, he got himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is possible to see Chidchai's death as something triggered by his own karma, but his mother sees it as the direct outcome of his own cruel words—his curse, and she believes he revels in it.

Chidchai was killed on the spot even though he didn't want to die. Those who are scared of death often meet an instant death like this. He should have been merely injured and given a chance to get treatment, recuperate, and continue his life. This way he would have gained some life lessons that he could ponder over until he reached old age. However, life no longer loves Chidchai. People like him are often destined to meet an instant death, the death that took place immediately after a bullet from a home-made gun of those vocational students went through his chest and ran straight into his heart. It was a good shot. (Death often happens easily to those who still enjoy being alive. On the other hand, those who really want to die might still survive even after being shot by several bullets.)

One of the members of that teenage gang exclaimed in admiration after his friend had pulled the trigger: 'Wow! You are a good shot! One bullet and that guy is dead!'

Later on, some of the members of that gang were rounded up by the police, but the one who killed Chidchai managed to escape. None of them were charged or found guilty though. The one who murdered Chidchai was in hiding for ten years and in all those years, he boasted about how he once killed a man, as if what he did had some kind of dignity or meritorious power. By the time he becomes a middle-aged man, he won't remember that he was once a killer. Being married with children and having aging parents to look after, he will no longer remember the craziness and violence of his youth, and the death of a person he had killed will fade away and eventually disappear from his life.

5 May 2009

Bloodline—this concept keeps puzzling him and he has pondered over it ever since his younger years. To his consternation, the relationships he has with his blood relatives become more distant as he grows older. Is the attachment towards one's biological parents and siblings something spontaneous? It is true that humans inherit genetic traits from their parents, and those traits, which affect both our physical appearance and mental state, form the basic gist of each individual's development that correlates with the experiences one encounters in life.

Does the feeling of attachment occur immediately after we were born? When someone looks after us for a while, we start to feel attached towards that person, and when someone is devoted to us, sacrifices everything, even his/her life, for us, we feel a profound love towards that person even though he/she is not our parent. If attachment and affection are formed much later after birth, then what is the true meaning of bloodline?

To share the same bloodline with someone is certainly not an obvious thing, and one won't know this unless being told by others or having witnessed the evidence with one's own eyes. Generally, those who brought us up—people we refer to as mum and dad, told us who share our bloodline and ascribe important meanings to this knowledge. Parents indicated to us who we should refer to as 'brothers' or 'sisters'. It is true that he saw his mother being pregnant, carrying in her womb someone who would become his brother, but how can he tell if that brother is his 'real' brother?

But how can one define 'real'? 'Real' because we were born from the same mother and the same source of sperms, which means sharing the same bloodline? Or 'real' because we are members of the same family? He might have been adopted, or his brother could be conceived from a sperm of a man who is not his father, but if they have brotherly affection for each other, is sharing the same bloodline important? What about the biological parents? Are they important in this case? To him, the answer to both questions is 'no' because the affection we have for our parents happens afterwards; we

love, respect, and do many things for our parents because they brought us up and made it possible for us to survive, not because we originated from their sperm and egg. This is most evident in the case when a child is adopted: the child loves people who have nurtured him and he refers to them as his parents. To him, they are his real parents, and this is not less real, or could even be more real than the relationship between biological parents and their children.

So how can we define the meaning of parents? The same question applies to the meaning of siblings.

We humans grow up with narratives and limited perceptions, but when narratives are combined with fragmented perceptions and become the basis of words such as mother, father, family, bloodline, to name just a few, they eventually lead us to the meanings or definitions of those words that enable us to comprehend where we stand. But comprehension alone is not enough. We need to be aware of the significance of the grand meanings of some words-- those words whose meanings we dare not explore, change, or question, as by simply questioning them, we could be branded as ungrateful.

We learn about big words and the values embedded in them through narratives and our limited perceptions. We know what meanings those values are associated with, but such meanings were transferred to us from outside. We did not really construct meanings by ourselves or synthetized them so that words emerge out of them. We could say that words like parents, family, siblings, bloodline, etc. are not instilled from the sweet honey of our souls, but are poured into us from without, from the jug of sweet words (which could be sweet honey) whose meanings have been passed on to us by our own parents, who said before feeding us those words: “This is honey, sweetheart. It is so sweet.” We therefore started to associate honey with sweetness; honey equals sweetness, so it cannot have other tastes. We then accept this imposition from without as real experience or norm, and turn to force or adjust what we have personally experienced in real life to fit in with the meanings of those words that had been imposed on us. This is how we humans polish or adapt our personal experiences, or worse, distort them so that they would correspond with the norms. If we try hard but still fail to normalize our personal

experiences, we may have to delete or erase some of them. We have been brought up to embrace norms, not to construct our own meanings of things.

What was he doing? Acting like a magician who shows off tricks that he cannot really master? Trying to drag an ocean and fit it in a small canal? His middle brother has just met a tragic death, but he feels no sadness. All he feels is that it serves him right and it is best that he carked it! He feels neither love nor compassion for that lost life that was once tagged as 'his brother'. Maybe that was why he tried to come up with the elaborate structure of logic and reasoning so as to use it to justify his lack of emotions upon being told about his brother's death.

Let us be reminded that he is still trying to fix the chronic life problem his mother has handed to him. He realizes that he has not gone astray but is still trying to figure out its solution. In fact, he has started to visualize a large terrain of all the possibilities that could lead to a way out of the problem. Well, his mother has asked him to solve the problem so she should accept his strategy for dealing with it. Chidchai's death is just a prologue but a real disaster is going to happen pretty soon. Stay tuned for it and don't even blink! If his mother really wants to know how the problem can be sorted out, he doesn't mind telling her right now—that someone who repeatedly complains that he wants to die won't die anytime soon. On the other hand, the one who wants to live is leaving this world, abandoning the one who eagerly wants to embrace death to continue living like a helpless vegetable, unable to think or do anything except watch the destruction, peril, and annihilation of the one who does not want death.

This is what he has roughly come up with as a solution for the problem his mother had assigned him to solve.

Mum, do you really want to know this? He has had some doubts about Maitree for quite a while, and today he is going to find the answer for them. Chidchai's death reveals to him that sharing the same bloodline with someone does not automatically make him have affection and compassion for that person. And with Maitree—that brainless troublemaker—he believes he can easily cut him off.

There is something he has just found out after taking another trip home to settle things related to Maitree's criminal case. As he and his mother were seeking advice from the lawyer he had paid to help out with Maitree's case, Somjai (Maitree's wife, who was also there on the night Maitree assaulted Thai) walked past where they were sitting, on the way to her room. He noticed that she had put on weight and was walking rather slowly so he asked his mother what was wrong with her. His mother beamed and replied that Somjai is pregnant and when he asked who the father is, she said who else could it be. His guess was that his mother was imagining herself with a new grandchild in her arms, and that was why she looked so pleased.

But he was not at all pleased, especially when thinking about the unfolding of events leading up to that disastrous night. He remembered that Maitree had been hassling his mother to organize the wedding with Somjai and also asked her to help pay the dowry for him. His mother later asked his opinion about this matter and he told her not to help Maitree.

Even though Maitree and Somjai are not married, the two had been living together in one of his mother's rental rooms as husband and wife (and they obviously regarded their relationship that way). He recalled yelling at his brother and telling him to use condoms, and at this point he felt as if the condoms he had told his brother to use were hitting against his face until it became numb with pain. It seemed clear that Maitree and his wife didn't bother about condoms as they see their relationship as that between husband and wife, so in their eyes there was no need to use condoms. However, it was also possible that the refusal to use condoms was actually ingenious and similar to drawing lots, or gambling, in that if they win, their lives could be changed the way they want. And Maitree did win by successfully creating a new life, a fetus asleep in Somjai's womb. This fetus would become their baby and a grandchild who can make his mother give in to Maitree's request that a wedding between himself and Somjai take place. Thus, this grandchild would impose obligation on his mother, acting as a bridge that formally links Maitree and Somjai's relationship. In short, the birth of Maitree's baby would

oblige his mother to help Maitree pay the dowry and arrange a wedding for him. Having a baby therefore would help Maitree to get married just like what he had hoped for.

This is how one uses the consequence or what happens afterwards to justify and fix the instigation.

Such was the ingenuity that his wild imagination sought to decipher, but he believed that his brother and Somjai did not plan this ingenuity. It just happened by chance to people who are used to living their lives as if they are solving a series of questions, each of which offers only two alternatives to choose from. Still there might be a moment in their lives when coincidences reward them with something that seems both worthwhile and ingenious.

He asked his mother how far gone is Somjai and she said around five months, according to what Somjai told her after she went to see a doctor to have her pregnancy checked. He tried to figure out when the baby was conceived and once he could guess the date, he again felt like his face was slapped by a condom and even more painfully than last time.

During the past five months, his family had been bombarded with problems, starting from that early December night when that stupid Maitree committed the disastrous crime. If that night is taken as the starting point of the crises his family had to go through for five months so far….Bravo! he finally found the last missing jigsaw piece that completes the whole picture. This last jigsaw piece—the ingenious coincidence, something he was not aware of until that very moment—originated amidst crises.

That night after Maitree attacked Thai with the billhook, his mother and Somjai tried to drag Maitree home and pushed him into his room. After that, his mother tried to calm herself down before ringing him. He suggested that they should take Maitree to a police station and they did as advised. Seeing that Maitree had no intention to flee, the police recorded the crime and let Maitree return home with his family. That night at home, everyone was shaken, tense, and confused. His mother ordered Maitree and his wife to retreat to their room while herself and Chidchai remained downstairs to keep an eye on things. Sumon, Thai's son, was in a rage. He walked back and forth in front of his

mother's house and yelled out abuse and threats, trying to do whatever he could to vent his fury.

Maitree was pacing back and forth in his small room, unable to force himself to lie down and sleep in the hellish atmosphere of that sweltering moonlit night. Somjai was sitting on the floor with both of her knees raised to touch her chin, her back against the wall, keeping an eye on Maitree, who started to think which is better: to flee or to take his own life? Actually, the first option was not available anymore as his brother had convinced him to turn himself in, and deep down he knew that he was too coward to kill himself. His mouth felt so dry and his throat was phlegmy. He had gulped down a lot of water but it did not help relieve his thirst at all. He desperately wanted booze and he believed it was the only thing that could help him to feel less tense and anxious, but he remembered that his eldest brother had forbidden him to drink, saying to him that drinking would only drag him down into a disastrous abyss. He also remembered he had promised his brother that he would quit drinking. But half a bottle of moonshine was still in his room, and he felt it could give him another option; he would not have to choose between death and running away, as the moonshine would make him able to deal with what he recently did—turning himself in, which was not his preferred option at all; he was forced to do it by his family members. At this moment he was being tormented by the fear of jail, being in chains and forced to share a cell with other prisoners. It was not at all the option he came up with, but he would have to accept it. In order to come to terms with the fearful future, he needed to drink because drinking would make him feel more relaxed mentally and physically, enough for him to accept that he would have to go to jail. And drinking would make him tired enough to drift into sleep. He picked up that bottle of moonshine, but Somjai tried to stop him. Have some pity for me, Maitree said, I'm the only one who have to bear this hell. I suffer all alone. Somjai felt sorry for Maitree so she let him drink and moved closer to him to indicate that his suffering was also hers and that she was worried about her lover's future. She then picked a glass and poured some moonshine into it so that she could drink with Maitree. In this way, the two shared their pain and both blamed fate for playing tricks on them.

“Will you leave me if I go to jail?” asked Maitree.

“I will never leave you. I will wait for you,” Somjai said.

“I’m so scared…I’m sure you will leave me,” Maitree said.

Somjai wiped tears off Maitree’s face with her hand, moved closer to him and hugged him. Then they made love.

Hence, a new life was conceived on a sweltering moonlit night while Sumon was yelling in rage outside.

6 May 2009

A life was conceived amidst tension and it was nurtured by crises and despair like a fetus being nurtured by the umbilical cord while it was in a womb. Nine months later that life would come out into the world.

In his view, under such a circumstance, when the whole family is going downhill, it is quite incredible to bring a new life into this world. How could the baby become the gift for the parents? And when that baby grows up, will she feel that her birth is a gift for her as her parents brought her into this world but were incapable of raising her? She was born in a basket that had been whipped to shreds by fate. It seems to him that no one pauses to ponder whether the birth of that child would add more hardships or would offer a slim chance of redemption.

Redemption from what? Okay, right now Maitree's lawyer is trying to fabricate a new date of conception for that life in Somjai's womb so that it would help during the process of witness interrogation. The lawyer would use a spell to make Somjai three months pregnant on that night when the crime took place, hoping that this, together with other details he plans to fabricate, would reduce the severity of Maitree's sentence. Or is it redemption from the couple's illegitimate relationship? The birth of the baby would rush his mother to pay for the dowry and organize the wedding for Maitree. To him, however, this baby does not offer any redemption and its birth would not benefit anyone. Still the baby seems to be significant as it could offer a solution to the hard problem his mother asked him to fix. It is because this baby's blood is mixed with the blood of a mysterious stranger.

His thought goes back to his father's sudden death years ago and he now feels that it is the most opportune death. If his father were still alive, what would he see and would he see this thing the way he now sees it? And what would he do? He has no answers for these questions. Also, while he has witnessed this thing that his father missed a chance to see because of his early death, there is nothing he can do about it. That is because he is no

longer part of this family and is merely an observer and voyeur. He is able to piece things together but is unable to interfere with his family's affairs as his mother is now the one who is in charge of the family's destiny.

What does he see? He sees something odd and secretive and an attempt to conceal it, even though this attempt may not be that obvious. Still with the passage of time, this thing reveals itself more and more in a way that is hard to ignore.

His father died and did not have a chance to watch Maitree growing up. If he saw the grown up Maitree, he would certainly be able to tell.

When Maitree was a kid, he looked similar to his mother, and his father complained that he found no physical resemblance between himself and Maitree. Later he assumed that Maitree's fearlessness and sharp tongue had been inherited from him. He was totally mistaken as those traits are the first sign of Maitree's desire to challenge and destroy him, his other sons and his whole family. Maitree wants to get rid of his father's bloodline and make sure that only his and his mother's remains. He is actually instilling a new bloodline in order to wash out the old bloodline, and it is unclear who is behind all this. The mastermind seemed to disguise himself and his intention through Maitree's barbaric act that may appear uncomplicated at first sight, but is in fact not as simple as that.

It is quite obvious to him that as they become older, Maitree's personality is quite different from that of his and Chidchai. Chidchai and himself are similar in their keen pursuit of higher education and their desire to have a better or more affluent life. They also try to solve problems through careful consideration and the use of reasoning without resorting to physical violence. Maitree, on the other hand, has no interest in studies and lacks ambition. He seems happy to live a lazy life and is satisfied with any little reward that comes his way. He is short-sighted and often relies on physical violence to sort things out.

He himself likes to drink but drinking does not make him aggressive, violent, or want to get in a fight. He knows when he should stop drinking and he does not need to drink every day. When he is drunk, he never wants to be loud, beat up someone, or have a

heated argument with anyone. (He cannot understand people who, when drunk, want to pick a fight and lash out at others. Could it be that they feel they are crushed or trampled by some forces so they want to do the same with others?) He could not imagine himself getting drunk, grabbing a knife while demanding that his mother give him money to buy more booze, and when she refused to do so, throwing a tantrum and wrecking things with the knife. Only a thug could do something like this, and a thug his brother certainly is.

Still, of all her sons, his mother seems to love and want to protect Maitree the most. Why so?

That must be because he is the one who has inherited her bloodline. He is not his father's son!

Maitree grew up to be someone who is very different from his two brothers. The physical difference is especially evident: The brothers (Chidchai and himself) are tall and thin whereas Maitree is quite stubby. Also, while the brothers (Chidchai and himself) have a yellowish brown complexion, Maitree's is pinkish brown. What is more is that Maitree's facial features bear no resemblance to his brothers (his and Chidchai's) until one cannot help wondering why he does not seem to have any traces of their father's genetic traits. The shape of his skull, cheekbones, and nose seem to come from a different mould. Another puzzling thing is about his hair, which in his early 20s, has started to thin out, a clear sign that he will be bald in later life. It is a mystery where Maitree got this genetic trait from as their father had thick, curly hair, and their mother's hair is also quite thick. Unlike Maitree, the brothers have thick hair like their parents.

Thus, Maitree's physical appearance and temperament have no resemblance to his brothers and their father. What a pity that their father died when Maitree was a kid so he could not witness Maitree's differences. While he sees Maitree's differences with his own eyes, there is nothing he can do.

He is convinced that for years, a stranger's genetic traits have infiltrated his family. Maitree has nothing similar to him and this makes it easier for him to cut him off.

But all of this is his hypothesis and he has yet to find other evidence to support it. So far, the hypothesis is mainly based on his own suspicion that there is something wrong

and out of place in his family and the thing that strongly backs up his suspicion is Maitree's total difference from himself. He cannot accept such an alien into his family (family here is his imagined family). He probes further for more evidence to confirm this suspicion of his, but encounters some contradictions and things that undermine his suspicion. But he does not give up. On the contrary, he becomes bolder in his thinking and conviction that Maitree is not his father's son and he could be fathered by his mother's secret lover, who vanished after impregnating her.

There are certainly things that make this assumption appear unreasonable and not quite right—his mother does not seem to belong to the type of women who are bold enough to do such a thing. She was completely under his father's control when he was still alive and she could not possibly do anything that he was not aware of. Even to think freely was not possible for her. Still his mother has the tendency to do things or behave differently from what she did while living with his father. Actually, she has dramatically changed after his father passed. It is as if she has transformed into a different person, and she has made it clear that his death freed her from the oppression she endured during their marriage. She is no longer the prim, polite and submissive woman she used to be, but has become a sharp-tongued, loud-mouthed, upcountry woman. She sometimes uses the dialect of her birthplace. In short, she has rejected everything his father forced her to do.

Nevertheless, this freedom from her husband's oppression does not really make things better for her. It is like she has been freed from one type of domination only to be under the control of another one. Her life has become totally disorganized and disorderly, no different from an abandoned piece of land where weeds can grow freely, and puddles or mounds are never filled up or leveled. When birds fly past this piece of land and drop seeds, those seeds are allowed to freely grow into big trees, which stay there without being disturbed. Similarly, his mother allows fate to create a mess out of her life by letting whatever happens determine the course of her life. If her life appears more complicated, it is not a result of her free will or intention, but more a consequence of allowing fate to do whatever it wants again and again.

He feels that there is still time to ponder over his mother's essence to find things that could help make his suspicion plausible and not too far-fetched, so he shifts his attention to Maitree.

He is certain that Maitree and himself have different fathers. Let's consider the whole picture of his family once more: there used to be three sons, but the middle one has met a tragic death so right now there are only two sons who are still alive. It seems very unlikely that the eldest son would get married anytime soon, but the youngest son is going to be a father. The blood flowing in this new life is a mixture of Maitree's blood, which has a stranger's blood in it, and Somjai's blood. The new life these two have created, a baby girl, doesn't have any blood of the late owner of the land the couple lives on. Thus, a new family is going to displace the old one and take over the land.

Honestly speaking, he has cut ties with his family since he was a teenager. He hardly feels any emotional bond with his family and their contact is limited (to just matters concerning losses and disasters happening to the family—and could we refer to this painful sort of contact as family ties?) And now he is convinced that Maitree has a stranger's blood in him. They share the same mother, but who is Maitree's father?

9 May 2009

Is it that important to him who Maitree's real father is? He has spent a lot of time pondering this. Is knowing the identity of the man in the shadow significant to his attempt to solve the problem? Or maybe the most significant thing is the realization that Maitree does not have his father's blood in him. This realization should be enough to make him proceed to the next stage in solving the problem the way he wants. He has devoted a lot of time in piecing things together in the most logical way and in contemplating relevant details in order to make his hypothesis sound. Initially, he felt that it would be worth it to spend more time trying to bring the identity of the man who is Maitree's real father out in the open but in the end he changes his mind, as he feels that it is not necessary.

He feels he is getting too obsessed with this matter. Now he is not sure whether the disaster that happened to his family has depleted his energy, or whether he actually draws life force from that disaster. At first glance, it could a bit of both, but as he gives it more thought, he realizes that he is the real source of disastrous forces; bad things happen because of the evil words he uttered; those words serve as a means through which his rebellious and defiant thoughts are articulated. He remembered that he yelled accusations at his mother, blaming her for being the cause of all the awful things that happened to their family. In doing so, he not only wanted his mother to feel bad, but also hoped that his hurtful words would trigger supernatural forces, or the law of karma, or any powerful forces, to shift their attention to him and trample him. He wants to hear their fearful voice cursing him and sentencing him to a horrible death, to make him suffer more than the suffering he caused his mother.

He dares those powerful forces to make Mother Earth drag him down to his death!

But the earth does not split underneath him and pull him down. …. Supernatural forces do not manifest themselves that way.

In today's world, supernatural forces do not exercise their power in a grand and outrageous manner, but in a restrained yet merciless way.

Those supernatural forces have heard his defiant words and they have been keeping an eye on him. When the opportune time comes, they quietly pierce him with a needle that carries within it their sentence. The next moment he becomes conscious, his whole body feels totally numb and he can no longer move.

"Are you happy now?" asked those supernatural forces.

He moaned. Yes, this is how he wants to solve the problem his mother handed to him. Is he happy now? Yes, he is in a state of complete bliss, as this is the result he wants.

He has become a vegetable as a result of uttering those defiant words. One day, his limbs went limp, causing him to fall over and become unconscious for a long while. Once he regained consciousness, he tried in vain to move his limbs and was overcome by panic. He then tried to calm himself down and lie still, hoping that the paralysis would leave him. He started to feel hopeful when he could move the right side of his body. But the left side of his body remained paralyzed and even after dusk had arrived, it did not get better. He therefore tried to crawl to his study desk, grab a phone and rang for an ambulance.

And this is how things unfold.

The doctor's diagnosis is that half of his body has become paralyzed because a vein in the right side of his brain is clogged and can no longer perform its function in controlling the left side of this body. According to the doctor, he has a chance to recover but it could take a year or two, depending on the kind of treatment he receives. He then spends a week in hospital, depleting almost all of his savings.

Throughout that week, some of his friends and acquaintances have paid him visits and spent 15-30 minutes chatting with him before excusing themselves. It is clear that he cannot stay at the hospital forever as the doctor told him that he needs to be looked after closely and that involves expenses, something he cannot afford.

He does not have money to pay someone to look after him and because of this he has to endure a pathetic and most humiliating state: having to relieve himself in bed.

His mother rang him and as he picked up the phone, he felt somewhat pleased inside as he guessed that she probably expected him to help her with something, but he had nothing to give her now that he has become a vegetable, and he told her so.

Imagine this: a woman who has never ventured out beyond a small provincial town of Kaeng Khoi, but now has to travel to a big city like Bangkok with her youngest son, who, like her, has never been there before. The only thing she knows is the name of the hospital, her destination. So the mother and son undertake a small adventure, and in the end get to their destination despite their upcountry manner and outlook. All the mother knows about is her small world on a small piece of land. She takes her eldest son out of a much bigger world, back to that small piece of land, the land he should have had cherished and valued.

Hatred fills his heart and it keeps increasing each day. The hatred he feels for everything has replaced his limbs and helped him move to the deepest point.

One of his mother's rooms for rent, which is next to Maitree's room, has been turned into his room. He ran away from home and his family, but now he has returned, though unwillingly. He does not want Maitree to look after him, to ask what he wants, or to offer to do anything for him. He also does not want to see Somjai and the baby she is carrying. He hates it when his mother touches him, wipes his skin, and cleans up after he relieves himself. He does not want to listen to her sorrowful words or sobs, and does not want to see her weep. He hates everything and he realizes that he has become a burden to others. Such a reversal of roles, compared to the past when he often complained about having to shoulder responsibilities for others. But this is his fate and what he deserves.

At first, he thought this plight of his, which he believes serves him right, would bring great suffering to his mother, who does not seem to be able to rely on herself and is used to living her life in the hands of fate and of others. She once depended on his father, and later on him (her eldest son) to support this collapsing family. Now he does nothing to help the family and waits for it to collapse in front of his very eyes, but nothing of that sort seems to happen. It is as if this sort of state will remain forever, refusing to collapse. Thus, after three months have passed, the pain and torment of his, which he thought

would devastate his mother, slowly flows back into his own heart, and it becomes increasingly clear that he alone suffers.

He has been transformed from a person who wanted to be alive and who was free to do anything into someone who is deprived of all he used to have. He starts to feel that it might be better to be a sleeping prince who is not aware of anything around him and does not have to shoulder any burdens or responsibilities. His condition, right now, however, is no different from a fish stranded on the land, still alive and is able to see, hear and feel, but totally helpless. This condition of his multiplies his suffering, increasing his torment, and because he believes his physical condition won't get any better, he wants to die.

But remember the conditions previously set? Death can spare the one who wants to die, and because he wants death, his wish will never be answered. All he can do is to lie still in this shabby room in a half-dead, half-alive state, something he truly deserves.

One day his mother walks into his room carrying a bowl of water and a towel with her. Then she starts to clean him up by rubbing his face, neck and ears with the damp towel. She moves on to rub his arms, hands, chest, tummy, legs and feet before making him lie on his side and cleaning his back, both sides of his body, and his backside.

Later, she begins to talk to him, telling him that he has turned into a newly born baby who needs her to give him a bath and put on clothes for him. As she cleans his feet for him again, she recounts to him the story of her life when she was a young girl who had to clean her husband's feet before he went to bed. He does not want to hear stories like this and, before that, he tried to tell her to stop telling him such stories, but because of his stiff neck and drooping mouth, his words are intelligible.

Like before, today he attempts once more to tell her to stop telling him those stories but he can only mutter words that no one understands, and he dribbles a lot trying to do so. Seeing that, his mother says to him, Please don't say anything. When you try to talk, you dribble and then I have to clean up for you again. Just listen to me, okay? Having said so, she resumes telling him her stories, the stories he does not want to listen to at all.

His rage and hatred of life pushed him to try to take control of his voice box once more. He focuses his will power on forming words and forcing them out as clearly as possible while his mother is still wiping the saliva off his neck and chin:

"It was all because of you!" he cries. "All because of you!"

He is about to continue by saying why it is because of his mother that all those things happened, but his mother won't let him talk anymore. She covers his mouth with the towel she has used to wipe his saliva. What he wants to say therefore slips back into him. She covers his mouth that way until he starts to feel the need to breathe, and suddenly he realizes that it would be excellent if she covers his mouth a bit longer. But she soon lifts the towel and lets the air flow into him, leaving him struggling for breath and unable to say anything anymore.

He remembers that his mother once said a mother could kill her own child and has a right to do so if the child has done something terrible. That was when Maitree got drunk and became violent. She told him she would kill Maitree if he tried to assault her, his very own mother who gave birth to him. To her, to hurt one's own mother is an unforgiveable crime and the monster who has committed it will go to the deepest abyss of hell. She would kill him because she wants to prevent him from committing the most horrible of all crimes. She would rather become a monster herself instead of letting him become one.

That his mother has refused to cover his mouth a bit longer leads to a different result from what he expected in the beginning. He is not exactly sure when things start to go astray from his plan? His initial intention was that this story would end with his mother being the one who has to witness each son's death. However, things do not quite turn out the way he wants, as he himself has become physically paralyzed but is forced to remain alive. He supposes it is reasonable enough that he is cursed to be trapped in this physical state. Yet when he tried to gather all his strength in the hope of uttering something cruel that could have had a devastating effect on his mother, he failed. That was because his mother would not let the story proceed the way it should. Instead, she intervenes by covering his mouth and nose, depriving him of the ending that he yearns

for, the ending he believes would have been utterly heart-breaking, excruciating, cold-blooded, and soul-shattering; the kind of ending that reveals to us that the deeper the human soul is explored, the closer it brings us to the abyss of hell, to the barbaric time of the ancient world dominated by animalistic instincts, the world in which morals and conscience do not exist.

And now he has to shoulder the burden of finding a new ending.

8 June 2010

"…the literary man does not understand that life may go on living, un-ashamed, even after it has been expressed and therewith finished. No matter how much it has been redeemed by becoming literature, it keeps right on sinning-for all action is sin in the mind's eye…"

Thomas Mann is right! A writer's problem is that he wants to capture and express life's realities through writing, and hopes that after they get written down and read, they won't repeat themselves. This kind of hope stems from the belief that the act of writing and reading will make us realize that all the things that have been committed are 'sinful'. However, the truth is, they are only 'sinful' from a spiritual perspective, after applying one's conscience in contemplating them, and this kind of sin is helpless in preventing life's realities from running their course. And humans still have to witness degradation and losses happening in real life, for heaven knows how long.

And the following is what really happened to his family.

Three months after that crime in the early December of 2008, Maitree was still able to lead a normal life: he went to work every day and it seemed he had even become more mature after that night when the horrible event took place. Then one day he received the news from the prosecutor that a lawsuit had been filed against him. After that, Maitree, accompanied by his mother, his wife, and himself, showed up at a provincial court. Maitree's lawyer insisted that he would fight the case and argued that Maitree committed the crime out of rage because the plaintiff assaulted Maitree's mother first. He would try to change the prosecutor's attempted murder charge against Maitree into a physical assault charge as the latter is much less severe.

On that day they went to court to be informed about appointment dates, he was also in the courtroom, which was quite small and crowded with hardly any space to walk or move around. People there could only sit and stand. Worse, in that small courtroom, whose space is roughly 30 square metres, there were people from other cases crowded in

there. This courtroom, which looks like an apartment room in a slum area, was so different from the grand and awe-inspiring one he had seen in foreign movies.

No one had imagined that Maitree would be handcuffed after being informed about appointment dates, and apparently Maitree himself didn't expect this. He was then taken to a jail beneath the courtroom. It was a very hot day and all he and other family members could do was to hang around in front of the jail and wait till noon when they would be allowed to see Maitree again.

While his mother went out to buy new sets of clothes, a pair of sandals, and lunch for Maitree, he asked the lawyer what they should do and was advised that they'd better bail Maitree out. As he had been charged with attempted murder, they would need to place at least 40,000 bath cash or assets worth this much as a bail. Upon hearing what the lawyer said, he was at a loss as to where to find such a large amount of money.

But Maitree had his mother as his fairy godmother. After spending three nights in jail, he was released on bail because his mother had asked for help from a neighbor who agreed to use her land title deed to bail him out. His mother is therefore indebted to this neighbor who made it possible for Maitree to get his freedom back, though just temporarily.

Eight months later, towards the end of 2009, a court hearing took place and it lasted for three consecutive days, during which the witnesses for both the defendant and the plaintiff were interrogated. While the plaintiff had witnesses who helped lend credit to him, namely the policeman who was in charge of this criminal case and the doctor who had provided Thai with medical care, the defendant had only his family members as witnesses, making it harder for him to fight his case.

He was present during the court hearing, which lasted from morning till late afternoon. He noticed that the judge showed signs of tiredness in the afternoon, as he not only had to listen to the interrogation, but also had to sum up all the details of the exchanges between the lawyers and the witnesses. The judge had the microphone close to his mouth and he summed the details in formal language; meanwhile a court official stationed below his bench typed up the judge's summary. The whole process did not flow

smoothly and was quite tedious, and as the late afternoon wore on, he could tell that the judge was getting bored having to listen to the same questions being asked over and over by the lawyers in their attempts to ascertain the truthfulness of the witnesses.

The only thing that appeared quite dramatic and somewhat similar to what he had seen in foreign movies was the personality of the plaintiff's lawyer or prosecutor. This guy often used a very loud and intimidating voice when questioning the defendant's witnesses. He made it clear that he looked down on them and did not try to hide the attempt to mock, intimidate, and treat them with no respect. He did all this intentionally, hoping that the judge would see the defendant's witnesses as unreliable and not worth giving much credit to. He noticed that Maitree's wife was the one most affected by the prosecutor's intimidating questioning. He mocked her and tried to make her lose track by misleading and confusing questions. His strategies worked, as Maitree's wife became extremely nervous and was unable to give proper answers to his questions. Her voice shook and her answers came out all wrong and inappropriate. The prosecutor did not seem to have any sympathy for her despite the fact that she was quite late in her pregnancy.

Witnessing all this outraged him. He saw those people who had nothing to do with that terrible event acting as if they are the experts who can handle everything, but the truth is those people—the judge and the lawyers—more or less dismissed that event and focused their energy on trying to show off to others how smart and knowledgeable they are. They are the players in this legal chess game; the plaintiff, the defendant and the witnesses are merely pawns for those players to move around to so that they could boastfully demonstrate to others how well they know the game.

His mother, however, reacted differently from Somjai when being cornered by the plaintiff's lawyer. His loud voice failed to intimidate her and when he mocked her, she fought back by responding to some of his questions with defiance and aggression. While doing so helped his mother to feel a little better, it put them in a disadvantageous position as it was like his mother fell into a trap set by the plaintiff's lawyer by appearing very

emotional and unable to control her temper. This made it easier for the prosecutor to claim that she was behind all the trouble and triggered the attempted murder that night.

In that courtroom, your life and destiny no longer belong to you as they have been handed over to those people who bend and distort them before passing them on to you once more.

Of course the duty of the defendant's lawyer is to confidently show that he can convince the judge to agree with him. However, he could see that in that courtroom his brother's lawyer did not do a good job. Yet when the lawyer talked to Maitree, his mother, and himself, he exuded confidence that he could argue against all the points raised by the prosecutor. Perhaps he did so in order to convince the defendant and his relatives to believe that there is hope, even though such a hope does not really exist. And sure enough, people who are desperate often run towards and try to grab whatever hope they could glimpse, whether it is real or imaginary.

There was, however, one thing that the two parties could agree on. When the prosecutor informed them that the plaintiff would drop the charge against the defendant if the defendant agrees to pay all the medical expenses as demanded by the plaintiff. As it is a criminal charge, even if the plaintiff did not want to press the charge further, the case would not be over but would proceed until the court passes sentence. Still if Maitree agrees to pay the medical expenses, there is a higher chance that he would get a lighter sentence.

Maitree's salary was not much because he was just an unskilled worker. Each month he only had 3,000 baht to spare. Because the condition set by the prosecutor is that Maitree has to pay all the medical expenses before the day the court delivers his sentence, which would be 6 months later, Prateep could not see how Maitree could pay all that, almost 100,000 baht in total, by the deadline.

And this is his youngest brother, who used to ask for money from his mother when he wanted to buy booze. Now he is asking for money to buy his freedom. His mother had to ask someone to help bail him out, and he himself had to pay for the lawyer's fee, not to mention that they will also have to help him pay the medical fees by the deadline. He also

remembers what the lawyer told him about the 50,000 baht fee he demanded—that this fee only applies to his dealing with the lower court, and if the case goes to the appeal court, more fees will be needed. He cannot understand why he allowed himself to be dragged into this big mess.

On the day when Maitree's sentence is going to be delivered, he prays for the lightest sentence for his brother. He feels that Maitree should serve a prison term for a while to pay for the crime he committed, but he thinks it should be less than 10 years. He could see that Maitree has become much more mature, especially after Somjai gave birth to a baby girl, a little girl whom they named Maya. Maitree's sense of responsibility seems to increase as he now has another life to take care of. He brings his baby girl along with him to the provincial court, and when he looks at her, his eyes are full of love and concern for her. Maitree's affection for his little daughter is evident to him.

Thai and his family members are not present at the court that day. Maybe they don't want to know what kind of sentence Maitree is going to get. Thai has fully recovered from the injuries; the shattered bones of his lower jaw have been properly fixed and they are firmly in place just like before the injuries were inflicted. Those bones were damaged and broken by the force of Maitee's billhook. While it is true that Thai is fine now, it is undeniable that Maitree's billhook could have killed him, and this fact could greatly affect the sentence Maitree will soon receive.

Maitree is sentenced to be jailed for 10 years for his crime. He is handcuffed again and then a policeman led him out towards the back door of the court, the door for convicts to pass through to their cells.

The judge found the prosecutor's arguments convincing while regarding the counter-arguments put forth by the defendant's lawyer unconvincing. Maitree does not get a reduced sentence despite the fact he has paid all the medical fees. The judge claimed that the proof that Maitree has paid all the medical fees did not get to him in time. According to the judge, the details of Maitree's case were sent to the central court, who read them and passed on the sentence, which was sent back to the Saraburi provincial court. The judge's duty is merely to read out the sentence decided by the

central court. Worse, after the sentence has been read, the judge tells Maitree that if he wants his sentence reduced, he has to apply for it later. The implication of this is that Maitree's case would have to proceed to the appeal court, just like what Maitree's lawyer wants, as intended by this ridiculous legal process.

The judge also informed Maitree that he needs written proof from the plaintiff that they have received all the medical fees he paid them, and he needs to submit that proof to the court before he could start the process of appealing for a reduced sentence.

He recalled that day he paid a visit to Sangwan, Thai's wife, to apologize for what his brother did and to let her know that his family was willing to pay all the medical expenses, and what she said to him that day came back to him:

"I don't want your money! I want him to rot in jail. If I accept the money, your brother will get an upper hand in court. I'm not dumb and you can't use money to buy me!"

Yes, that family wants Maitree to be punished by the longest possible jail term, and that must be why they did not show up to collect the medical fees on the date agreed by the prosecutor and the defendant's lawyer in front of the judge. They will collect the money after the judge has passed sentence.

This is how things should proceed. Such is the outcome when a person physically hurts another without enough grounds to do so. That was what the court based its judgement on. The court only paid attention to life as revealed in photos and through written and spoken words, especially the ones spoken by those trustworthy people; those things were passed on to the judge who dominated the stage where real life has no place.

The court found the claim made by the defendant's lawyer unconvincing. According to the lawyer, before the crime took place, Thai had been provoking his mother every day—calling her a stupid country bumpkin from the Northeast who cannot read and write and so dumb that she unthinkingly signed off the sale of half of her land to him. When Thai made the attempt to demand that piece of land as his, his mother refused to give it to him. Thai therefore, hired a lawyer to help him to file the lawsuit against her, and later bought a property right next to his mother's land, hoping to annoy and disturb

her as much as he could by doing all sorts of things, such as making a lot of noise with his machines, releasing polluted water into her property, beating up her dogs when they walked past his place. In short, his mother and her family had to endure all kinds of things Thai did to provoke them. And then Thai threw cherry bombs into his mother's yard, one after another, until his mother could no longer contain her frustration and anger. She went to his place and yelled at him in rage. He retaliated by punching her, but Maitree rushed towards them and attacked Thai with a billhook, sending him to the ground.

The court, however, insisted that Maitree used excessive violence. Thai's provocative actions might have made the family upset but those actions were not life-threatening, so Maitree's sudden outburst of temper and insane act cannot be justified. The court also claimed that the defendant's family could have made a charge against Thai for provoking them, but they did not seek legal help to defend their rights so they had no one to blame but themselves.

Is that what they should have done? A village folk could just go to a police station and tell the police that he has been insulted and verbally abused by someone? Do you think the police would take this matter seriously, or would they simply laugh? It is most likely that the police would not see the villager as having enough dignity to be insulted, and they probably would just tell that villager to go back home and sort the matter out in a civil manner.

Is that what they should have done? Even if the police agree to recognize the complaint, the next inevitable thing is a time-consuming and costly legal procedure involving lawyer and court. One will be pushed into the world of law and order and judges where one cannot handle anything and has to rely on a lawyer. This world is like a chess board and there is only one group of people accorded with enough expertise to play the game and to make this game their job.

It's just the way things go, he told himself.

"Let him go to jail, mum," he told his mother.

“If only I had known that he would have to stay in jail that long, I would have told him to just kill that bastard,” she said.

13 August 2011

During Maitree's first week in jail, Prateep was tormented by awful feelings. Thinking about Maitree's loss of freedom and his life as a prisoner took a terrible toll on Prateep's mind. Nonetheless, he was not the one physically imprisoned and after a week had passed by, the thought about Maitree troubled him less. A month passed quickly and normally enough, and soon a year was over.

In the beginning, his mother and Somjai visited Maitree three or four times a week, and they tried to make sure that he got everything he needed—things like sandals, blanket, cigarettes, and even some money for his personal use. Initially, Maitree wept every time he saw them and asked Somjai to bring their baby daughter along as he wanted to see her. That was the only thing he wanted, he said. After a month had passed by, the frequency of their visits was reduced to about a few times a month as Maitree was able to adjust better with life in jail. His mother didn't have to provide anything for him. All she did when visiting him was remind him not to get involved with drugs otherwise he would lose a chance to be released before his jail term was completed.

He didn't visit his younger brother while he was in jail, but his mother often rang him to talk about how Maitree was going. He promised that he would go to see Maitree in jail, but he never did. He simply asked his mother and Somjai to give Maitree his regards and transferred some money to his mother so that she could give it to Maitree in case he needed it.

Around late August last year, his mother rang him and said that Maitree wanted him to withdraw their appeal because he believed it was no use and he was willing to stay in jail until he completed his jail term. He didn't want to be released temporarily only to go back to jail again later. According to Maitree, the appeal that seemed to go nowhere also made him ineligible for a pardon granted annually on each auspicious occasion. After that phone talk with his mother, he rang the lawyer to ask for advice and was told

that if the appeal court approved the appeal, the reduction of Maitree's jail term would be much more than the one he might get through being pardoned on auspicious occasions. He then told his mother about what the lawyer said so that she could pass it on to Maitree when she visited him next time. However, when his mother rang him again, she said Maitree had very little confidence that the appeal court would go along with their appeal and if it rejected the appeal, his jail term wouldn't be reduced at all.

He was quite annoyed by Maitree's attitude. He had put a lot of effort into helping Maitree with the appeal but what he did was not appreciated and was even seen as something that increased the severity of Maitree's punishment. By the end of 2010, it became more obvious that they blamed him for what he did to help Maitree. His mother told him over the phone that he was the one who made Maitree ineligible for a pardon he deserved. She wanted him to tell the lawyer to withdraw the appeal immediately. She also added that he wasn't the one imprisoned so he could not possibly know what it was like to pass each day in jail. Maitree was the one imprisoned and if he wanted things concerning his jail term done in a particular way, there was no reason to deny him what he wanted.

She said, "Maitree seems to believe that you want him to stay in jail for a long time."

"How could he come up with such a warped idea?" he raised his voice. "Is that what he really thinks?"

"It's because you never try to see things from his perspective!" she said. "You never listen to what he wants."

How could he listen to someone like Maitree who cannot even tell what is best for himself?

Then came a day in June, 2011, a day that witnesses were asked to appear in court and answer the questions that would help the court determine how to divide that piece of land among the parties involved. The root cause of the awful disaster befalling his family is the conflict over a tiny piece of land following the arrival and invasion of a guy named Thai. In his view, this guy is no one but his family's 'creditor' from their past lives. Since

the first day he was allowed to live on their land, he is the one who turned their wheel of fate around, making sure that his family suffer terribly time and again.

On that day, Maitree, himself, and Thai had to appear in court as they had shared ownership of the land. Witnesses for his family's side and Thai's side were also there. His family fought for the land on the basis of their occupying right and their actual use of the land while Thai claimed that he had the right to occupy the land based on the official land sale agreement that warranted his ownership of it.

The trial lasted for three days and Thai was there as a plaintiff who filed a lawsuit against his family. (Once more, Thai acted as a 'creditor' taking control over the fate of his family, and because of Thai, the word 'plaintiff' would continue haunting him throughout his life.) The first part of the hearing in which Thai was called before and interrogated by the court took one and a half days then it was the defendant's turn, that of his family, which took another one and a half days.

At first, the judge tried to encourage the two parties to negotiate and compromise, claiming that he was aware that the land conflict had created a lot of tension between them and it had triggered Maitree's assault of Thai and resulted in the former's jail sentence.

What the judge said reminded him of the day when Maitree was on trial and was sentenced to ten years in jail. On that day, the judge didn't take into account the land conflict between his family and Thai, and he felt that his family was treated unfairly. Because of this, he stubbornly refused to negotiate, even though he himself was also surprised by his own reaction, as before that he had been trying to reach a compromise with Thai. Perhaps because Maitree already received the maximum sentence as Thai and his family had hoped for, he didn't feel that he had to try to be on friendly terms with them anymore. The trial thus carried on.

On the last day of the trial, Maitree was taken out from jail so that he could appear in front of the court. He was in a pale, fading red prison uniform and was shackled. After the trial, he was led by a policeman to a prison truck that would take him back to the

prison. Maitree said nothing to him. In fact, he didn't even glance at him. Nonetheless, he didn't give much thought to Maitree's coldness.

On the day the court issued a verdict for their case, the small court room was fully packed, as many other people were also awaiting the verdicts for their cases. Everyone looked the same—all were nervous and full of both negative and positive speculations about the verdicts soon to be delivered by the court. He was no different from them, as he was thinking about the worst possible verdict for his family. He told his mother that if the court ordered them to split the land into two halves (--one half given to his family and the other half to Thai), they would have to go along with it, as the decision by the court had to be treated as final. According to his lawyer, it was enough that he was there to listen to the verdict so they didn't apply for the permission to bring Maitree from prison to the court room on that day.

A little while after the judge sat on his bench and read out the judgment for their case, he felt confused and could not quite keep track of what the judge was saying. The ruling was a lengthy formal narrative and the decision made by the court was left till the very end. While listening, he felt anxious and worried. Things didn't look good for his family, especially later on when the judge pointed out that the land conflict was unlikely to be solved even after the land was divided between the two parties. This was due to the fact that the plaintiff and the defendant lived next to each other and a new conflict between them could erupt in the future, similar to what had recently happened when the two parties had to rely on the court to settle their conflict. Dividing the land therefore could not get rid of the real problem as both parties refuse to give in to each other.

According to the judge, after taking all things into consideration, the court decided that the land had to be put up for auction and the money gained would be divided equally between the two parties.

His heart sank when he heard the verdict. Was this the best solution the court could offer to his family? They had lived on that land for a long time and now they had no home. Their fate was decided by that verdict, or to put it more correctly, they were forced out from their own land by such a verdict.

He didn't want that money from the auction. It was just a small amount of money, not enough for anything significant in life. He wanted the land back for his mother and brother, the land that had the history of his family written on it. He didn't want to construct memories on a new piece of land. He glanced at Thai and his family and noticed that they didn't seem to be emotional. Thai owned another piece of land adjacent to the one being ordered by the court to be put up for action so he and his family only needed to walk one step and they would be on their other property. But where would his mother and brother move to? His heart cried out in agony and he looked at his mother, whose facial expression vividly revealed her shock. Her eyes were moving back and forth in panic but her face looked paralyzed, the same kind of reaction he noticed in her on the day he yelled at her that he wasn't in any urgent need to sell his share of the land and that she should sell hers if she needed the money. What happened on that day in the land department became material for his short story with a fictionalized situation in which he is eventually forced to sell his share of the land. In the story, he compares his act of holding a pen and forcing it to draw a line that forms a signature that finishes off the land sale deal with the bursting open of a cliff following the arrival of cement factories and the industrial era. The invasion of the cement factories signifies the arrival of new things that shatters the locals' legends, history, and memories before transforming them into cement, tiles, gypsum boards, bathroom fittings, coal, and energy—all the things that constitute a new house. The earth's spirit is burst open and shattered in order that new memories could be created.

Those were the messages he wanted to convey in that short story. There were things in that short story that did not take place in real life but their existence in that story acted like a bad omen. It was like he borrowed those things from the future to be used in his short story and that kind of borrowing came at a price that he would have to pay back seven years later. History repeats itself and fiction can be a replay of real life. However, there are also times when real life is, more or less, a replay of fiction, like that day when he stood transfixed in the courtroom after the verdict had been issued. The judge let him know that he could sit down but he remained standing until the judge left the bench and

another judge was about to sit on the bench to read out the ruling for another case. Other plaintiffs and defendants in that crowded court room were shifting around, and he realized that he should leave the room as his case was over. Things were done quickly and there was no room for whining, arguing, or appealing. The judge for his case had disappeared and he should stop attracting attention and allow other complainants to take centre stage.

Then a two-page document was pushed in front of him. His lawyer was passing it on to him together with a pen. The document was the written verdict and he was supposed to sign at the end of it to acknowledge the decision of the court regarding the case. He took the pen and signed.

Yesterday he got a letter from Maitree sent to him from the prison, and he guessed it had already been opened and read by prison authorities. He opened the envelope and found a piece of paper on which a short message was written.

"I wrote this in tears.

I don't really know whether I should remember or forget that I once had a brother like you.

It was all because of you! All because of you!

I hope the rest of my time in jail will help me forget you. I want nothing more than having all my memory of you erased. Help me, ok?"

Maitree's message was incoherent and very emotional. It was possible that Maitree was wasted when writing those words. If that is the case, it shows that the destiny of some people can't be changed even if you put them in jail.

Folder V

Maya's Birth and Existence

Images

It is common knowledge that our time consists of the past, the present, and the future, but whether we are aware or not as to what particular point in time we are occupying is a different matter. Many people allow themselves to dwell in the past while others waste a lot of time daydreaming about the future. It is quite surprising that we spend the least time living in the present. Here I'm talking about our thoughts and feelings, which play a crucial role in determining the way our physical body behaves but sometimes hardly pay any attention to the existence of the physical body. Thoughts and feelings can travel freely to the past and the future, leaving the physical body to wither away in the present.

We humans spend the least time with the present and, because of this, our time lacks continuation and appears like a dotted line that is repeatedly interrupted and keeps on fading away, unable to make itself clearly visible all the time. The Buddha's teaching is truly wonderful because its goal is to make people able to maintain the continuation and presence of the present throughout their lives. His teaching emphasizes the ability to live in the moment and to be forever aware of each moment in life. Each movement and action should always be accompanied by awareness. According to this teaching, we have to focus our thoughts on our physical being so as to pull the thoughts back from the past and the future. Such teaching is magnificent because following it will make us dwell in the present without being distracted by the past or the future. Any thinking individual can comprehend the teaching and it does not sound difficult to adhere to, but knowledge alone is not enough because it is important to put the teaching into practice. There are many knowledgeable people who are still wallowing in the past or dwelling in the future, causing their present to be no different from a dotted line that lacks precision and clarity.

I originate from my thoughts and awareness at this particular moment. My thoughts appear first and gather like a cloud that increases in weight and starts to form a shape. I try to pull my thoughts back to the present and be aware of them.

I'm standing near a glass window pane and gazing absent-mindedly at the scenery beyond it—a vast field, a dried up pond, and an untrimmed and shady grove, and a scattering of houses further off. Those houses are built from cement and bricks and their roofs are either bright colored tiles or sheets of corrugated iron. Their doors and window panes are made from glass or man-made materials that look like timber. Houses nowadays hardly have components made from real timber, and my house is no exception. My feet are pressing against a tiled floor, and the desk, cupboard, bed, and shelves near me are all manufactured from factories. They are not made from real timber, but from a combination of plywood, paper, and other materials like formica or laminate. This type of furniture is affordable to most households.

I'm standing next to a window in my room, a room that does not have a lot of things and most of the objects in the room, including my childhood photos, are from my past, a distant past. Once I'm back here, in my hometown Kaeng Khoi and in my childhood room, the damp smell of the past seems to rush towards me like dogs rushing towards their long-awaited owner. Maybe I have imagined this myself. The smell might be merely from mothballs placed in a cupboard and the hidden corners of the room. The unique smell of mothballs has absorbed the smell of our belongings from the past until they become one, and once the mothball smell reaches our nose, we could smell the past. Personally, however, I don't think the smell of the past is always as strong as that of mothballs.

I don't visit my birthplace often. I only take a trip to my hometown once or twice a year during my long semester break. Right now I'm a student at a university in Nakhon Pathom, doing my Bachelor's degree in Education, and in 2029, which is only a few months away, I will be 20 years old.

The question is how come I am standing right next to the window of my room in my childhood home. Why did I choose this place? (There are times that we don't really know what triggers us to do such and such thing, and if we believe in supernatural or mysterious stuff like omen or instinct, we might claim that they are behind our action. However, it is also possible that sometimes we give credit to this sort of thing simply

because we don't want to explain what the real reason is. It is also possible that a certain image buried deep in your memory of the distant past has guided you to do something. Considering this latter possibility, I can't help seeing myself as similar to Teresa whose life is so easily swayed as if it is as light as a feather. Or perhaps I bear resemblance to Thomas who is gazing absent-mindedly through a glass window pane pondering over past life and what might happen in the future.) Like Thomas, I'm standing here in a pensive mood and even though the window is shut, the bright sun outside makes me feel the heat despite the fact that it is not hot in my room. My long hair starts to irritate the back of my neck so I have tied it up into a pony tail. I was not ready at all to take a trip to my hometown today as my whole body is playing up and it is that time of the month. Also, it is the day I broke up with my boyfriend and I can still hear what I said to him vividly: "I think we should break up." Then I kicked him out and shut the door of my room so as to be alone.

After that, I packed up some clothes and other necessities and headed off to my birthplace. The past has pushed me to take the trip and once I arrive here, another type of my past jumps towards me. As I'm standing near the window, that past is hovering around me and acting as if it loves me so much. I'm like a dog owner who keeps many dogs and all of them are rushing towards me, sniffing and licking me affectionately. I decide to ignore it, assuming that if the past is like dogs, they would soon lose interest in me. Nevertheless, there is a type of past that is our fondest and it will crouch down, perhaps just a few steps away, and keep an eye on us. When we move, even if just slightly, it will stare at us so intently. We need to be careful about this kind of past more than others.

Why do my thoughts originate from the past, the present, and the future? And I even referred to the Lord Buddha. The reason is we have been discussing about this sort of stuff so much lately, and 'we' here refers to my ex-boyfriend and I. He is studying at another faculty at the same university as mine.

He is a tall, slim, and good-looking young man, and I was charmed by his attention, sweet words, and sense of humor. He is not a perceptive person and he often

enjoyed expressing his rather superficial views. Based on my description of him, he probably appears like an ordinary guy, and the truth is he is merely an ordinary guy. During the first few months of our relationship, I drank in his sweet nothings and sense of humor, but after we slept together the relationship started to change. He no longer liked it when I expressed my views despite the fact that before that he seemed fascinated by them. He acted as if my voice hurt his ears and he couldn't stand it when I was quiet and in a pensive mood, claiming that seeing me like that made him feel that he was an inadequate lover. I now realize that he is only concerned about himself and pays attention to himself only. If I chose to sit still contemplating things, why should it bother him? (It was none of his business really.)

Last week, which was the start of the long vacation, we were at first quite happy with the prospect of having a chance to enjoy our time together more, but then those nagging things in our relationship blossomed and expanded like drops of ink on a damp sheet of paper. (That was how I explained it to him and he reacted so negatively, saying that I used extremely outdated words to invent a reprehensible image that made his hair stand on end.) At the end of that week, he announced to me that he would enter monkhood.

"When is the ritual taking place?" I asked.

"Next week," he said.

"That's quick. You didn't mention anything about it before."

"My parents want me to become a monk for a while."

"Aren't you interested in spending time with me anymore?"

He looked displeased, as if he blamed me for trying to stop him from being ordained. Then he started to explain to me why he had to become a monk, but I think none of what he said was the real reason.

He told me that entering monkhood was the thing all men had to do for their parents and in accordance with ongoing tradition. According to him, after their studies, all men should be ordained then get married, as that was how they should proceed in life, and so on and so forth. The way he put it was like he was trying to educate me about

men's duties and he used so many 'have to' and 'should' in order to convince me that he was doing the right thing.

"But do you want to become a monk?" That was what I really wanted to know.

Again, he looked displeased and said my question was a wrong one because it didn't matter whether he wanted to be ordained or not. Rather, it was what he should do that matters. Then he said: "When parents offer their sons this kind of merit, any son who rejects it commits a gravely sinful act," he said.

That's not true, I thought. The truth is he saw it as a good opportunity to stay away from me.

"And who is going to hold the pillow for you during the ritual?" I asked, although I didn't want to be that person. I was slightly annoyed so I asked that question to provoke him.

"You can hold it, if you want to."

Is that the best answer he could give me? I could easily imagine that I didn't exist in what he had envisioned for himself, and his response: "You can hold it, if you want to" plainly indicated that he didn't want me to be part of his plan. The response was hurtful to me … but Bloody hell! It came from a young man who was going to carry on that great duty of entering monkhood! From that young man who was about to go through the process of becoming 'a real man'.

Our path and conversion inevitably led to one outcome—one of us is going to be the virtuous one and the other the evil one; one is going to be a monk, and the other one a sinner. I was of the opinion that he was too weak to be the wicked or the evil one and too weak to be the defeated, so I prayed that he achieved the highest level of goodness.

"I don't want to hold the pillow. You can do whatever you want because it's none of my business anyway." I told him.

"Oh, well, if you want it that way!" That was all he said and he gave me a condescending look, as if I was a complete stranger to him. In fact, the way he looked at me was like he saw me as the evil one.

But wait! You become the virtuous one only because I let you.

He inhaled deeply in the attempt to calm himself down, but I had nothing to say so I left for my unit.

He disappeared for two nights and then showed up that afternoon, knocking the front door lightly as if he didn't want to disturb me. I let him in without saying a word.

"I want to become a monk so that after I disrobe, we can get married," he said.

He disappeared for two nights so that he could come back with that excuse? Does he think I want to get married? And marry him? Apparently, he was convinced that I was touched by what he told me, as he moved closer to me and pulled me towards him. Let us forget about our quarrel, he said. I love you, he said slowly, then he gently caressed me and took off my top and pants. I was not responsive to what he did and thought he would stop soon when noticing that I was unresponsive. However, he didn't stop even though he knew that I was menstruating. He reaped pleasure from my body and ejaculated when he was still inside me, leaving me both sore and in pain. After that he had a shower and put on his clothes. It was then that I said to him: "I think we should break up."

I kicked him out and yelled at him: "Get out. Get out of my life!", and he left me.

No doubt what he did to me was his way of making the best of the last day of his secular life before entering monkhood. And that was how our relationship ended.

Metaphoric Representation

After spending ten minutes visiting the Buddha's footprint at the Temple of the Buddha's Footprint, I leave the pavilion and stroll around the temple compound. A mysterious force urged me to come to this temple even though I had no interest in visiting it when I lived in this hometown of mine. As my status changes to someone from somewhere else (which I mean not living in this town anymore), I become eager to have a look at the temple. I guess I could have been motivated by a touristic interest; I stop by this temple as a tourist, not a local.

I have taken pictures of this temple from virtually all angles and after using Photoshop to make those photos look nice, I upload them to my personal web page. As the temple is surrounded by stalls selling offerings, I take the opportunity to make merit by buying those offerings and gave them to monks. After walking around the temple and looking at everything of interest, I stop at the beginning of a staircase that leads to the pavilion—a spot where all tourists are tempted to stop to take pictures of what they see in front of them. Countless pictures of this scenery have been taken again and again. Still you cannot resist taking more photos of it.

After a while, I look for a shady spot under a tree and sit down, gazing at the staircase that leads to the pavilion. There I ponder over that mysterious force that brings me to the temple and find it extremely odd indeed. For one thing, I recently announced to someone who is about to become a monk that I wanted to break up with him. Then I left him. But I'm now sitting and facing a temple, even though it is a temple in my hometown, not the one where he will be ordained. This is also my first visit to this temple. That mysterious force also seems to have an uncanny effect on me, making me bring myself into this scene as if it is my turn to show up. After that, I feel like I begin to see something that has been buried deep down rising to the surface. As I'm sitting under the tree, I start to hear someone's voice, an ancient voice from within me that whispers: "Ask your parents to take you there so that you can have a look by yourself."

At the foot of the staircase leading to the pavilion are statues of four nāgas with five heads. Those nāgas appear golden in the sun and I'm looking at them contemplatively. A nāga staircase can be seen at any temple, not only the ones in Thailand but in almost all ASEAN countries where Buddhism is the main religion. According to an account that relates the Buddha's life, there was once a nāga who transformed himself into a human so that he could enter monkhood. However, his real identity was later discovered and the Buddha told him that a nāga was a sub-human being and thus was not allowed to be a monk. Since then it has become a custom to ask those who want to be ordained whether they are humans or sub-human beings. Based on that account, the nāga confessed that he wanted to be a monk because he was not happy about his lowly birth. The Buddha took pity on him so he advised him to guard the temple's main hall in order that he would be set free from his lower origins and become a human in the near future. Because of this, we see nāga staircases at temples everywhere.

Also related in that account is how that nāga, after accepting the rule that a nāga could not become a monk, pleaded with the Buddha that the word 'nāga' be used to refer to men who are about to enter monkhood. Since then it has become a practice to call men who are about to be ordained 'nāgas'.

I won't have a chance to become a monk because I'm a woman, but does my ex-boyfriend who is about to become a monk know this story? No offense meant, but I believe he has never heard about it. Those who have a chance to become something or are entitled to acquire a certain status or reach a certain state are generally uninterested about that status or state. In my case, because I'm deprived of that chance or that status, it's natural that I'm curious to find out more about it, digging things up so as to get to the bottom of it.

As I'm contemplating those things, I also surf the Internet to look for more information about the birth of the Buddha. I'm the wicked one, right? That explains why I'm so keen to challenge things. Something has caught my attention and I'm still puzzling about it: Why did that account attribute the nāga's desire to become a monk to the dissatisfaction with his lowly birth, as if being human is something so noble? A temple

dog walks past me and a question pops up in my mind: does this dog want to become a human? What about those ants? Do they want to be reborn as humans?

The Buddha told the nāga that he was not allowed to enter monkhood because he was a sub-human being, and that he had to be reborn as a human first before being allowed to do so. Is it possible that he was implying that humans were noble—noble because they had thoughts, determination, freedom of choice, and wish to be enlightened? My interpretation is that the Buddha perceived humans as equipped with qualities and opportunities that would make them more likely to attain enlightenment than other beings. Is my interpretation correct?

But does the dog that walked past me a moment ago want to be a human? And what about these ants? I don't think they have the desire to become human. Humans are the only species that tell themselves that they are the noblest beings, and they assume that other creatures like that dog, for example, believe that way as well.

Because nāgas cannot write down the historical account of their ancestors in a language or method comprehensible to humans, we have yet to know what they really think. All we know is how humans perceive nāgas, so the explanation, "The nāga was not happy about his lowly birth and wanted to find a way to become human" actually stemmed from the human race's own perception. And humans came up with that assumption because they wanted to make their species appear superior to others.

Upon reaching this conclusion I blush, but then I come up with another blasphemous conviction that I dare not utter out loud in my mind-- the story about the nāga who transformed himself into a human and wanted to be a monk was actually invented to enhance the status and greatness of Buddhism.

Oh, now I've just discovered something from my Internet search—the Jataka tales about the Buddha's 500 previous lives! My boldness does lead me somewhere! Those tales are about the spiritual practices the Buddha stoically went through as a way to accumulate merit, and, based on those tales, he had been a nāga before in his previous lives, three times altogether when he was born as Jumpei Nāga, Purithat Nāga, and Maha

Tatara Nāga. What do these tales tell us? For me, it's satisfactory enough to know that the Buddha was born a nāgas in some of his previous lives.

From what I have studied, there is a word 'Nog', an ancient Indo-European root word meaning 'naked' that appears in several languages, for example, as "Nudus" in Latin, "naked" in English, Nagna in Sansakrit, and Nanga in Hindi. Moreover, it was discovered that there exists an ancient tribe called Nāga in the easternmost part of India known as the Nāga Hills. The tribe has lived in that area for a long time, and the members of that tribe do not wear clothes, and thus are naked. It is believed that the ancient Arayans looked down on them. Of note is that the word 'nāga' in Assamese also means 'naked', and, based on this observation, it is quite plausible that the word 'nāga' was used to refer to native people, hill people, uncivilized people, or country bumpkins, was it not?

I still cannot decide whether a nāga is merely a metaphor for native people or hill people. It's because big serpents like nāgas could be found everywhere in Asia of the ancient time, especially Suwannabhumi, as recorded in the legend about the Phanom Pagoda that: "Suwannabhumi is the land where nāgas reside." The Cambodian myth about the birth of the Mekong River also talks about how a nāga helps build a city. Moreover, tales about nāgas are also common in Thailand and Burma.

Then I discover that the custom about men having to go through the process of being a nāga before entering monkhood did not exist in India. The custom was exclusive to Suwannabhumi, or "the land where nāgas reside", where, during the ancient time, the natives had worshipped ghosts, spirits, and nāgas. They had considered nāgas as the original owners of the earth and all other things until the Buddha arrived in the region to impart Buddhism. The Buddha introduced the natives to Buddhism, and with it, progress and civilization.

But to change the natives' beliefs and make them accept new things was not that easy. Fantastic miracles had to be performed, dissent had to be suppressed, and the devil had to be persecuted. Both power and benevolence were needed because some things had to be totally destroyed while others needed compromise so as to make possible the coexistence of the old and the new.

The Buddha had left his footprints in innumerable places, and in Thailand there are many of them, not just in Saraburi but in other provinces as well. The locals all claim that the footprints located in their towns or cities are the real ones, although those footprints are of various sizes. Based on the sizes of some those footprints, the Buddha must have been of gigantic stature and build. Also because his footprints have various sizes, his statue and build must have been myriad (Oh, yes! The Buddha could change himself into anything and he could use his power to make himself smaller or bigger. He could also journey through the air to wherever he wanted.) That must have been possible because of the miracles he performed, and those miracles were his ingenious strategy to persuade the natives, who were superstitious from the beginning, to become Buddhists.

As far as I'm concerned, the fact that the ritual of being a nāgas before becoming a monk is exclusive to Suwannaphumi reflects how the Buddha employed both power and benevolence when he arrived in this region to impart Buddhism. Historically speaking, Siam was younger than Laos, Burma, Cambodia, and even Lanna. Buddhism actually arrived in China first, and the influence of Buddhism and civilization reached the Siamese city of Lopburi via the Cambodian kingdom, which had been quite powerful. When the Buddha first arrived in a new region, the first thing he did was to tame what had previously commanded the natives' respect such as spirits, ghosts, and nāgas. Once they were tamed, he converted them to Buddhism. His next step was to persuade their worshippers (the natives, hill people, or naked people) to become Buddhist. (Buddhism, of course, represented development and civilization.) The Buddha didn't make the natives completely abandon their age-old beliefs, and that was why the ritual about becoming a nāga before entering monkhood originated.

The arrival of the Buddha can be equated with the arrival of early civilization that defeated primitivism, of humanity trying to rid itself of sub-human qualities, of the rulers who came to rule, of foreigners, of development, of governing systems, of capitalism, of innovation, of multinational networks, and so on and so forth. As time passes, many more things can be comparable to the Buddha's arrival. It is also no different from the way a handsome high-born man from another region falls in love with a naïve native girl whose

status is lower than him. In other words, there must be someone or something foreign that helps elevate the status of the natives. I believe that this kind of formula can be universally applied to change that happened to all human civilizations and ways of life. This kind of formula is also imposed on TV soap operas.

On the day my ex-boyfriend is about to put on a nāga's white outfit of mixed origins—Brahmin, animistic, Buddhist (Not purely Buddhist, mind you!), will his mind be preoccupied with this sort of stuff? I imagine that on that day, he will sit on a chair and all his relatives will wait in a long line to approach him one by one in order to help cut off his hair. His mother will stand behind her son awaiting her turn to cut his hair with a pair of scissors in one of her hands. Her eyes will be brimmed with tears of joy now that her son is entering monkhood for her. She will be able to hold on to his yellow robe as they are flying towards heaven. (At that particular moment, I bet the image of herself holding on to his yellow robe as they are flying upwards towards heaven together will appear in her mind.) I cannot tell where this sort of mental image originated from and when it entered human consciousness, but it seems to be firmly imprinted in the mind of most Thai Buddhists. And this image—the image of parents holding on to their son's yellow robe as he is flying up towards heaven-- pushed aside what I have said earlier and what I have known, studied, researched about, and learned. That heaven is not even where the Buddha resides, as it is not the land of enlightenment.

The three people of that image—parents and their son who are flying towards heaven—have tears brimming in their eyes. They are overwhelmingly happy, happy that they have been civilized, happy that they are about to rise above the sub-human level.

"Are you dissatisfied with your birth?" I direct my question at a group of ants nearby.

Then I turn to look at the pavilion above the Buddha's Footprint once more. Look at me! I'm at a temple but I hardly pay attention to what is around me. Instead, I have wasted my time searching for information via this hi-tech gadget of mine. I have also wasted my time arguing and challenging things even though I'm by myself. I'm an intrinsic sinner—I praise myself.

Great-grandmother's Rebirth

That voice lies still at the deepest corner of my heart, being part of my memory of the distant past. When something triggers or makes it start to shake, it sends some sort of wave from deep down into the surface. That voice whispered to me as I was at the Temple of the Buddha's Footprint: "Ask you parents to take you there so that you can have a look, ok?" The mysterious force of that voice urged me to take a trip to that temple but soon after the purpose of the trip started to change when I took it upon myself to challenge certain beliefs and values that are tied up with my ex-boyfriend's decision to enter monkhood. Then something unexpected started to reveal itself from a dark shadow. The trip to the temple of the Buddha's Footprint is not only about the breakup with my ex-boyfriend but also functions as something that fulfills my deepest yearning from the distant past. I could feel that visiting the Buddha's footprint has helped me complete the gap of the past, no different from finding the missing piece of the jigsaw that makes an image whole again. This image then triggers the movement of something—perhaps of the wheel of life—and causes it to move slowly.

Thus, I have fulfilled my yearning from the past. Actually, I directly step into the hole of the past.

Those tales recounted to me by my great-grandmother came back to me little by little. Certainly, that voice belonged to my great-grandmother who once told me that I should ask my parents to take me to see the Buddha's Footprint, the Buddha's Image, and other things, to see whether they were like what she had recounted to me.

It was over ten years ago, perhaps in the year 2015 when I was about 6 years old. On that day we children were together at the old house of my grandfather's brother, which was located on this same plot of earth. That house was already pulled down and a new one was built to replace it. That day we were left to stay with my great-grandmother and our parents had told us that we had to look after great-grandmother and fetch things

for her when she asked for them. At that time she was no longer able to walk and she could only lie down or sit up.

At that age I didn't know much about what had happened. It was only later that I got to know that, on that day, all the adults went to a temple and were very busy arranging a funeral for my grandfather who had died. On that particular day, the adults at the temple were probably rushing around giving my grandfather his final bath and dressed him up to get him ready for the evening ritual when people would pay him the last visit and sprinkle water on him as a gesture of respect and farewell. Great-grandmother still didn't know that her son had passed away, as no one told her the sad news yet. The adults were probably waiting for the right time to tell her and they worried that if they were not careful, the sad news would devastate her and make her health worse.

That was why my friends and I were left with great-grandmother. Except the fact that she could no longer walk and her memory was failing, she seemed to look healthy and happy enough. She couldn't remember our names and had lost some of her memories about this and that thing, but that was something to be expected of someone of her age. On that day, it was actually great-grandmother who looked after us, as she tried to keep us within her sight by telling us fantastic stories about her life. I didn't listen to everything she recounted to us because at that age our attention span was quite short and those tales could not mesmerize us for long. When we got bored of listening to her, we went out to play. We could still hear her voice though. Her eyesight was not that good so she probably didn't know that we kids didn't listen to her anymore. From time to time, however, I stopped playing and came to sit near her listening to her stories so as to make her feel that someone was nearby.

The image of that day returned to me: great-grandmother was reclining on a mattress placed on the floor with her back supported by a triangular-shaped pillow. A small Buddha shelf could be seen higher up above where she was reclining. The room was dim and not well-ventilated. The only light within it was the greenish bluish ceiling light from the fluorescent tube coated with smoke stains and dead dried insects. The room

smelled damp and all sort of old smells—from engine oil and machinery—hanged in the air. It was like we were in an ancient cave and the atmosphere of the ancient time had enveloped us.

When great-grandmother got to the part about how she was transformed into a nāga and what sort of movement she made when crawling along the ground, I listened to her excitedly. I can still feel the excitement even now. I had never listened to old tales from elderly people before, and old people younger than great-grandmother didn't seem to have that kind of fantastic tales like the ones recounted by her. Later I learned from books about stories from the past that old people who have plenty of transformation tales to relate were those born before 1957. Those born after that tell a different type of old stories that appear to be more realistic or more historically based, and they are more cognizant of injuries and death. In other words, a storyteller of this type has only one life.

But great-grandmother has many lives and she has undergone innumerable transformations. Based on what I can remember, she was a nāga and then a deer, before being transformed into my ancient great-grandmother whose health is in decline.

Was great-grandmother able to foresee how people today would interpret her rebirth and existence? When she told us that she was part of the earth before being transformed into a nāga, did she know or plan beforehand how that story would be read or interpreted by members of a younger generation like myself? The story has to wait over ten years for me to grow up into a young woman with a better thinking capacity so that I can look at it again in a new light, treating it as a story with implications and symbols that have to be decoded, not as a fanciful and nonsensical tale. At least, that part about great-grandmother being a nāga who had vowed to take a journey to find the Lord Buddha seems to have some sort of mysterious link or association with the fact that my ex-lover is about to become a nāga.

Is it possible that great-grandmother's existence (or her narrative) functioned to serve other ancient narratives that came before it? Her narrative had merged with and woven itself into the grand narratives whose existence predated her consciousness and awareness. Those grand narratives were like a galaxy. Or like a woman's womb; when a

sperm swims into it and finds a suitable egg, this gives birth to a new narrative that emerges from the grand narratives. It is also possible that there exists an author, the one who is happy with his anonymity so he does not want to reveal his face and identity. This author picks up a pen to draw a line that connects all the dots to make them form a more vivid shape. What he does is similar to what I do when gazing up at the dark starry night sky and, with my eyes, draw a connecting line from one star to the next until a mysterious shape appears in my mind. That shape is mine but it might be similar to a shape that occurs in someone else's mind even though I may not know about it. Still, my lack of knowledge about it does not alter the fact that the two shapes are similar.

I try to convince myself that there was a purpose in my great-grandmother's storytelling even though there are gaps in my memory about her tales. When someone starts to tell a story, that means s/he ultimately aims to reach a certain goal, but it isn't important whether that goal is successfully reached or not. What is more important is the thing that pushes or motivates one to do it in the first place… and now something starts to take shape in my mind and it emerges from the distant past, from where it once resided—my missing memory.

Then I start to draw a connecting line. My present existence cannot be explained by coincidence, especially when we have time to ponder over and acknowledge certain things that pre-date us. I exist partly to serve the past—serving here means connecting with it, disclosing it, and bringing it out of my missing memory.

And now I have just realized that I played a greater role in the past than what I thought.

2015 was the year my family experienced devastating losses—the first one was the death of my grandfather and the other one was that of my great-grandmother. None of our family members were prepared for the tragedy that struck us twice like that.

I continue drawing a line connecting all the dots together…As grandfather's relatives were busily giving him a bath that afternoon, his lifeless and naked body was probably placed on a table in a temple pavilion. After they gave him a bath and dried his body, they would put on his pants and shirt for him. Perhaps they chose to dress him up

in his favorite outfits, or maybe they chose the outfits that would make him look most respectable—like the royally granted outfits? It was also possible that they simply picked his work pants and long sleeve light green shirt for him. And would they put on his white coat for him? After that, they probably would put on some makeup of darker tones for him to cover up the paleness of his lifeless complexion and to bring some color to his face, making it look like he was still alive. When it was done, one of his relatives might exclaim: "He looks like he is simply asleep!" Grandfather looked tidy, clean, and respectable when the whole process was completed and he was ready for the late afternoon ritual during which people would come to sprinkle water on him one by one as a gesture of respect and farewell. When that ritual was done, they would place him in a coffin together with his beloved belongings and some necessities he might need for the other world. Then they would help lift the coffin onto a raised platform in preparation for the cremation.

Having sorted out that side of the funeral, the relatives would probably sit down together to discuss how to break the devastating news to great-grandmother in a way that wouldn't make her too devastated. In the end, they would have come up with an idea but by then it was too late.

Great-grandmother's death came suddenly and unexpectedly.

When grandfather's relatives got home and found the still and lifeless body of great-grandmother, they experienced another shock and tragic loss. They bombarded me with questions, asking me what happened and saying how I could let such a thing happen after being told to help look after great-grandmother. I was singled out for questioning and grandfather's brother treated me very roughly; in his fury, he jerked me by my arm, screaming questions at me, and even smacked me many times. Under such pressure, I was unable to respond to his questions and couldn't do anything but weep until my parents intervened and took me away.

My father then gently asked me what had happened and I told him that great-grandmother left in order to follow grandfather.

"Great-grandmother wants to help grandfather," I said.

All the relatives who were there heard what I said and they mumbled among themselves that great-grandmother knew even before anyone told her about grandfather's death and that was undoubtedly a miracle. Grandfather's brother, however, bitterly whined that great-grandmother loved his brother more than him and was even willing to die so that she could go live with him.

Hearing that I tried to correct what he said even though I didn't address him directly. I said to my father: "Great-grandmother is not dead. She told me herself that she is going to be reborn."

Later I also tried my best to argue that great-grandmother was not dead yet. I went so far as to not letting anyone say that she had died and I kept insisting that she was about to be reborn. Yet I didn't have much chance to argue my point. I remember that only a couple of days later my mother took me to the Northeast to live with my grandmother, and the memory I had of my birthplace was cut short because of that.

That day when my great-grandmother asked me to get her a bundle of herbs from the Buddha shelf above where she was reclining, I did what she asked, believing she was immortal and would never die, as she had lived for thousands of years and had undergone innumerable transformations; she had been part of the earth, a nāga, and a doe before she became the great-grandmother I knew.

The word 'juti' (rebirth) means death, but it can also mean a movement from one place to the next. Death in the first meaning of 'juti' refers to the death of angels or gods, not that of humans. Thus, the death of angels is the movement from one place to the next, or the act of being reborn, transformed, or changed in terms of substance or material.

I didn't cause great-grandmother's death but I helped her to be reborn, and more importantly, I did what she wanted me to.

Oh, no… in a few months' time, you will be a year older and turn 20. Time moves forward into the future but right now you are recalling the past, entering the space of lost memories, and discovering that you had played a role in setting forth certain movement of the past. This sort of stuff is not really a very good birthday present for myself, I think.

But why do those lost memories return to me at this point in my life? That is the question.

Time Heals Everything

I stayed in my mother's hometown in the Northeast for about four years until I finished my primary school. My mother took me there but she stayed with me for less than a week before taking a trip back, leaving me under the care of my maternal grandparents. My grandparents explained to me that my mother had to go back to help my father with his work, and it was easier to change school for kids than to change parents' job.

During the first half of my first year in the Northeast, my parents often visited me, but as time passed and they could see that I was happy living with my grandparents, their visits became less frequent. Their trips to see me were mainly made during long public holidays like New Year break or Songkran holiday. My grandparents' house was spacious and it was located in the city, in a community that once called itself the Red Shirts' community, which had been quite active in organizing political activities and demonstrations until the 2014 coup brought a halt to them. For my part, I made new friends at the new school and a new chapter of my life began.

My grandparents once defined themselves for me that they were part of the spirit of new democracy that regarded the majority of the citizens, not the high-ranking officers and aristocrats who were the minority, as the rightful owner of the country. According to my grandparents, the high-ranking officers and aristocrats were the oppressors who enjoyed dictating things for the people. My grandparents saw themselves as part of the masses who transformed words like 'serf', which had been condescendingly used by the ruling classes to classify them, into a sign of honor and glory.

During the years 2006 to 2010, they had taken trips to the capital city with others who wanted to join protests and demonstrations. Those historically complicated and divisive years were characterized by a rift between two groups that held totally different versions of 'truth', and since then the country was blanketed by discourses about good and evil, about good people defeating corruption, and about angels gaining victory over

the devil. The images evoked by those discourses are reminiscent of the ancient accounts about the Buddha's life. Those years also witnessed the emergence of definitions like 'dictatorship of good people' and 'dictatorship of democracy', and they originated from the two opposing groups. Both definitions, 'dictatorship of good people' and 'dictatorship of democracy', are constituted from words that couldn't be combined together from the beginning but somehow they are made to exist together in those definitions. And the whole populace was coerced into accepting that sort of impossibility.

After the decision to 'take back the space' was implemented by the then government headed by the pretty boy Prime Minister, there were a lot of deaths and casualties among the red shirt protestors. My grandparents were wounded both physically and psychologically and not long after they returned home from Bangkok, my grandmother was diagnosed with a colon tumor that soon developed into cancer. One of her sons, whose political view was totally different from hers, said to her that the cancer was a punishment for her lack of respect for hierarchal order. Upon hearing that, my grandmother immediately retorted:

"You are no better than me." Then she added that he'd better watch out because, after his death, he might be transformed into a gigantic monster with a mouth as small as the eye of the needle as he had said horrible things about his mother.

After my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, my grandfather spent all his time looking after her and never made another trip to Bangkok to join a demonstration or protest. Occasionally, he might join a protest organized in town, but he never left the city. And that is some background information about my maternal grandparents.

Shortly before I finished primary school, my father took a trip to see me and told me that it was about time I return to my hometown in Kaeng Khoi to stay with him and my mother and continue my secondary schooling there. He told me that I should get myself ready to move back home, and that he had been missing me all the time and always wanted me to return home to stay with them. However, it was previously not possible for him to bring me back and he could only wait for things to settle down, even though the wait caused him immeasurable pain. While waiting, he hoped that the passage of time would make the

relatives on his father's side and my grandfather's brother forget what happened on that day.

My father told me that this was the second time that we had to stay apart for several years, and he prayed that from now on nothing would force us to live so far away from each other like this. He made me promise that I would never talk about what happened on that day, and must not argue back if my grandfather's brother said something offensive to me or tried to ridicule or provoke me. I should just remain silent because it was pointless to argue with that old man because he would cark it soon anyway. That was his advice to me. I had noticed for quite a while that my father didn't get on with my grandfather's brother and it seemed they had some sort of conflict in the past. When they were together, my father was very self-conscious and took extra care to behave himself. However, on that day I was so pleased to hear that I would be living with my parents soon so I didn't bother to ask what sort of problem my father had with my grandfather's brother. But there was one thing that caught my interest.

My father told me that this was the second time that we had to stay apart and it was my doing that caused this separation, but what about the first separation? Was it because of me as well? Why was he forced to stay away from me, and how come I remember nothing about it?

My father told me that our first separation took place when I was very young. It was shortly after I was born and I was not even a year old yet.

"At that time you were with your mum and grandma." He said. "They both helped look after you."

"And where were you then?"

"I was staying somewhere else. It was an unpleasant place." He was silent for a big while before saying. "Once in a while your mum and grandma brought you along when they came to see me."

"But why did you have to stay in that place?"

“I was forced to stay there.” He became silent again and I could see his discomfort and shame. However, he seemed to realize that if he continued to keep me in the dark, I would persist with my endless questions, so in the end he decided to tell me. “I was in jail.”

“You were in jail!” I was stunned and unable to say anything except repeating what he had just told me.

Yes, he had been in jail, he told me. He faced a serious charge and was jailed for an attempted murder, even though in reality it was merely a quarrel. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison but he spent only a little over 3 years in jail, as his jail term was later reduced because of his good behavior. Each year on auspicious days, which were many, he was granted a royal reduction in sentence and because of this, he was released much sooner than his original jail term would have permitted.

“Who was the one who caused you to go to jail, dad?” I asked.

“Grandpa Siam’s brother, Grandpa Thai.” He said.

I would never comprehend why a person could hurt his own family member to this extent. For a reason unknown to me, Grandpa Thai caused my father to go to jail for almost four years, and this probably explained why their relationship was not that smooth, even though they live on the same plot of land within the same fence. Also, unlike Grandpa Thai, my father does not act like he owns the land. Was it because one party had wronged the other? And maybe the way my father behaves suggests that he accepts that what he did was wrong? I somehow sense that my father feels that way.

I now understand why whenever I visit my family home, Grandpa Thai appears to me as the most intimidating and authoritative of all my family members. He has owned this plot of land for a long time and everything on it is the fruit of his own blood, sweat and tears. He built a garage, a grocery store, and buildings that he has rented out to migrant workers. A small road that runs past the family home to the front is even named after him to suggest his influence. In addition to the main house, he also built a lot of small houses for all his relatives to live together in peace and harmony as much as possible. This is a small fiefdom that he had established with his very own hands. Since he was a small boy, he was driven by a strong determination to build a house for his mother, a promise he had

already fulfilled, and now in his old age, he has accomplished all his dreams. He has the future, the present, and the past; all these are the outcome of his diligence, aspirations and determination to create a history of his own.

The next day I try hard to find an opportune moment to approach Grandpa Thai, knowing full well that I am not his favorite niece. What I did to my great-grandmother over ten years ago sent me far away from home, but many years have passed and he is much older now so I hope that his hatred has somehow diminished.

I know that around this time of the day, he usually spends hours in solitude in his prayer room praying, meditating, and passing on his merit to others—all the things that purify his mind. I wait for him in front of the prayer room and when he opens the door, I pretend that I simply happen to pass by.

"How long have you been back?" He asks me by way of greeting.

It seems like that is all he wants to say to me and he is about to walk away when I call out to him:

"Grandpa!"

He glances at me but continues with his walk. I follow him until he finds somewhere to sit in the kitchen and asks me why I'm still bothering him.

"I'm going to be straightforward with you because I know that whatever I do will annoy you anyway. The thing is there is something I want to ask you about."

"Go ahead then."

"Do you still recall the conflict you had with my dad?"

"What conflict?" He said. "Your dad had all sorts of issues in the past."

"The conflict that sent my dad to jail, shortly after I was born," I said.

"Your father was a bastard." He breathes in deeply, trying to calm himself down as a good Buddhist. "In those days, your father was a moron, a good for nothing type, unlike what he is now. I think it was only after you were born that he improved himself."

My father is now working at Grandpa Thai's garage, looking after the garage business for him.

“He was drunk every day,” he says. “When he was drunk, he liked to pick a fight with people, even those who were his own parents and relatives.”

“Did he start a fight with you?” I ask.

Grandpa Thai does not say anything for a long while. He bites his teeth until his jaw becomes prominent. He makes a lot of noise when breathing and I notice that he is having difficulty breathing, like many other old people. I don’t want to be like this when I get old.

“I have forgiven him for whatever he had wronged me in the past and I no longer think about our past conflicts.” He says. “After all, your dad shares my bloodline as he is my brother’s son.”

So it turns out that what I want to know has been kept in the past and overshadowed by forgiveness. Grandpa Thai has now chosen the Buddhist way that encourages non-attachment and the acceptance of changed conditions that take place as one becomes older. All individuals have their pasts and had experienced things that caused them pain but once they have reached a ripe old age, forgiveness then seals those painful pasts and packs them into boxes to be removed and placed in storage. The contents of those boxes are not to be disturbed, at least not in the near future.

I might try to ask my father again. Even though his past suffering has made it hard for him to recount what had happened, he is like someone with a chronic wound whose past is not sealed by forgiveness yet. His past is actually ready to reveal itself and transform into a new wound anytime. There is a limit of what he can tell me. What I can do is to reach out, touch his past ever so slightly, and ask to be told what is necessary for me to know, no more than that. I can’t ask more because the past might flow out of his wound, causing my father to die from losing too much blood.

The two parties have forgiven each other so would it be pointless if I try to get to the bottom of the conflict by asking and gleaning what I want to know from those involved?

And where am I in this equation?

The Ancestors' Miracle

This is what my father was able to relate to me and I will narrate it as follows:

Like my mum, my grandma was from the Northeast, although they were from different provinces. Grandma fled poverty to look for a job in Saraburi and got a job at a factory that made fabrics. As a young woman, she was quite pretty but she could not read or write and didn't know much about the world. She was sixteen when she started her job at the factory and less than a year later, she was romantically involved with one guy.

He was a foreman at that factory so grandma thought being with him would provide her with security in life. They were together for 3 or 4 years without getting married and her parents knew nothing about the relationship. Because grandma sent more money home, her parents were not worried about her.

Grandma was not really happy during the 3 or 4 years she was with that guy. He was abusive and treated her badly. He was also addicted to drinking, gambling and often fooled around with other women. In fact, he showed his true colors after less than a year of their relationship by physically abusing her. The neighbors shunned him but grandma endured it all, believing her life was in his hands, as he could sack her anytime.

She had two kids with him, both were boys. After the births of the boys, she wanted them to visit her parents, but he was against it. He said it was pointless to bring his children to her home village and it was against his will as he didn't want to see her parents. It was, however, grandma's intention to indirectly push him to bring their kids to see her parents so that he could formally ask her parents for her hand in marriage. According to her, they were together for quite a while and already had two kids. Marrying her was the right thing he should do.

But he refused to go along with her so, without telling him, grandma took her children to see her parents by herself. When she returned, he beat her up brutally, kicked her out of his house, and sacked her.

Grandma had to stay in hospital for almost a week and it was during that time that she met grandpa, who was a doctor at the district hospital and opened a clinic in Kaeng Khoi town.

He was a well-known and well-respected doctor. Being more progressive than most, grandpa was among the first doctors who utilized and adapted traditional Thai medicinal practice for the treatment of patients. He recognized the usefulness of age-old local wisdom and valued it, even though he spent years overseas learning about modern medical science.

Grandpa was very kind to grandma. He listened to her and got to know her sad plight and suffering, much more than what he knew about other patients. Later he got her a job at a Chinese restaurant whose owner he was familiar with. He also found a new place for her to stay.

Grandma was a great cook. In fact, grandpa could also cook very well, even though he kept that skill a secret from grandma. Every day she visited him at his clinic, carrying tins containing the food she cooked for him. Grandpa was pleased because he loved to see her every day and he found her food delicious. As time passed, grandpa started to visit grandma at a rented room where she lived and my father was conceived and born during that time.

That factory foreman looked for grandma everywhere and in the end he found her. He wanted to force grandma to go back with him as he needed someone to look after his children for him. He caused such a big row and was about to hit grandma but grandpa intervened and got into a fight with him to protect grandma. “You are just a coward bastard who only dares to hit women!” Grandpa yelled at him. “Come on! Fight me like a man!” He said. “Get out of here and don’t you dare show your face again!”

From then on, grandma never saw him again.

Grandpa was a talented man with lots of abilities. He was far-sighted, smart, and was not afraid to defend others with physical force when he had to. He seemed like a perfect guy and perhaps in every way above grandma in the eyes of others, especially Thai, grandpa’s brother. However, grandpa never saw it this way.

Grandpa Thai disliked grandma and said she was a country bumpkin and a stupid woman who couldn't read or write. The thing that was more important, however, was the fact that he didn't like the way Grandpa Siam led his life. In Grandpa Thai's eyes, Grandpa Siam had no future and was irresponsible. How could he have a wife and son when he couldn't even look after himself? Not a thought given to his mum (or my great-grandmother). In his head, there was not a single concern about how his mum would feel.

Such criticism of Grandpa Siam's behavior had some truth in it. When grandma was pregnant, Grandpa Siam brought her to Thap Kwang district to live on a plot of land owned by Grandpa Thai. After living there for a while, one day Grandpa Siam simply vanished into thin air, and at that time my father was just about three years old.

There were all sorts of rumors about grandpa's disappearance. Some said he volunteered to work as a doctor along the borders, others claimed that he went mad and ran headlong into a jungle or cave in Kanchanaburi. According to them, his insanity was triggered by the attempt to combine traditional medicine with modern medical practice, mixing everything up until it drove him crazy. These rumors are hard to believe. Years later when grandpa showed up again, he looked just fine, no signs of madness whatsoever. In fact, his charisma seemed to increase.

When he returned to Kaeng Khoi this time, grandpa brought with him new knowledge and skills. He upgraded the treatment offered at his clinic from the general one to a new kind of treatment that made use of stem cells. People were very excited about the new treatment and it became quite popular through word of mouth. Grandpa started to look for new places to open new branches of his clinic that specialized in enhancing beauty from within. He also had a massage and spa shop where nourishment and health products were sold. Grandma worked by his side helping him look after his business. Those years were the prime of grandma and grandpa's lives.

"It's disgusting," Grandpa Thai had said. "It's not an honest way to earn a living. They are taking advantage of people's hopes and dreams."

According to Grandpa Thai, what Grandpa Siam and grandma were doing was superficial and it was not a real job that offers security and stability. It was not even a job, but a business brought about by consumerist capitalism!

A few years later Grandpa Thai would refer to it as part of the ‘immoral capitalism’.

In those days, however, Grandpa Thai believed that Grandpa Siam was trying to make money by taking advantage of poor people who had no education and were short-sighted. Among those were people who wanted to see an immediate change in their complexion and those ready to believe in the miracle of stem cell treatment. For the latter group, if a paralyzed person was able to slightly move his hands or feet just once or twice after being injected with stem cells, they would be convinced that the treatment worked. In short, they were prone to mass hysteria. How could they be certain that that kind of treatment wouldn’t become harmful later?

A year later, Grandpa Thai would replace the term ‘immoral capitalism’ with ‘the horrific destruction caused by populism.”

Grandpa Thai had a satellite receiver installed and since then he had his television set stay tuned to one particular channel all day and night. It was a channel that broadcast vicious attacks of the then populist government and aimed to mobilize and manipulate its audience. Soon Grandpa Thai put on a yellow shirt and equipped himself with the clapping hands associated with that movement. Some days he stood in front of his house and made a lot of noise with those clappers, obviously intending to disturb my grandma. Not long afterwards, grandma retaliated by buying red clapping feet for herself and clapping them loudly to annoy Grandpa Thai.

At Grandpa Thai’s house, there were a lot of direct selling products he bought from that channel. He only used some of what he purchased, others were left untouched in their sealed packages. He said he only bought them so that he could contribute something to the fight of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). Grandma also bought a lot of things to show support to the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD).

The minor conflict between the two brothers had been searching for a way to manifest itself and when it eventually did find what it was looking for, the confrontation

took place. This confrontation was not caused by the clashing of ideals, but was triggered by a small disagreement between the two brothers.

Grandpa Thai travelled to the capital city with others who shared the same political stance. Once there, they organized a protest that aimed to get rid of the puppet government that allegedly sought to change the country's political system. They hoped that what they were doing would help them achieve the ultimate victory. To their deep disappointment, the election that took place after the completion and implementation of the 2007 constitution led once again to the victory of the much hated political party that kept haunting Grandpa Thai and other yellow shirts. Grandpa Thai and his like-minded folk set up their headquarters near Makkawan Bridge, which was not far from the Parliament House. Later that evening they would join forces to uproot that government once and for all. Their leaders had announced on stage that their mission would be aided by several 'invisible armies' namely, the Vanguard, the Small Army, and the Fantastic Army.

The next day, they divided themselves into groups and dispersed with the mission of laying siege to important government buildings. Eventually, they succeeded in taking control of all—the Ministry of Treasury, the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, the Ministry of Telecommunications, the Government's TV station, and finally the Government House.

Grandpa Siam and grandma could not let this happen without doing anything. What those yellow shirted people did was unacceptable for them. The two of them together with my father boarded a bus to Bangkok to join almost a hundred thousand red shirts from all over the Northeast who were heading to the same destination. My mother and her parents were among them, and that was how my parents met and soon fell in love.

Grandpa Siam and grandma joined other red shirts at Sanam Luang. Late that night Grandpa Siam told grandma to stay there with others but he left with a small group of red-shirted protestors to find out what Grandpa Thai and his yellow shirted folk were up to. Shortly afterwards, the clash between the two factions took place in a small alley near Ratchadamnoen Boxing Stadium. First the two brothers argued heatedly then their supporters charged at one another with fists, flag poles, stones and other kinds of weapons

they had managed to get hold of. Soon several shots could be heard and some of Grandpa Siam's red shirt fellows collapsed.

Grandpa Siam himself was brutally attacked. His right eye was hit and full of blood. His head was also injured. He was sure that Grandpa Thai was the one who attacked him.

Grandpa Siam and grandma returned home defeated. My father also asked my future mother to go back home with him.

What happened to Grandpa Siam really upset my father. His heart was full of the desire for revenge. Hatred filled his young heart and he couldn't forgive Grandpa Thai for brutally attacking his father. My father took to drinking and couldn't force himself to go to work. He sat in front of his house every day, waiting for Grandpa Thai to return home from Bangkok.

Later that year Grandpa Thai and his yellow shirt folk succeeded in laying siege to the two biggest airports of the country. Around the same time, the constitutional court dissolved the political party the yellow shirts despised and banned it from political involvement for 5 years. This decision by the court made the then prime minister lose his position, and soon a new prime minister from the opposing party replaced him. He was the youngest and the most handsome prime minister Thailand had had so far. He also spoke English with the most British accent. These things about him had to be recorded as part of Thailand's administrative history. Grandpa Thai returned home soon after the new prime minister was installed.

It was around early December. My father had been drinking and playing with fire crackers since Loy Kratong Day, and when he could see that Granpa Thai had finally got home, he started to throw fire crackers towards Grandpa Thai's house. He continued doing that, intending to provoke the older man. (He asks me not to get upset at him for behaving that way, explaining that at that time he was still a teenager and was driven by anger against Grandpa Thai and the desire to take revenge. He insists that he is totally a different person now.) After Grandpa Thai could no longer stand it, he came out to the front yard and yelled at my father:

“You and your folk are a hopeless case. It’s because of me that you all have a roof over your head, but you are an ungrateful lot. The land you live on belongs to me, but you act like a malicious traitor. Get out of my land! You should follow that treacherous ex-prime minister and serve him like what slaves do to their master!”

Grandpa Thai’s hateful condemnation was too much for my grandma to bear. She emerged from her house and verbally attacked him in retaliation. Both hurled abuse at each other until things got out of control and grandma walked straight to Grandpa Thai’s front yard. My father, who was drinking and intensely paying attention to what was going on, could tell that something bad was going to happen. Grandpa Thai who had beaten up his father would soon hurt his mother for sure.

Thus convinced, he grabbed a billhook that was placed against a wall by his side and ran towards Grandpa Thai’s yard. My father was right. He saw Grandpa Thai punching my grandma a couple of times until she lost balance and was about to collapse. In a fiery rage, my father raised the billhook in his hand and brought it down with full force on Grandpa Thai’s neck, intending to kill him. The curved blade hit Grandpa Thai’s jaw and his neck was caught in the curve. The blade was blunt so it didn’t really chop off Grandpa Thai’s head, but the force of the attack knocked Grandpa Thai unconscious and sent him to the ground.

My father was jailed for almost four years because of that assault.

And now its cause has been revealed to me.

Grandpa Thai tells me that he has forgiven my father, but I doubt if he is entitled to forgiveness.

The Arrival of the Two Brothers

According to my father, when one is experiencing a crisis in life, good and bad things often pay him a visit all at once. My father told me that about 3 or 4 months after he attacked Grandpa Thai, my mum realized that she was pregnant with me. I was like a precious gift to them during that dark period in their lives. Like my parents, my grandma eagerly awaited the day I would come out to see the world. I became the only hope that prevented them from falling into a deep despair, making them feel that life was not too unbearable. Waiting for my birth made them feel that there was still some hope in their dark future.

But bad things also paid them a visit during that time and they manifested in the arrival of the two brothers who were grandma's sons from her previous relationship. One day, out of the blue, the two brothers showed up and intruded into our family. They wanted to see grandma, their mother, and they said they had been searching for her for a long time.

They told grandma that their father had died and left them nothing but their fatherless status. The father had spent everything he had acquired during his lifetime—land, valuable possessions, money—on women and gambling, leaving his sons penniless and without anyone to turn to, except grandma, their mother.

Both of them were no longer kids. They were older than my father and they were both university students. My father said he had no idea what they wanted. When they first arrived, grandma let them stay with our family, and Grandpa Siam had no objection, knowing they were grandma's sons. It was assumed that they probably wanted to spend a few days with their mother and then would leave us alone.

But they spent more and more time at our place and became intrusive. They offered to look after things for my grandparents when they went out to work. The younger one, whose name was Chidchai, offered to help find a good lawyer for my father, and later took my father to see a lawyer to prepare to fight his case in court. He acted as if he wanted to get my father out of the mess.

One day, while drunk, my father bluntly asked the two brothers: “Why the hell are the two of you hanging around here all the time? You have no other place to go to, eh?”

My father believed that the brothers were insincere and he didn’t trust that they truly wanted to help him. The next day, the elder brother told grandma that my father was rude to them while he was drunk and that such behavior was no good. Being so eloquent, the brothers were able to convince grandma to go along with them. She said to my father: “Son, you’d better listen to your brothers. They know more than you.” My father was so frustrated that he had to share the same roof with the two brothers and he tried every way to let them know that they were not welcome.

My father’s forebodings were justified. The arrival of the two brothers and their intrusion into our family preceded devastating losses for our family. My father blamed them for the losses. It might seem like the brothers didn’t actually cause those great losses but they were a catalyst that hastened and facilitated them.

First, the lawyer they got for my father was no good. The court decreed that my father had to serve his full term in prison without any reduction. Grandma lost one son to jail but he was replaced by her other two sons who were ready to occupy the space in his family. Those sons gradually exerted ownership of his place and there was nothing he could do to protect his family. His baby, his wife and his parents were on the outside with those two brothers.

In the beginning, grandma and my mother brought me to see my father in jail every week. Then one day grandma told my father that her eldest son had left to pursue his studies and Grandpa Siam was the one who paid for those studies.

“What about the other one?” asked my father.

Grandma didn’t reply. When my father turned to look at my mum, he noticed that she avoided meeting his eyes and was sobbing a little while holding me in her arms. She seemed to be full of frustration and he could tell that the other brother was still living at home. My father promised to himself that as soon as he was released from jail, he would drag Chidchai out of his home, and if he could kill him, he would. It didn’t bother him in the least if he gets thrown in jail again. That was how outraged my father was at that time.

Chidchai had small living quarters on land that belonged to us. He had given up his university studies and had relied on whatever qualifications he had to apply for a job in town. In fact, he was the one who drove grandma and my mother to visit my father but didn't come in with them. One day, however, he came to see my father with them, and after my father had a chat with grandma and my mother, he asked to have a talk with Chidchai. They sat opposite each other and there was a glass panel separating them. When Chidchai picked up the phone, my father said:

"I know all about your plotting and scheming."

"Do you?" That was all Chidchai said and he acted as if my father's fury didn't bother him in the least.

"You and your brother want to get rid of me so that you could steal my land!" said my father. "I know everything. I know that you plan to get rid of my kid and my wife, of all my family members, so that in the end only you and your brother could claim my land as yours!"

"This is so typical of your type." Chidchai argued back. "There is nothing in your head but rubbish. I'm your brother and I have done everything I can for you. You ungrateful bastard! No doubt you are rotting in here because your head is full of horrid nonsense. And what is the big deal if I choose to live on that land?"

"You'd better watch out. You won't get away with it!" My father threatened him in a low voice, having no wish for a prison guard to overhear his threat. "Wait till I get out of here!"

"See! Like what I said, a brute like you will be thrown in jail again and again. You will never get away from jail." Chidchai mocked my father.

After that my father heard nothing about the two brothers as grandma wouldn't mention anything about them, knowing that they upset my father. However, he wasn't sure whether being kept in the dark tortured him even more than being told what the brothers were up to or not. During those tedious prison years, he asked himself again and again whether he would have enough courage to kill them or not, if, after his release, he discovered that they were still lazing around at his place.

But when my father was released from jail, they were no longer there. Grandma told him that Chidchai had bought a house for himself somewhere in Saraburi's suburban area.

That was a big relief for my father. He actually didn't want to cause trouble, but if something decisive had to be done to protect his family, he was prepared to do it. According to my father, the intrusion of the two brothers into our family was no good to anyone, and particularly bad for me and my mother. But the two brothers were not the only problem on his mind when he was released from jail, my father also had to deal with Grandpa Thai, who was the rightful owner of this land.

My father tried his best to avoid Granpa Thai. In the beginning he couldn't get a job so he rarely left home. Only my mother went out to work every day like before. It was Grandpa Thai who approached him first. He came to see my father at home and asked how life was in jail and whether serving time in jail had made a man out of him. My father said nothing and kept avoiding Grandpa Thai's eyes. It seemed to him that the older man no longer bore a grudge against him. He approached my father like an elderly relative who wanted to make peace and to ask how my father was doing. According to my father, Grandpa Thai had forgiven him and believed that he had paid for his crime by serving time in jail and being deprived of his freedom. Grandpa Thai didn't want to seek revenge, and he intended to ask if my father could help him out at his garage. Thus, my father followed him to the garage, and since then he has been working at Grandpa Thai's garage. Grandpa Siam and grandma were both pleased with the way things turned out.

After a while, 2015 arrived and it was a year of devastating losses for our family. As far as my father is concerned, the brothers triggered those losses.

That year Grandpa Siam collapsed and lost consciousness while he was at his clinic. Grandma brought him to a private hospital but when there was no sign of improvement, she moved him to another hospital. Grandpa Siam's condition was known among all the relatives, including the two brothers, who also visited him a couple of times while he was hospitalized. The only person who didn't know about his illness was great-grandmother. My father told me that grandma had done everything she could to make grandpa regain consciousness. Just before he fell down and became paralyzed, Grandpa Siam was

experiencing the most glorious period of his life. He was about to become part of the local political scene, but his glorious path vanished when he lost consciousness. Grandpa eventually passed away after months of immobility and unconsciousness.

As I understand it, that year Grandpa Siam didn't depart from this world alone because great-grandmother soon followed him. Because of this, I was sent away to live with my maternal grandparents in the Northeast and things got worse and intense once again.

Grandpa Thai was insane with rage, grief, and hatred. He directed his boiling anger at my parents, who no longer had Grandpa Siam with them. He said he should have known that my parents were waiting for that moment when they could shatter him and destroy everything he cherished. He labelled them ungrateful, treacherous, and cursed with bad luck. His relatives and those close to Grandpa Thai tried to talk some sense into him and calm him down, but his grieving heart was flooded with venomous words. He accused my father of harboring the desire for revenge and using me to take revenge for him (Such an unfair and heartless accusation! She was also my great-grandmother!) Sheltering these cursed offspring would bring nothing but disaster to the family. And if this was not enough, there were the offspring from grandma's first husband who showed up acting suspiciously, and left with 'their stories of utterly shameless lies'. They were the lot who earned their living from lies, dressing up falsehood as if it was truth, then sold it to people who knew nothing, making them believe that what was written was based on truth.

"These ungrateful offspring have inflicted a deep wound in my heart!" Grandpa Thai said angrily. "But the one who must take all the blame is their bitchy mother!"

Grandpa Thai accused grandma of being the source of all the devastating losses, of being the one who carried the destructive seeds in her womb, gave birth to them one by one, and let the destruction eat up Grandpa Thai's land and soul.

By then my father no longer resorted to violence as a means to solve problems. He knew that he had a child, a wife, and other relatives to feed and look after. He admitted that he was extremely upset at Grandpa Thai, but he could not act out of impulse anymore, now that he didn't have only himself to think about. Also, he had realized that Grandpa Thai

needed to vent his anger via spiteful words before he could calm down. Because of this, my father tried to control his anger and let Grandpa Thai spit out his venomous words.

As mentioned earlier, I was sent away to live with my maternal grandparents, and after the funerals were over, the passage of time gradually silenced Grandpa Thai.

But that outburst of his was the last straw for my grandma, who could no longer endure Grandpa Thai's hurtful and cutting words. Without Grandpa Siam, she wanted nothing but peace in her old age. Realizing that she could not find peace there, one day she said goodbye to my father and told him that she didn't worry about him anymore and that, as a father, he needed to look after his family. She asked my parents to build a home for themselves there, but she would go and live with Chidchai, a son from her first husband. That was why grandma was not there when I got home.

Contemplating How Falsehood is Reconstructed as Truth

I become really interested in what I've heard from my father—the thing about the disaster caused by the two brothers that inflicted a deep wound in our family. In a rage, Grandpa Thai blamed grandma's three sons for causing destruction to the family. I ask my father whether he still has that book with him and he says he isn't sure. He suggests that I can try searching for it. Perhaps it is bundled up with piles of old newspapers and magazines lying around somewhere in the house. My parents are not keen on reading so they don't have a specific place where books and stuff like that are kept neatly.

I was born and brought up by parents who don't see that reading could be of any use. I originated from the genes that were indifferent to the reading culture. Strangely enough, my origins and backgrounds motivated me to pursue my studies in the field of education.

Later, my father says to me that I'd better try to look for that book from Grandpa Thai's book shelves instead, and I agree with him.

In the end, I discovered that book among piles of other books bundled together in a corner of a room. In the same pile with that book are astrology books and books about Thailand and Cambodia's disputed territories with an ultra-nationalist agenda. Almost 20 years have gone by, but that book is still waiting for me in this damp room.

The book was entitled *Destructive Curse*, written by Prateep P. and first published in 2013. It is only a thin book, a novella of a just a little over 100 pages. That evening I spend two hours finishing it.

Destructive Curse consists of 13 entries and the title of each entry comes from a date, month, and year it was supposed to be written down. Together, the 13 entries build up the main plot that establishes the connection of the depicted situations and portrays the lives and the biological bond of three siblings and their mother. The most outstanding aspect of the novel is the intriguing characterization that brings out the personality traits of the characters so vividly. Also, the way the novel depicts the difference between the three

brothers is quite interesting. The author did well in terms of descriptions, which are frustration-ridden, heartrending, and realistic. The book also poses a number of metaphysical questions that invite contemplation.

Central to the text is the land that once belonged to their late father, as it functions to reflect the consciousness and attitudes of the three brothers towards their birthplace and the arrival of the intruder who sought to colonize and swallow up that land. The land can also be seen as representing the conscience of the three brothers and their mother. In other words, it figures as a geographical space and a space within the minds of all the characters.

Throughout the book, violence is employed to drive the main plot to its moving conclusion. Overall, this novel is quite interesting but not outstanding.

The writer made use of postmodern narratives strategies, which, by 2013, was no longer novel. The text seeks to blend the old with the new, as can be seen from the adoption of the diary style with a date specified at the top of each dairy entry (The diary is supposedly written by the ghost writer, who is also the narrator, and the date of each entry and the events recorded in it are significantly related.) The narrator raises a seemingly trivial question about how real life and fiction interact with each other and from then on the narrative tries to seek a path that it wants to pursue, a path that has not been discovered by others yet. Actually, to put it more correctly, it is a path that has not been pursued because no other authors are crazy enough to bring such a distressing effect to their narratives. It is like the ghost author is suggesting that if members of a certain family suffer a tragic plight as destined by an invisible hand, the readers might simply accept it as a plausible outcome of a literary convention and a matter of chance; fate's destructive curse might befall any family. In this particular narrative, on the other hand, the ghost writer or the narrator is playing a crucial role in it (although he does not want his name mentioned and refers to himself as 'he'. There are, however, times when his mother refers to him as 'Prateep'.) 'He' or the third person narrator is the eldest son of the family and he replaces that invisible hand in casting a destructive spell and all sorts of calamities on his family and his narrative. He is also the one who utters a bad omen about his own family. He insists again and again

that the narrative is merely fictional yet the readers feel that it is so real and they are quite shaken by the brutal and ruthless darkness of the narrator's heart.

The ghost writer picked up a pen and used it as a tool to destine life as it appears on paper, drawing it in an alarming direction. The readers become confused and shocked. The narrative originated from something real but then it went off track and followed the deserted path of fiction. The narrator plays two roles: one is the role of the eldest brother and the other is that of someone who determines the destiny of his family through his writing. It is noticeable that from the fifth entry, which was dated 6 December, 2008, the narrative voice changes its storytelling style and the crisis in the narrative is transformed into a mere 'problem' that has to be decoded and solved.

Like I said before, as a creative work of fiction, this novel is not that outstanding. When I look up the Internet for more information about the novel and its author, I can't find anything that tells me more about them than what is provided in the brief biography of the author on the last page of the novel.

In this light, *Destructive Curse* didn't seem to be a literary work that created much impact among the reading public.

The whole novel appears to be full of contradictions from the beginning to the end---it is equally professional and amateurish and it wavers between being fiction and non-fiction. To me the contradictions reflect the author's hesitation and uncertainty, not his professionalism. The novel seemed to originate from thoughts and ideas that have yet to be fully formed, and this severely weakens it. Nonetheless, even though it is a literary work that lacks the power to shine brightly when it comes out to the reading public, once its light is directed to those real lives behind the narrative, that light becomes fiery and powerful.

It is because the characters in the novel are named after my family members and myself. (Even though the narrator tries not to use his name and reveal his identity.) The events unfolding in the novel and in real life can also be attributed to the same cause, although the novel upended the whole thing. Grandpa Thai is portrayed as a self-serving encroacher, and my father as a love child. Can we call a literary work that dresses up falsehood as truth a creative work without a qualm? That writer reconstructed and

reconfigured memories to create a new history out of them; he demolished the old architectural structure and replaced it with a new one. He adjusted, reshaped, and relocated the identities of myself and of my ancestry—my parents and grandparents.

It's a pity that other readers know nothing about what was behind the narrative. For myself and my family members, that narrative has inflicted a terrible pain on us, on our ancestors, our own narrative, and our memories. It does not surprise me that Grandpa Thai is so upset about it, and I believe my father feels the same way about it.

That night I was not able to sleep because I found what I had read too disturbing. Despite the fact that those incidents took place so many years ago and our family has by now reached a state of peace and happiness, there is no denying that the sediment of the past has been stirred up. It is as if the age-old rust is about to do its job, gradually eroding the steel core.

I looked up various websites, trying to gather whatever information was available about that anonymous author. There were few literary events in 2013, except the public recognition that Bangkok gained the status of a world literary city that year. One day, as I was browsing through a website that sells second-hand books, a particular title caught my attention. I spent ages gazing at the image on its cover, fancying that in doing so I could see through its front cover and be able to read the contents of that novel. I looked at the name of its author and found that it was not the name I was looking for. The author is not Prateep P., although it is possible that the name on the front cover of the novel could have been another pen name used by that very same author. For some inexplicable reason, I became convinced that the novel was authored by him. Perhaps it was the title *Dr. Siam's Adventure in the World of Conspiracy* that brought about such a conviction. I decided to order that book.

Two days later, the novel arrived. It was in a bad shape and damp spots were visible here and there. It wasn't merely the age of the book that contributed to its bad condition, its low quality paper was also to blame. The two-tone front cover that depicts a woodcut-like graphic image of a fleeing man makes the book appear like it belongs to the Literature for Life genre. The front cover, the overall design of the book, the book title, the name of

its author—Tai Pudpard—and the fact that the book was published in 2016 all strongly suggest that the intention was to simultaneously mock, ridicule, and satirize its own mode of expression and the society described and created through its narration.

It didn't take me that long to finish reading that novel, and I found that my assumption about it is correct. The mocking and satirical intention is conveyed through both the content and outward appearance of the novel.

In the very first chapter of the novel, the anonymous author discloses that he is the ghost writer who authored the story about the plight of a 50 something years old man named Siam, who has to flee for his life in the world of the afterlife. Here the reader is forced to confront the contradiction (when anonymity and disclosure are brought together). Actually, it is better to refer to the world inhabited by Siam as the invisible world or the parallel universe of the everyday world. Dr. Siam was torn by the obligations or worries of the everyday world and the desire to be free or to enter the idealistic world. However, the invisible world that was supposedly occupied by Dr. Siam alone was soon infiltrated by so many things. (And this is so awful!) So many people compete to come up with their own versions of his identity and their own definitions of him, and these attempts were slowly absorbed into Dr. Siam's invisible world.

The space that was supposed to be his was contaminated by 'the views' of people surrounding him and, little by little, they tightened their grip on the wandering soul of Dr. Siam until it was totally crushed. Other people's views sought to explain his identity and eventually it seemed like he himself became merely one of those explanations.

The narrative strategy employed also works in a way that helps convey such a message. The author makes use of footnotes, something often associated with academic strategy, as a means to undermine and exert control over the main narrative. (Despite its manifesto style, the main narrative, which has Dr. Siam as the narrator, is undercut by naivety and stupid jokes.) The impression created is that Dr. Siam has never been someone who can inspire trust, and even the author participated in depriving him of credibility by making him look stupid through his laughable use of Thai and his attempt to show off his mediocre English.

The use of footnotes is quite effective as it reflects the overwhelming power of reasoning to ruthlessly attack the main narrative that has already been weakened by its lack of credibility and tasteless jokes. When physical afflictions and death happen to a character that no one trusts, particularly when such a character is cornered and killed by the hand of reason and explanations grander than himself, readers tend to be indifferent. In other words, readers are often unperturbed by and eventually accept the death of the untrustworthy by the hand of reason.

To me, however, the whole thing is an utter tragedy. Perhaps the author wants to suggest that the narrative offers no hope for the main character, as not only is he attacked by other characters surrounding him, he was also undermined by the one who authored him. The other message from the author could be that even the author who created the main character cannot be trusted.

Despite the fact that *Dr. Siam's Adventure in the World of Conspiracy* is a narrative that creatively makes use of various devices, its content still serves old modes of thought and it still relies on the old way of perceiving ideals and challenging the establishment. In fact, it can be said that the content simply reiterates the paradigm of thoughts and ideas often found in Kafka and Beckett's works like *The Trial*, *The Castle, and Waiting for Godot*. In those works, an individual's quest is foregrounded and this novel's intertextual relationship with those works is clearly noticeable through its imagery, contextuality, and resolution.

I won't mention how this novel is related to my family's history. Suffice it to say that, upon finishing this novel, it is obvious that it was written by Prateep P., and Tai Pudpard is one of his pen names. This novel was published three years after the other one I discovered earlier and it portrays events that offer perfect matches to the real ones that took place in this house and on this piece of land. (The author didn't even bother to change the names of the characters and all of those who appear in *Destructive Curse* show up in this novella.) The two works undermine and reconstruct the real history of my family and drastically affect my memories and selfhood.

After reading both works, which I'm certain were authored by the same person, the falsehood or truth status of them no longer bothers me. I'm not interested in announcing that he has made things up and I know what the truth is. He occupies a particular space, a particular piece of earth, and he has composed a narrative about his predecessors. Likewise, I have my own narrative about my predecessors, the narrative derived from what others have recounted to me. Two worlds occupy the same space, although they belong to different dimensions and different orders…

After moments of contemplation uninterrupted by emotions, I gain a new insight. It is like a flash of light that dispels darkness; the insight makes me realize that it does matter when 'untrustworthiness' is made to perish in front of your very eyes, whether in the name of reason or other forms of justification. The destruction of the 'untrustworthiness' might be referred to as the destruction of evil by a virtuous force, the defeat of a monstrous being by the Lord Buddha, the victory of religion over misguided beliefs, the acquisition of a plot of land by a new owner, or the replacement of one bloodline by another ….Whatever justification is used, I cannot simply let his death fade from my memory.

Towards the end of *Destructive Curse*, the anonymous author suffers from a paralytic stroke and loses his mobility, while in another novella Dr. Siam is forced to vanish. These things matter to me. There might not be a concrete space available for the defeated, the horrendous, the evil, the untrustworthy. Still their echoes remain, and I have witnessed them, we have witnessed them.

Sins will meet their annihilation and bad karma will catch up with you. Such thoughts occur because of us, within our consciousness. I do not believe that lifeless beings are capable of using the mental faculty to form connections the way humans do. Animals do not imagine that humans are superior to them and death does not see life as something better. All these thoughts arise within me and they are influenced by the way I think and perceive myself and the world out there.

I am Maya

Who am I? I ask myself and the answer is not my name. Names are not important at all because they are merely used for the purpose of identification, and thus are labels and not the real content. When I ask 'Who am I?', what I mean is what the real content within me is.

Back to the time before I was born, the biological content that constituted me had started to form within a warm nest and it gradually reached perfection. Once the process was completed, I left that warm nest and came out to see the world. Was I aware of my identity then? I don't think so. And that lack of awareness remained with me for a decade. The world was full of new things but I had yet to ask what they were. I merely used my five senses as a tool to feel the warmth and heat and to fulfill my physical needs so that I could grow up and become ready.

During those years "I" didn't want anything and it was many years to come before "I" started to have its own desire. Before that, it was my body that determined what I wanted.

I started to learn about things around me and use words to identify things. Those words were what I had heard from others and I learned to use them to refer to things in the same way as what others did. I also learned to refer to myself as "I".

Then those words poured in, starting with words like father, mother, flesh and blood, life, family, home, land, country, the world, the universe. Things get communicated through words: "Listen, once upon a time…." and this creates the past, memories, and histories. Words bring the past back to me, the past during which I was unaware of my identity. Through what my parents recount to me, the past was delivered in front of my very eyes the night I was born. I might have felt impressed, or other feelings might have been triggered in me, not because of my own awareness but because of those words. Those words created memories, the past and me, and later I started to make use of the past together with all my senses to explain what happened around me, those situations that I, at that

stage, recognized as having been involved with. They became my experiences as conveyed through words, and at that point, the 'now' originated—the present was awakened.

During that period of life when I was aware of the existence of the present, my physical being kept growing and relying on other factors for its growth. During that time, I also became aware of what I wanted, which was no longer merely the need for food, but other needs. I wanted this and that but I didn't get everything I wanted. This led me to hope, dream, and imagine that I could get hold of what I wanted. At this point, the light from the time ahead shone on me and the future turned to look at me.

Now I know that where I stand is the present that is located in space and time. As I walk towards Grandpa Thai's house, I have to go through space and spend time organizing the balance and progress of everything that exists here in the present. I was a little kid in the past but then I grew up and have become a young woman who will turn into an old woman in the future. I may seem to accept what is going on in the present spatially and temporally, but I also try to resist it. Actually, I often refuse to go along with the present and prefer to dwell in the past, in memories and in the imagination and hopes of the future. In just one day I travel to so many places in a split second—to outer space, the universe, the galaxy, the milky way, and other milky ways.

A small mass in the darkness of the universe moved so fast in a circle then forged and compressed itself until it became a dark hole that sucked everything into its horizon of events. The more it sucked things in, the smaller it became. Its size kept decreasing until it was the same size as when I was a fetus in my mother's womb. Such an incredibly small size! The whole universe could fit in a mother's womb; everything was in there and compressed until it was reduced into an atom, then a quark, and something smaller than a quark. This thing was not aware of its existence. It was so small and it could reside in a mother's womb, or in an even smaller space. Its whole size is more or less the same as a handful of leaves in the hand of the Lord Buddha, who extended his arm in order to spread those leaves. The breeze lifted them up and they dropped in front of the Buddha's disciples. The Buddha himself was seated under the big tree and in his hand were the leaves, which were about to be spread and blown away by the breeze. He was aware of the movement of

his hand as his mind was focusing on it. Thus he lived in the present and his present did not recede and become a dotted line or vanish. His present was similar to a constant river flow that does not lose its continuity. There is no past and no future.

Who am I? What is the substance of my being? I have the past and the future but do they really belong to me? I'm conscious and my existence is visible. At the moment, I'm here in my hometown and in my old bedroom, and I will turn 20 in 2029, which is a few months away.

Once I recall the past, inquire about it, and gaze towards the horizon of events, my past gradually comes into existence and starts to formulate. Stories start to unfold and rearrange into images, events, and words. It originates from my awareness that triggers my inquiry. I ask: "Who am I?", then I wake up, as if I was in a slumber or a state of nothingness before. As soon as I start to ask about my identity, stories flood in.

Stories occurred before me, or did my existence predate those stories? The past and the future existed before me, or was it because of my existence that gave birth to the past and the future. I don't like to make things complicated and my questions are not meant to create confusion about my identity. To me, those questions are profoundly important.

Our identity is immediately formulated when we were born, or does it originate when we start to ask who we are. If the latter is the case, then my real identity occurred quite recently when I reached the age of 19 and began to ask those questions that led to the birth of stories. Or is it possible that before I started my inquiry or even before I was born, those stories had already come into existence? After my birth and my inquiry, connection and bond is established. I become involved with things that have existed before—the past, memories, narratives, sadness and happiness, struggle and passivity, and victory and defeat. Am I merely a component of a grand narrative?

When unknown external factors determine and destine the path of our lives, we traditionally refer to them as 'destiny' or 'fate'. People who frequently talk about destiny or fate are often those who have encountered unexpected calamities beyond their control, for example, repeated misfortunes, sudden death, natural disasters, etc. People don't plan for this sort of stuff to happen to them but bad luck simply befalls them. Those who struggle

financially and are overwhelmed by debts might never emerge from poverty, or some people might meet a sudden death, like being hit by a car or a stray bullet, or there might be a big flood or a devastating earthquake that kills hundreds or thousands of people. People don't plan those calamities for themselves and it seems they are destined by something else. Is this something else the Lord Brahma or Fate?

As far as I'm concerned, however, I don't think Brahma or Fate has anything to do with the calamities that befall people. I believe the real causes of those calamities stem from humans themselves. Whether consciously or not, each of us plays a certain role that affects others; it is like we each create a wave that reaches others and somehow links us with them in one way or another even though we may not know them in real life. Even things like disasters are caused by humans; an incident that occurs in one place can affect other places; we are a part of each other and we can affect others or form a certain link with them in one way or another.

In my case, I'm also affected by that kind of wave that comes in the form of my family's history and legends. I'm not the one who caused the conflicts and wounds, but I inevitably become part of them ever since I was born. They are like the heritage that constitutes my being.

I'm just a tiny narrative that is part of the immensity of the master narrative. Actually, I strongly feel that I'm merely a character in it.

I exist when I started to ask who I am, then situations and events arranged the position I occupy. I'm now in one of the rooms of my family home and I have just taken a trip from Nakhon Pathom after telling my boyfriend that I wanted to break up with him. He is about to become a monk, but before that he has to go through the ritual of being a nāga first. Nāga reminded me of my great-grandmother's ancient tales, which also included the legends about the Buddha's footprints and others. I absorbed stories and they helped construct my identity and bond me with stories that existed before my time. Only one thing happened to me in my present: I had a fight with my ex-boyfriend then I was somehow driven by that quarrel to serve the past that I didn't create. I became part of the narrative and started investigating and tracing. I listened to stories about what took place in the

distant past then the past plunged itself towards me. Do I have to be responsible for the past? I'm enveloped by my ancestors' stories and the ties and obligations that come with them. I'm asked to remember them, to remember them well, and to live my life as a continuation of that past.

What about my present? You didn't want to write about it as it is not part of your grand narrative.

I'm faceless and my physical appearance is unclear because I generally do not need those physical attributes. Thoughts are what I need to set me into motion. In this narrative, my thoughts indicate my identity and my physical surroundings—objects, lights, shadows, or weather conditions—are quite obscure. If I don't pay attention to them and gaze at them, they hardly become vivid.

I'm curious to know whether I have beliefs or faiths or not. I like to use my critical thinking to expose this and that thing, and I often compare things or try to figure out how they are connected, but what if I start to have beliefs and faiths? Will you let me hold on to my beliefs and faiths even if they are illogical?

Can *you* set me free from those narratives of bygone years? I'm merely a newcomer.

Because those narratives are so ancient and I'm not familiar with those things of the past. My memory is short and it keeps changing. Each day there are new things that enter my memory and they replace the ones that have been stored there. Time also moves much faster for me and it does not last that long as in the past. Nowadays the space we occupy is much less spacious than in the past, and stuff like land, territory, ownership, home, as well as their long histories and the deep attachments they create mean nothing to me. Indeed, I feel alienated from the earth due to the fact that myself and people like me are used to living in a small square room of a condominium. We share our living space and we are too far removed from those conflicts of earlier eras. Also, our love, attachment, possessiveness, belief and faith are uniquely ours.

Those family feuds and clashes of the past also appear too archaic, too insane, and too barbaric to me. They slumber in the past, where they belong. If you are curious, if the past is curious, we also have our own narratives that are firmly located in our time to

recount. Our narratives are no better or worse than yours, but we have hope and faith—the terms borrowed from your time. The heritage from the past still exists in our era.

I haven't forgotten the past but my movement belongs to the present.

You have to set me free so that I can be reborn in my own narrative.

Rebirth

It is too dim and obscure, and the fine elements of darkness still linger in the air. Once awake, I let my eyes gradually adjust to the dimness of the bedroom ….Even though the room is air-conditioned, I can tell from the way the air-conditioning works that that the outside air is cooler and more humid than normal. The cool and damp morning has made me stay under the blankets longer.

The dawn light shines on the window panes and finds its way through the double layered curtains into the bedroom. From a distance comes the call of an Asian koel. I pick up a mobile phone from somewhere near my pillow and turn it on. The light from the screen brightens my face and I notice that it was 6.11 am. According to the phone, the temperature is 20 C and the dark sky is covered with heavy clouds, signaling upcoming rains. A tropical depression from China has reached the North, Northeast and Central Region. The Thai Gulf and nearby areas are hot and humid, and the sea is rough and stormy. The clash between two different types of air mass may result in thick clouds and heavy rains in Southern Thailand, and scattering rains are predicted in the Central Region.

I press the camera icon of the phone and focus the camera on my face, which, normal for someone who has just woken up, is not very nice to look at. My eyes are still covered in discharge, my breath stinks, and my cheeks are creased as they have been pressed against pillows and blankets. My hair also looks like a mess. Still this is my face, with its olive complexion, wide forehead and thick eyebrows (that need to be trimmed soon). My eyes are neither big nor small and I have a tiny mole under my left eye. From where I'm on my bed gazing at the camera that focuses on my face, my nostrils look big and my lips appear too thick. It's not a good idea to take a picture of myself from this angle. We all know what angle is the best one to take a snapshot of our face.

I close the camera icon, resist the temptation to browse my personal pages, get up, and head towards the corridor. Once I open the glass door, I can see from the corridor of my unit on the 9th floor that the sky is quite cloudy, just like what I found out earlier from

my phone. It is chilly outside and the damp wind is trying to sneak itself through the narrow openings of the window panes. I can hear the reverberating bird song and there is no movement in the spacious yard below. It's probably still too early and all I can see below in the yard are lots of parked cars and bicycles. The yard looks darker than normal as if it has recently absorbed water. Perhaps it was drizzling last night.

I keep four potted plants in one corner of my corridor and they are all Rosemary plants. One is bigger than the rest because it is my original one and I had chopped off some of its branches and planted them in the other three pots. During the first week, those branches looked so withered as if they wouldn't be able to survive, but they recovered after one week had gone by. I'm so pleased that they are gradually sinking roots and becoming stronger. I stroke my original Rosemary plant and place my hand close to my nose to smell the pleasantly strong fragrance of the plant. It seems there's no need to water the plants this morning.

I walk back into the room and boil some water so as to make a cup of digestive herbal tea. I often have a constipation problem so I need to drink that kind of herb every morning. Then I walk into the bathroom to wash my face and clean my teeth.

I intend to visit the university library this morning, although I can find what I'm looking for from web pages without having to leave my room. Today, however, I feel that it is necessary for me to go out, being motivated to move my body across space and time. I believe that sometimes we need to go out and try to chase what we seek so as to make ourselves more active. Take this for instance, the information about the weather and temperature available from my cell phone is not knowledge, but merely a channel, a window, or a frame through which we can see what we are interested in. That information from my phone is not quite the same as the experience I gain when I open the glass door, go out, and let the damp cold air bathe my whole body. It's true that the sky looks more or less the same as what the computing system of the phone has forecasted, but oftentimes we tend to believe this sort of tool or window too much. We see it as an expert in predicting things for us, in managing everything for us, and in processing and screening stuff for us. We even let it feel and think for us, and we use it to remember important personal details

and information for us so that we won't have to memorize them. Worse, we let it become our instinct. All these make me feel that I should rely more on my own judgement and thinking capacity rather than allowing myself to view everything through this tool.

Even though it is semester break, people still hang around the campus and there are activities going on similar to what happens during the semester. Students who live on campus can be seen everywhere; some of them might have chosen to remain on campus during the whole semester break while others might have just come back from a trip home. Within the vast campus, food shops, coffee shops and other types of businesses are still open. I leave my apartment room and walk along a path towards a cafe. Around me are a lot of green trees with dark brown trunks. The wet moss gives off a strong damp odor and I notice the smell of stale mud from a pond. A millipede is moving along the edge of the path on its hundred or perhaps thousand feet. Across the damp path, a snail drags itself forward, leaving a trail of glittering slime. A squirrel jumps from the treetop onto a power line and climbs on it, causing drops of water to fall on my face and arms. I heard a bicycle bell and turn to look then give way to a few cyclists. A middle-aged man in a track suit is jogging towards me from the other side of the path and when he gets closer, I recognize that he is one of my lecturers. He nods and smiles at me and I politely greet him back. Once I pass a bend, I reach a café, a small one with only a few sets of tables and chairs placed on a narrow space in front of it for customers. A few of my fellow students are already there. I order a breakfast set that consists of a cup of Americano and a croissant sandwich. The girl who takes the order does not speak Thai very clearly, and I guess she is Cambodian. To avoid the difficulty of using Thai, she later tells me how much the breakfast costs in English. After paying for my meal, I walk towards an empty table, intending to spend about half an hour here while waiting for the campus library to open.

In fact, the three students sitting at a table next to me, two girls and one boy, are ASEAN citizens like me, and they are chatting in Vietnamese, their mother tongue. I remember that when I heard the language spoken for the first time, I found it somewhat unusual. However, in an Asian Literature class last semester, a classmate read a poem in Vietnamese and I found the language beautiful and pleasing to the ear. I have noticed that

the word ‘mother’ in Vietnamese was “me”. It is actually amazing that certain words are pronounced quite similarly in many languages. The word ‘mother’ is a good example, as in many languages this word starts with the initial consonant “m”, for example, *mother* in English, *maman* in French, *mutter* in German, *mātaraḥ* in Sanskrit, *matha* in Pali, *mae* in Laotian, *mama* in Mandarin, *mœ* in Cambodian, *ahm* in Arabic, *eomeoni* in Korean, etc.

Sounds come before languages so sounds can be considered the instinct of languages and they are more ancient than languages. If languages reflect humans’ ability to think, to create, and to develop civilization, then sounds are the age-old instinctive element of languages and words. Sounds do not have ethnicity, nationality, or country and they are indiscriminately accessible to humans in all our emotional states, whether when we are laughing merrily, weeping bitterly, screaming fearfully, or moaning in pleasure. We all know what message a sound carries, be it a stressed sound, unstressed sound, high-pitched voice, or low-pitched voice. Perhaps this explains why I could grasp the basic meanings of the poems read by my foreign classmates even though I didn’t quite understand those poems at first. In my opinion, poems are therefore more special than novels and short stories because they effectively utilize sounds as a means to convey meanings. Poems are not necessarily more primitive or refreshing than fiction, but they are capable of revealing the instinctive and ancient nature of languages and words by purifying them and placing them closer to their origins.

For me, sitting around eating a croissant sandwich and contemplating the origins of sound is a simple pleasure for a late morning like this. I savor the soft and smooth touch of the cheese slice and the enticing aroma of butter in the croissant. Even though a croissant has many layers and has been through a complicated process of folding and rolling, it is still thin and its inside is full of air.

The campus library is open now but I want to linger at the café a bit longer, postponing my intention to go into the library and allowing myself to indulge in just doing nothing for a little while……The thing I have to do is awaiting me. I have started to work on it and know that I will eventually get it done. I have discovered that I agree with the

observation made by the ghost writer through the footnote of the first chapter of *The Adventure of Dr. Siam in the World of Conspiracy*. He observes that:

"Life is wonderful when all of a sudden you realize that heartache, burden and things you need to work on are awaiting you, and that after finishing your meal or after having a quick nap, you will proceed to deal with them. We have to thank life for giving us obligations and burden to ponder on. We thank life even more for allowing us to do things. Our concerns about stuff that need to be sorted out give us some certainty….."

Thus, beneath that fictional account about my grandfather and my family lies the thing that can be considered truth of life; there is a grain of truth in fiction.

Right now I do agree with his observation. I'm sitting here with my present, and the past is pushing me onward to the future, the future that I want to reach, to step upon, and to transform into the present. I want the beginning and the continuation. In a world full of dotted lines and interruptions, I use myself as something that bridges gaps, and this is how we construct our path, our time, our space, and our narrative.

Another group of people are now walking towards the front of the café, chatting noisily among themselves. I brush pieces of bread off my hands and look at the numerous lines on my palms. Some of those lines appear to be on the surface of the palms while others seem to be deeply imprinted. They form images of hills and valleys—a microcosm of the earth. An ancient voice seems to whisper to me: "Come close to look at them. You can touch them if you like." It is the voice of my great-grandmother. "They are full of wrinkles and no longer youthful. I'm about to die." Great-grandmother won't die, I said. She is immortal, like what she told me, and she will be reborn again and again…..

Tiny drops of rain fall on my palms. I look up and notice that the sky is very dark and cloudy, and it is drizzling. I get up, ready to leave. Meanwhile others are walking in, looking for somewhere to shelter from the rain. I start to walk even though the drizzle hasn't stopped yet. From somewhere behind me, someone is ringing a bicycle bell, and as I turn to look, the cyclist stops his bike right by my side. Where are you heading to? He asks. The library, I reply, and he says he is going that way himself.

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4. *The Royal Chronicle of Thonburi Phanchanthanumas (Jerm) Version, War Diaries, The Miracles of Our Great Kings, and Other Documents*, published by Sripanya Publishing House
5. "Phra Phuttachai Legend" (recounted in a sermon style), available from http://www.watphraphutthachai.com
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