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THE Barefoot Billionaires

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The Barefoot Billionaires

A Novel

V. Vinicchayakul

PROLOGUE

You may have seen them before...

Their skin tanned by the sun, their muscles sturdy from physical labour, and their hands coarse.

They may have been wearing cheap sarongs, or creased trousers made out of second-rate fabric, with shabby foam flip flops as they entered the bank, the finance company, or the land department to buy or sell land deeds.

But if you had peered at their savings account books, their promissory notes, or the land deeds where their names were printed, you would have seen at least seven figures.

Eight figures would not have been unusual.

Yes, they are billionaires, but they are not the sort of billionaires that wear expensive suits and drive flashy Mercedes Benzes. They've never heard of Pierre Cardin, Balmain, or Gucci, or the Napalai Ballroom at the Dusit Thani, and they've never stepped on the smooth grass of a golf course. Their rough bare feet are accustomed to the soil, and they prefer the fresh air of the country to air-conditioning.

But they are one of the most important economic staples of an agricultural country like Thailand.

Their livelihoods, along with millions of others, and whether they live in poverty or plenty, depend on their physical strength, their brain power, and the capabilities that they dedicate to that soil.

Let me introduce them to you.

“The barefoot billionaires”

Chapter 1

“Oh, my bloody feet are killing me!”

Khunnai Lumyai hurled her shoes on the soft carpeted floor the minute she opened the door and stepped inside the hotel room. This was because she had taken her shoes off and carried them as soon as she entered the lift in the lobby. She sank down on the carpet with her knees up and massaged her feet.

“Nat, pass me the massage oil, would you? Oh, I forgot! I have to take these bloody tights off first!”

Nat looked at her mother in amusement before lifting up her seventy-kilogram frame without flinching.

“Come here! I’ll take them off for you. If you take them off yourself, you’ll only snag them again. This is the tenth pair, Mother!”

“Well, they’re so bloody thin! It’s like you’re not wearing anything! As soon as you catch them, they tear, and they’re itchy. I’ve never been so uncomfortable in my life!”

“That’s enough, Mother! Honestly, we’ve come on a trip to Europe and all you do is complain. We don’t have to do anything. They practically lift us onto the plane.”

Khunnai Lumyai scowled.

“I’m not talking about the journey. I mean my feet. They’re not used to these shoes. They can’t breathe.”

Nat laughed, revealing her small, even white teeth.

“Who on earth breathes through their feet, Mother? There you go! I’ve taken them off for you. Are you going to have a wash before you go to bed?”

“It’s too cold. This country’s like a freezer, Nat. Did we come in the winter instead of the summer?”

“This is the summer!”

“What? This is summer?” Khunnai Lumyai cried in shock. “Even in summer, you need three layers. What do they do in the winter, Nat?”

“I don’t know. It’s my first time abroad, too!”

Khunnai Lumyai removed the layers of clothing one by one — the coat, the scarf she had wrapped around her head, the sweater, the thick T-shirt beneath, the trousers, and the knee-length shorts underneath. By the time she had finished, a mountain of clothes lay in a heap on the bed, which she exchanged for a cotton vest and a sarong, before putting the sweater back on top.

“Nat, have you found the massage oil for me?”

“It’s next to your bag!” she called from the bathroom.

When she’d finished bathing, she came back in the room and found Khunnai Lumyai lying on the bed wriggling under the duvet whose edges were tucked tightly under the mattress for added warmth, unlike her quilt in Thailand, which was loose, allowing for freedom of movement. This trip to Europe was the

first time she had encountered such a covering, and it made her uncomfortable.

“I feel like I’m trapped in a buffalo stall!” she cried.

“At least you’ll be warm,” Nat reasoned, getting into her own bed.

“How long until we go home?” Khunnai Lumuai asked dejectedly.

“What do you mean? We’ve only been here for three days. We haven’t seen all of London yet!”

“It’s such a hassle, I’m not enjoying it anymore. All we do is get on a bus, get off, walk around and look at things. The people don’t understand anything I say, and I don’t understand anything they say. And it’s full of old buildings. What do they keep them for? Or haven’t they the money to build new ones? What I can’t stand is the cold. And you can’t find chilli paste. Now that’s made me hungry.”

“You wanted to come abroad. You said you had to come once in your life. Are you satisfied now?”

“I’ll say. I’ve had enough to last me a lifetime.”

“Go to sleep, Mother. We’ve got an early start tomorrow.”

“Oh...” Khunnai Lumyai groaned and became quiet.

Nat couldn’t help smiling to herself in the darkness.

Khunnai Lumyai was her adoptive mother, but she was actually her biological aunt because Nat’s father, Headman Fuang, was Khunnai Lumyai’s younger brother, and since Khunnai Lumyai didn’t have a daughter, she had asked to adopt Nat when she was a baby.

Nat’s family had lived in Nang Meaw Subdistrict of Nakhon Pathom for generations. You could say, they had lived there since it had been a rainforest, which they had cleared, and their descendants had never left. For that reason, Nat’s family was one

of the oldest in the village, and was respected by the villagers accordingly.

Nat's father had been a village headman, as had her uncle, Khunnai Lumyai's husband. Today, Chok, Khunnai Lumyai's son, was the village headman. Indeed, theirs was an important family in the locality, and Khunnai Lumyai was referred to as 'Khunnai', despite the fact that she was not the wife of a civil servant like the district governor's wife, an officer's wife, or a teacher's wife, all of whom the villagers called 'Khunnai'.

Since Khunnai regularly socialised with these 'Khunnai', she had been keen to go on a trip abroad just as they had done.

Khunnai had five sons, but she could not depend on any of them for this trip, or indeed anything else, as she tended to grumble.

She and her husband had lavished a great deal of affection on their eldest son in the hope that his younger siblings would be able to depend on him. They had sent him to good schools and to the temple in his free time to be instructed by the monks, so that he would not be disobedient. However, the monks' instruction had turned out to be more successful than expected, and as soon as he was old enough to enter the monkhood, to his parents' shock, he turned his back on worldly matters and determined to clothe himself in saffron robes until the day he died.

Her second son had graduated from the Police Academy, to the satisfaction of his parents who wanted a son in the police force so that the villagers would be scared of him. Sadly, criminals were not similarly scared of him, and after being in the force for five years, he was shot by a criminal while he was arresting him.

The third son was Chok.

The fourth son was the most educated of his brothers and, after graduating from university, he had become so attached to the Bangkok lights that he couldn't bring himself to go back home, and after he got married, he had to take care of his father-in-law's business, so was indirectly cut off from his family.

The fifth son was the one whom Khunnai called 'Deadbeat Duang' because Duang, whose real name was Duang Dee, was the black sheep of the family. He was capable of studying, but didn't study, and capable of working, but didn't work, so his parents didn't entrust him with any work, and left him to do his own thing.

Khunnai had been asleep for a while and was snoring underneath the duvet, but Nat was still awake. Her excitement at seeing places she had only read about or seen pictures of prevented her from sleeping.

In the end, she quietly got out of bed and tiptoed to get her diary from the airline bag that she had been holding. She turned on the corner lamp and sat down to pore over the day's events.

Nat was more interested in learning new things than her older siblings and had learned to read and do arithmetic at an earlier age. That was the reason that Khunnai Lumyai had encouraged her to further her education, despite the fact that her biological mother had disagreed.

"Why spend money on education?"

"Education's important, so she'll be able to take care of herself," Khunnai replied prudently. "I don't want my daughter depending on someone else. A girl needs to be able to look after herself!"

So Nat had earned her diploma from teacher-training college, and was studying for her Bachelor's degree, while teaching in the municipal school during the day.

Since Khunnai Lumyai had wanted to go on a trip to Europe, Nat had had to accompany her due to the fact that she was the only one who could speak English and knew enough about different countries to be able to tell her adoptive mother about them.

Prior to their departure, Nat had given Khunnai a few 'lessons' in etiquette.

"The people on our tour are from Bangkok, Mother. They're posh, so you'll have to be careful what you say."

The words she was instructed not to say were the curse words and coarse phrases that normally fell from her lips like rain.

"But it's alright if there's just the two of us."

"Alright," Khunnai sighed softly, giving way to her daughter because of her desire to go abroad. "I often talk to the officer's Khunnai, you know. I know what not to say."

When they were done with the lesson on polite talk, they moved on to table manners, since Khunnai had never liked eating with a spoon and fork, and preferred to use her hands or chopsticks. If she had to use a knife and fork, she would rather go hungry.

So Nat had to pack instant noodles along with several bottles of chilli paste, having got the idea from a professor at her college, who had studied abroad.

She had advised that packing her own food would be a whole lot easier than teaching Khunnai to eat with a knife and fork.

"Hold the fork in your left hand and turn it over, and hold the knife in your right hand. Don't hold it like a chopping knife. Hold it loosely and press it with your index finger to cut each piece of meat, and hold the meat down with the fork, so it doesn't fly off the plate. Now cut the meat!"

Khunnai was sweating by the time she'd finished and neither

the knife, the fork, nor the meat seemed to have been cooperating.

“Don’t put the knife in your mouth, whatever you do, Mother! Can’t you do it yet?”

Khunnai shook her head and said, “If it’s this much trouble, I’d rather not eat it.”

Professor Suwimon, the English professor who had advised her to pack her own food, had also advised her about what clothes to take.

“Europe’s still cold towards the end of Spring, Nat. Your mother will need a coat. You can take mine. It should fit her. And don’t forget tights, or her legs will be cold.”

Khunnai had had some clothes made in the town, and didn’t have much trouble finding suitable clothing, but the tights were another matter.

“What do they call these things?”

“Tights.”

“They itch like leprosy!”

Chapter 2

Khunnai's feet were used to the outdoors, and being free, touched by the sun and the wind. They had stepped on soft earth that had been ploughed for sowing seeds, walked on dry cracked soil in the summer, and waded through mud without fear of thorns or leeches, and when their owner had become more prosperous, they had been clad in foam flip flops, which still left the toes as free as before.

Until now...

"You can't wear flip flops abroad, Mother. It's too cold. And you should wear shoes with backs. Low heels will do," Nat instructed, having made her decision.

"If you wear high heels, you'll only fall downstairs and break your leg."

"If I'd have known it would be this much trouble, I wouldn't have bothered," she grumbled to herself.

Her pride kept her from telling anyone, especially her

husband and her youngest son, Duang — Headman Hong had been her fiercest critic since they were young, and Duang was just like his father — so she did not want to give them the satisfaction.

“You’re only used to flip flops, not swanning about in shoes!” Headman Hong had teased her, raising his eyebrows towards his son and smirking, “Just you wait, Duang. She’ll come back with bare feet just like before. Other people wear shoes, but your mother will just hang them round her neck!”

Duang Dee had laughed so hard that Khunnai got up and kicked him to vent her annoyance.

She had no choice but to go because, in the past, when people had money, they showed off by wearing gold chains and belts, but if you did that today you’d get mugged in broad daylight, so people had to show off by going abroad, so they could boast about it when they got home.

The district officer’s wife had accompanied her husband to Hong Kong, and the police inspector’s wife had been to visit her sister who was a nurse in America. The teacher’s wife had been to visit relatives in Taiwan, and she’d been to Japan, too, so how could Khunnai Lumyai be expected to just sit on her arse...er... backside and do nothing?

It was lucky she had Nat for company while she was abroad.

As soon as the plane took off, she pressed her face against the narrow window and watched Thailand getting smaller and smaller beneath her before blurring out, “Hey, Nat! Are we really in the sky, or is it a trick?”

“We’re really up here,” Nat smiled, handing her an inhaler from her bag. “We’re several thousand feet above the ground. Can you see the clouds? We’re almost touching them.”

“And where’s Nakhon Pathom then?”

“You can’t see it. Why are you getting up?”

“It makes me feel funny sitting there with nothing beneath me,” Khunnai answered. “I feel safer on my feet.”

At least she didn’t have plane sickness, but when the plane descended and she felt the pressure in her ears, she put her fingers in them, afraid her ear drums would burst and the plane would crash at the same time.

When she arrived in Europe, she almost sat down on the floor.

“They told me it was marvellous abroad. It looks shabby to me!”

She almost let slip a curse word, but stopped herself in time.

“What do you mean?” Nat asked, puzzled.

“Well, look at all these old buildings. The owners can’t afford to build new ones.”

Khunnai observed the colourless houses under the grey sky with pity.

“I’ve seen old buildings like these before in Bangkok. Before you were born, Nat. But they tore them down and built new ones ages ago. They didn’t leave them standing as eyesores. The people here must be poor, so they just have to put up with them. Where are all the rich people?”

Khunnai grumbled in disappointment that she had spent so much money on the trip, thinking it would give her something to boast about, but all she saw were old buildings. She could have seen similar ones in Bangrak, and it would only have cost a few baht to take the bus from Nakhon Pathom to Bangrak or Sathorn.

“The police inspector’s wife told me there were buildings more than a hundred floors high, or are they in another town, Nat?” Khunnai asked her daughter.

“She went to America, Mother, not England.”

“Well, can we nip over?”

“No! It’s on a different continent!” Nat admonished, before adding quickly, “I expect they have tall buildings here, too. I’ll ask the tour guide.”

London left Khunnai unimpressed and, as far as she could see, had nothing exciting to offer.

“The buildings are old and shabby. I feel sorry for the owners,” she grumbled. “They can’t be making much money, so they can’t build new ones, or perhaps there aren’t many builders.”

“Of course there are, Mother.”

“Well, they can’t be any good then. If Hia Mong came here, he’d make a fortune. He’d have these dingy buildings painted green and purple. They’d soon look a whole lot better. Do you remember the terraced houses at Samphran, Nat? The pink ones with the purple edges? That was his work. Where are all the painters here?”

Both the buildings and the parks alike left Khunnai disappointed.

The hotel where they were staying was close to Hyde Park, so Nat invited her to go there for a walk, but after a few minutes, Khunnai made a new observation.

“There are no meatballs here. In a park of this size, you’d think they’d be selling meatballs on skewers.”

Nat tried to ignore the remark. She was taking in the sight of the colourful blossoms on the trees, and the verdant green lawn — greener than any grass she’d ever seen before.

They sat feeding the pigeons for a while, before Khunnai made another remark.

“This is a big park alright. I’ve seen a lot of parks like this here.”

“Yes, in such a crowded city, they need parks to relax in,” Nat

explained as she watched the pigeons hopping about on the ground and beating their wings contentedly.

“It’s a shame,” Khunnai grumbled.

“What’s a shame, Mother?”

“Why do they leave so much land unused? You can walk until you drop and you still won’t have got to the end of it. If it was up to me, Nat, I’d build houses here and rent them out. I’d make a fortune. I wouldn’t leave it blank like this.”

Nat sat writing until her eyes were tired. Then she turned off the lamp and got into bed. The sound of Khunnai’s steady snores made her smile to herself before she too fell asleep.

The sky was overcast as if it was going to rain. Although it was still afternoon, the pale sun that had shone feebly in the morning had disappeared as if it was afraid of wasting energy. Khunnai Lumyai clutched Nat’s arm as she stepped down from the large tour bus and followed the others to the Tower of London, which stood loftily amid the crowd.

Khunnai looked up at the grey tower, which looked both majestic and mysteriously foreboding, suspiciously.

“What’s this? It looks just like a prison.”

In front of other people, she had to mind her language, and try to remember which words she was allowed to say and which were forbidden, so she ended up keeping quiet for most of the journey.

“It was once a prison,” one of the other people in the tour group explained. She was a lady in her late thirties, whom Khunnai heard was a civil servant in Bangkok.

She turned and said with a smile, “Isn’t there anything else to see, so they brought us to see a prison?” before pulling Nat aside and whispering, “Can I not go in?”

“Why, Mother?” Nat exclaimed. “It isn’t a prison anymore. Professor Suwimon said it’s an important historical monument.”

“Well, I don’t want to go in. It’s bad luck, you know. You’ll be cursed. Your uncle’s a warden at Bangkwang Prison, and if ever your father needs to see him, he won’t meet him there. He goes to his house instead. It’s unlucky.”

“If you stand out here, we might get separated.” Nat admonished, dragging her along. “There aren’t any curses here because the people don’t believe in them. Come and look at the jewels. There are rooms full of them. I want to look.”

“What are jewels doing in a prison?” Khunnai asked suspiciously. “Can’t they find a better place to keep them? The prisoners will pinch them. It’ll save them from robbing someone outside the prison.”

“What? There aren’t any prisoners here anymore,” Nat said as she dragged her mother along. “Let’s get in the queue and stop dithering.”

One of the other people in the tour group was a young woman in her mid or possibly late-twenties, dressed in fashionable expensive clothes.

Nat sensed that she didn’t much care for Khunnai and herself, despite the fact that she had not been close enough to them to even tell if she liked them or not, and she had smiled at them condescendingly.

This time, she did the same.

“This is the place where Queen Anne Boleyn was executed. Thinking about it makes me hate that Henry the eighth.”

Nat thought it was a shame she didn’t realise how obnoxious parading her knowledge in such an obvious way made her look.

It was a shame she didn’t realise that was the reason that almost all the others in the tour group were avoiding her.

Her name was Thewika, and Nat couldn't remember her surname, knowing only that it sounded important, but she called herself 'Wiw'.

She had just graduated from university in America and was having a stopover in Europe, joining the tour group from Thailand before returning home, so she was travelling alone.

"The crown jewels here are nothing compared to the ones in Iran, when the Shah was still there, I mean," Thewika said. "And Oliver Cromwell took a lot of them when he came to power, so it's hardly surprising that this is all that's left."

It seemed there was nothing she didn't know except for how to behave.

"I prefer art galleries myself. They're so much more stimulating, intellectually. Jewels are too concrete. I prefer something more abstract," she said to the lady who was a civil servant.

Nat gazed at the crown jewels until her eyes glazed over. She'd never seen so many gold and diamond jewels, the sparkling gold trays and ornaments moulded into the shapes of different gods and fruits, and the diamond jewels, especially Queen Elizabeth's crown. Nat had only seen it in pictures and was so excited to see the real thing that her hands trembled.

"Look, Mother! That's the diamond everyone talks about. How can it be so massive?"

Khunnai, in contrast, looked at the huge amount of jewels with indifference as if she'd seen them all before.

Or as if she had sackfuls of jewels like these at home, so the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom left her unimpressed.

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