

**A Message  
in the Box  
Stories**

By  
Anchalee Viva

## Publisher's Foreword

Welcome to *A Message in the Box Stories* by our brilliant author, Anchalee Viva. Within these pages, you will embark on an unforgettable journey through diverse landscapes of human experience in fictional characters. Each story is carefully crafted, illuminating the paradoxes and truths that reside at the core of our collective consciousness.

Anchalee's storytelling shines through in every tale, diving deep into the human psyche. Her richly developed and poignantly portrayed characters grapple with universal themes such as the tender bonds of family, the relentless pursuit of identity, the struggle between freedom and control, and the quest for meaning in a chaotic world. These stories authentically capture the resilience, vulnerability, and indomitable spirit of the human condition. Her work can be seen as a journey through the multifaceted and kaleidoscopic narratives she has crafted over the past seven years exclusively for *Elite+* Magazine.

Her humility and imaginative prowess in twisting plots leave readers both in awe and deeply moved, allowing space for personal self-discovery. When we engage with her realistic stories, we often find our vulnerabilities mirrored in her characters' conflicts and chaos.

In *A Message in a Box*, a woman finds a book with

a note from a person asking for a reason to live, prompting her to respond with a heartfelt message, emphasising the importance of understanding and empathy in a world where many struggle with despair. Witness the remarkable perspective from siblings and unconditional love from *The Marble Game*, revealing profound truths about perception and acceptance.

Explore the painful yet transformative journey of a young girl nicknamed *Chatterbox* by her grandfather, from her learning the true meaning of goodness and the courage it takes to embrace selflessness. In *To Be or Not to Be*, we are invited to ponder the intricacies of cultural identity, seen through the eyes of an immigrant navigating the complexities of a new life in New York.

Similar to a serial killer, *A Serial Writer* presents an intriguing story about a protagonist diagnosed with hypergraphia, reflecting on how their compulsive need to write borders on a mental disorder or can be seen as a blessing in disguise.

A retail worker observes various people frequenting the department store she works at but is intrigued by an elderly woman dubbed *Madame Butterfly*, characterised by her shopping habits. The old woman's backstory reveals a past that explains her erratic behaviour. Meanwhile, in a quiet suburb, *Serendipity* is discovered when a family becomes fascinated by a pair of intelligent ravens that later share a unique connection with them.

*Justice for All* transports us to the afterlife, where two brothers confront the ultimate judgement of their deeds, challenging our preconceptions of morality and

justice. *Deer Hunting* revolves around a club where people anonymously reveal their deepest secrets, carrying a message about trust, suspicion, and the complexity of human relationships.

*When Things Are Not What They Seem* takes readers back to folklore told by an elderly Brahmin teacher to children; they then share their different interpretations of these tales.

Anchalee's oeuvre in these stories is celebrated for its intricate dissection of human emotions. But the richness of this collection doesn't end there. *In the Name of Loneliness* explores the complexities of loneliness, trauma, and human dignity through the eyes of a cab driver encountering various individuals during his work shift, revealing how even in a city teeming with people, individuals can feel profoundly isolated.

*Humanity 101* provides an unsettling yet insightful exploration of life and suffering within New York's Grand Central Station, a microcosm of the broader human condition, revealing the hidden stories and silent struggles of those often overlooked in the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Finally, in *The Land On Which We Stand*, Anchalee masterfully juxtaposes the ideologies of freedom and control, embodied by two brothers working in diametrically opposed gardens. This story, like many others in this collection, serves as a powerful allegory for the societal and personal conflicts that shape our world.

The writer's eloquent prose, keen insight, and unwavering empathy for her characters create rich

narratives that leave a lasting impression. Each story is a message in a box, waiting to be unwrapped, explored, and cherished. As you turn the pages, prepare to be profoundly moved, intellectually challenged, and inspired.

In a world where the lines between right and wrong, good and evil, are often blurred, *A Message in the Box Stories* offers a perspective of understanding and compassion. This is not merely a collection of supplementary readings or afterthoughts but rather a compilation of short stories that serve as the pinnacle of insights missing from the first and second volumes of her English short stories. Anchalee Viva invites you to peer beyond the veneer, to question your assumptions, and to embrace the beautiful complexity of the human condition.

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## A Message in the Box

*When I moved to my new apartment in the city, I discovered my oasis at the corner of a street opposite to my building. It was a library box that stood four feet tall on the sidewalk under tree shade, alone and lonely, despite all the noise from the cars running past and passers-by who used that sidewalk to reach a bus stop a few blocks away.*

Over the past couple years, I'd spotted library boxes here and there, in nearly every neighbourhood. All the books inside those 4 x 2 foot boxes were for free. Anyone could generously contribute books as well as take as many home as they could carry. To the eye of the optimist, it meant an auspicious sign: a celebration of the bookworm's return.

Then, again, it might not have been what you'd been seeing as printed books have been facing a bleak future like never before. They have rapidly given way

to the invasion of the electronic book, coming in the form of a 7 x 5 in tablet that can amazingly store up to a million virtual books in its infinite space. The library boxes, as a consequence of this phenomenon, have now changed into paper book graveyards where people dump their unwanted books the same as they throw away over-worn, used clothes.

It is a disheartening scene to find more people heading for the library boxes just to get rid of their books rather than coming there to blissfully take one to read.

But I still have been holding fast to printed books just like in the old days. I have a memory of my mother coming home with one or two books she always borrowed from the library. Our wonderful time together would start the moment she opened one of the storybooks and read it to me with her soft, sweet and sad voice. She said the world opened to her in those books and remedied the melancholy mood that always hung over her life. Today, I still long for the nostalgic smell of paper from those books my mother read to me and the soft feel on my fingertips as I turned each page. I almost believed books could breathe life because they had souls.

As one of a handful visitors, I faithfully came to this sanctuary at least once a week to check for a moment of surprise. I always found some real treasures — rare books I would cherish — among stacks of what I called junk books. It's not because I was lucky to grab them before other book diggers could rush to take them away, but mainly because the book-lover species of today is at the brink of extinction along with other rare species of animals. It's no wonder I was usually alone in that



lonely graveyard.

About one month ago, when I came to the library box almost at dusk, I found no one else, as was normal now. I looked through the box's glass window and saw both shelves inside stuffed with unwanted books, and then when I pulled open the window, one book dropped at my feet.

Someone before me must have desperately crammed that book into the box, even when no space was left. As I quickly bent down and picked up the book, its cover immediately drew all my attention. It was a paperback novel, *The Bell Jar*, which I would try to read some day but not right now. It seemed to shun me, and so I always pushed it away for some reason, apart from the fact that I still had a long list of my must-read books waiting to be savoured. The author of this part autobiographical, part fiction story was Sylvia Plath, a writer posthumously well-known for her terrifying yet dramatic suicide.

As I flicked through that book, I found a sealed envelope hidden between the book's pages. Curiously, I flipped the envelop over and found someone's scribbles that grabbed my attention. Then, as I squinted to read what was said, I couldn't help uttering a cry of sheer shock.

*To anyone who found this envelope, my pre-suicide note is enclosed inside. Read it or leave it. Answer it or otherwise let me drop dead.*

That moment, I was speechless and shaken. But my

shock quickly turned into anger. Was it a cruel joke from someone who loved to watch people freak out the instant their eyes spotted that note? This kind of prank should be deemed funny only on April Fool's Day. Otherwise, it could only be an act done by a sick mind.

But what if it was not a joke? What if someone at this moment was in the depth of despair and all alone in the world? And this was how he or she was trying to reach someone for help.

Finally, I took that book under my arm and headed home. I had made myself a fool so many times. What if I was going to do it again?

I could feel my own heartbeat as I tore open the envelope and took out a two-paged note. The note was written in handsome handwriting you hardly find in this Digital Age, when people conveniently type and print out what they have written in a speed of light. I'd drawn my breath to collect myself before I inevitably began to read whatever was waiting to be read.

*To anyone who found this letter*

*The reason that I enclosed my note in this novel, The Bell Jar, is simple. I chose this notorious, yet well-known book, to deliver my message because I guess anyone who is enthusiastic to read this book must be mystified as much as fascinated by the prospect of suicide. The author of this book chose to end her life by putting her head inside an oven and turning on the gas. She did this while her children were soundly sleeping in their bedroom and perhaps dreaming of going to the*

*zoo tomorrow...*

*Needless to say, it takes a whole lot of courage to kill yourself. Yet, she was so brave to die; pure and simple. How cruel that some people have tarnished her glory. They say it's because she was so cowardly to live. So, this is a case of life at its worst irony.*

*Now, it's time to tell you why I want to be done with my life.*

*I am a man of 30 years old. If I break down the 30 years of my life into days, I have lived for 10,950 days. Or for a clearer picture, I could say I have existed for 15,778,476 minutes.*

*What happens if you come to realise, just like me, that a true moment of joy you can feel each day lasts only (or maybe less than) one or two minutes against the long 1,140 minutes that comprise a single day? I wonder how you would react to this staggeringly out of proportion ratio.*

*I bet it would terrify you to such an extreme that you will lose faith in life forever.*

*As in my case, when I collected all the minutes of sublime moments I have experienced in my entire life, I found that their total only amounted to barely a single day, compared to the 10,950 days that I have had to get by without joy.*

*If someone reexamines their life past their thirty years and found their moments of joy amounted to barely a single day, I believe they'll also feel there's no point to go on. It's as hopeless as walking into an endless desert to look for a drop of water.*

*It's not necessary to follow me up after you know.*

*If every day trickles by while I get stuck with agony over such senselessness of life, what purpose do I have to live? There wouldn't be enough time left for anyone to fulfil a dream that makes life more meaningful and hence worth living. For thirty years, I've put all my efforts to make sense of this thing called life. I have tried to find the answer why joy is only a speck compared to the infinite universe of despondency.*

*But the good news is I've figured out the answer just a moment before I wrote this letter.*

*I've found that the root of all turmoil in life must stem from this: that we are all born chained to fears. And among these built-in fears, our greatest fear, death, topples all others. From cradle to grave, we never get free of this utmost fear. We let it invade our space of existence, day in and day out, down to the core of our being, like a cancerous disease. That fear cripples the mind from thinking and freezes the heart from feeling, clouding all creativities from flourishing, crushing one's spirit into a pulp, and worst of all, darkening the soul with spite and atrocity. Fear for one's life can even drive a person to thoughtlessly commit the most unthinkable crime if it means their own life would be saved. You can see how fear can turn your soul into a slave; then swallow you alive — like a hungry carnivore predator coming to devour its prey, cracking its bone and sucking its marrow until your last drop perishes?*

*Yet, only the one who transcends this fear will find the light of freedom. But talk is cheap. How can you prove to yourself that you are free from fear, to win over*

*your fear of death that makes you a living dead for your whole life? It is to die like a freeman by your own hand.*

*But to be more honest, maybe some part of me doesn't want to go, even though the other part is impatient to be free. Maybe this is a reason I wrote to you to give that part of me a chance. While most can't find a reason to die, I can't find a reason to live. So, if you want to save me from myself, all I need is one good reason from you — why is life worth living? You can put your answer into the same book and return it to that library box by tomorrow evening, not later than 8 o'clock pm.*

*You may be anxious to know the outcome. If so, come to check that box again the day after you return the book. If it disappears from the shelves, it means I already took your message with me to keep and cherish as long as I stay alive.*

*I'm still alive and kicking. Chances are we might be strangers if we meet in person. I may be someone you've known or been familiar with — the neighbour you always wave to, or maybe I am your co-worker who's fiercely competing with you for promotion. Yet, it's still better to stay anonymous with each other. Please let me enjoy the zest of mystery. Without it, I might be long gone from life's utter ennui. So, whoever you are, I want to know only the you whose words enable me to be reborn. More identity and status that tells me who you could be, for better or for worse, are not what I need.*

*But if you fail — which is not your fault, not in the least — that book will be returned to you in the box*

*with my heartfelt note to let you know that by the time you come to read my farewell note I will be free from what I hate and yet love most — my life. But don't feel bad or upset. I truly appreciate your attempt to comfort me. Because of that caring, I will die with hope. That hope is not meant for me but for the sake of everyone else who still has faith in life. People like you, who show that even a crisis of a mere stranger does matter to them, must be among the few who never give up trying to make this world a better place. So that to live will be better than to die.*

*Thank you.*

After I finished reading this note, I sat there in silence for a long moment. This letter couldn't be fake. I could feel tears and blood on every line in these contents. There's no question it poured from the heart of someone who just couldn't live any longer. To be honest, the letter moved me to tears. I sensed that he wrote it not for help but for some comfort that he would not die alone without someone knowing. And the more it seemed to break anyone's heart, the less one could possibly do something to save him.

Every point he said about life was undeniable. He was simply a realist who told a truth about life as it truly was. Life was not worth living. But he wanted me to find a magical reason to say otherwise to give him a reason to live. How could I? How could I hypocritically lie to him that life was a blessing to convince him to live? My outlook on life was not that

different from his — only I would never die to free myself from life, and I couldn't let him die either. I couldn't fail him as I had failed once before a long time ago.

So, I wrote down what he needed to know.

*Dear Friend,*

*I had to reply to you, but the essence of my letter is not to convince you to believe life is worth living. I can't do that because, to me, it isn't either. I'm writing to you for a different reason. I want to tell you why I believe life isn't worth living and why I feel this way.*

*When I was very young, I lived with my mother after my father left us. It happened out of the blue one day when I came home from school. I found my mother's lifeless body in the bathroom dangling back and forth from the ceiling. She hung herself with her girdle and died in her most gorgeous dress and best high-heeled shoes as if in celebration. After the autopsy, they even found a large amount of sleeping pills in her stomach and that alone would have been enough to kill two people. But she obviously didn't trust the sleeping pills. So, she hung herself right after swallowing those pills to be doubly sure no miracle in the world could save her. They said they had never seen anyone more zealous to die.*

*My mother's suicide left me with a lifelong trauma. I had to go for treatment for many years until I was on my feet again. Even now, I still have nightmares; I keep seeing her dangling from the ceiling. In the dream, she is barely alive when she beckons me to join her; she is*

*holding one girdle in her hand while the other is choking her fragile neck. That girdle was for me, she said before her last breath. It's for me because life isn't worth living.*

*Last month, I dreamed of my mother again coaxing me to take that girdle. This time, I gave in and took it from her as if I was spellbound. But before I hung myself, someone came to snatch that fateful girdle from my hand and throw it away. When that mysterious person turned to face me, it was me, the stronger part of me, the one who wouldn't let me give in.*

I believe I have suffered from life in equal measure, if not worse than you. Just try to feel how I feel before making a decision on your fate. Try to think as if you have crossed over into the other side. Try to understand how terrible, how terrible it is for someone living with the nightmare that she's so worthless in her mother's eye that her mother did not regret to kill herself and even hastened to do it instead of continuing her life because the love and concern for her daughter who was only seven at the time of her mother's death.

*I will tell you this — whether life seems worth living or not — I will not take my own life. And that's because I will never leave my loved ones behind to suffer like my mother did to me.*

*As someone who can make the world a better place, I will not spread this disease of self-hatred. It must stop with me as I wish it must stop with you.*

*After I drop my message in that library box, I am not going to pursue learning your decision. I will leave it a mystery because you are not the only one who loves that sense of mystery. It's your life after all. You cannot*



*leave your fate to a stranger:*

*No matter what you choose, I wish you the best  
from my heart.*

*Your friend*

Since that day I dropped my message with that book in the library box, I have passed it on my way home. But I haven't gone to look whether that book is there or not. All I do to indulge my curiosity is to steal a glance and guess. After all, I wanted his fate to remain a mystery as life itself is.

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## A Serial Writer

*According to the doctor's view, though I am not a serial killer (the term refers to one type of psychopath) and never will be, my behaviour stays very close to one.*

In other words, I have been categorised as a serial killer's counterpart — or his relative at best. And I should beware of that. Because, at any rate, I could be a threat not only to my loved ones but also—or mostly—to myself.

I always, meekly and yet proudly, call myself a writer. But some doctors will raise their eyebrows. They will say, in this case of mine, a hypergraphic befits my type better; I commit an act that somehow borders on mental disorder.

It means, in a medical perspective, committing an act of writing can border on mental disorder.

Wanting to check what in the world 'a hypergraphic' means, I looked up in the medical glossary for that term.

I found its meaning and held my breath.

The glossary explained a person who's diagnosed as a hypergraphic has a compulsive and overwhelming need to write and carries that need to extremes. It's more than an obsession. And because his (or her in my case) urge to write is way beyond the norm, a hypergraphic therefore needs a treatment to adjust themselves to a normal life and behaviour. All in all, this person needs to be salvaged before spiralling downward into more serious symptoms such as severe depression, withdrawal from reality and inability to pursue normal happiness or keep a healthy relationship. Last but not least, those symptoms could possibly lead to the development of a suicidal tendency as the solution to those built-up problems.

This said, there's only a gossamer-thin line that divides a serial killer from a hypergraphic (also known as a *serial writer*). That line lies on the different goal and interest each of them possesses; the former's goal is to kill, whereas the latter's is to create. Their difference is obviously clean-cut. But both are each other's perfect match for their white-hot passion at the staggering level that, to them, the end will justify whatever means. They will move heaven and earth to find whatever method at any price in order to reach their ultimate goal once they set their mind on it.

More and more, a serial killer and a serial writer share the same attributes. Apart from being egoistic and self-centred, they are extremely sensitive, but only to their *own* feelings and needs. The grandiosity they feel for themselves, though rising to a stratospheric sky,

is so vulnerable deep down that a slight ridicule from anyone can break them into pieces. Yet, their determination is as invincible as a steel wall. You can only stop them from what they are pursuing — either to murder or to write — over their dead body or your dead body.

No wonder each must be a real monster for anybody to live with.

But is there anyone willing to share the same human's darkest sides with a psychopath in order to make oneself a writer? I believe I could be that someone. I believe I dare — as the song *The Impossible Dream* goes — to be *willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause*. If Heaven showers me with all prosperities and happiness of the world but only deprives me of that one thing, I can turn my back to Heaven and go down to hell if that is the sole place in the entire universe where I will find a wee spot to sit down and do my labour of love for the rest of my life, which is to write, write and write.

Could I call myself a writer or could that kind of craziness be enough to make me a hypergraphic in disguise of a writer?

I know I should go back to my childhood days. I know something had started at that time.

When I was about four years old, I fell head down from the bike while my brother was riding. Very luckily, I fell on the soft ground, not on the road's hard surface. I did not recall that incident. I have no memory of that trauma. But my mother said that night I had a mild epileptic fit and vomited. After the x-ray to check for a serious head injury, everything seemed normal and fine.

A day later, I was sent home and life went on.

But my mother said I changed in a subtle and yet very strange way after that episode. I changed from a lively and hyper girl who seemed to always run across small, thousands of miracles on my every move. A meow from a cat to a burst of fireworks to a sneaky taste of a pencil crayon could fascinate and excite me to no end. I was always the first to explode into a laugh as much as to break into tears, my mother said.

But that bike-falling transformed me into a cold and aloof girl who lost all her appetites for life. I used to scream my head off from extreme fun at my mother's cuddle and tickle. But no more after that day. I responded to a thrill of life like a lump of ice that didn't know how to melt in the hot sun. And that change started to worry her. Yet, overall, I was fine and healthy and well behaved as any normal child should be. I could keep up with pretty good grades throughout my academic years at school.

Although I can't recall 'a lust for life' I once embraced during those days as my mother had claimed, I can vividly remember my first day at school, a couple months thereafter. I remember I tried to stay away from everyone. I hardly joined other children's activities in my class. I hid myself at a far corner of the classroom and wondered why my other classmates always giggled while playing and singing as if nothing could bring them more joy. Why didn't I feel that way as they did?

I wondered why all other kids stared breathlessly at their red and yellow and pink toys whereas those toys looked as colourless as black and grey to me.

Of course, from that very first day, the other kids must have sensed something not quite right about me. They would avoid me when they possibly could. They completely ignored my shadowlike presence at the school playground. They left me alone to stare at the blankness to wonder if the world was going to be so full of ennui and emptiness just like today — what was the point of being in it? And that thought somehow scared me.

The negligence from other kids through the entire afternoon started to upset me. But at least it was safe to stay alone and be my own self for a while.

Then, our teacher let us watch some kid's video, and everyone huddled together in front of the screen. While my eyes were transfixed on that animated screen unblinking, paying all attention to it, my face remained stiff and deadpan. I stayed that way until the video finally came to the end. The other kids' heart-broken sobs that quickly switched to belly laughs as the moods of the story alternated, began to stir and sharpen my sense of otherness.

It was at that very moment I became aware that I must have something like a black hole in place of what others call 'feelings'.

A person who is unable to see is called blind; and unable to hear, deaf. But how about the one who is not able to feel, even though they are able to see and hear as much as everyone else?

I was boiling with envy. I wanted to feel red and green like everybody else. I wanted to feel a belly laugh and to give my eyes the feel of hot tears. Whether a

heart feels bliss or grief, they must be wonderful feelings. A life's luxury. It must be better than the living vacuum I was becoming. The black hole inside me was now imploding. It started to act like a fierce and hungry vortex desperate to suck in any image, sound and touch to feed its emptiness. But I just couldn't find what was captivating enough to fill that black hole of mine. I didn't realise that I was starving more and more for all the feelings in the world as everything in it seemed as good as dead landscape.

Until I stumbled on a blank sheet of paper and a pencil.

Like a dying fish coming alive after being thrown into water, swimming and swimming its life away, I was the fastest and the most zealous student in the class in learning how to write the whole alphabet. My classmates were gasping when I grabbed a piece of chalk to scribble some letters onto the blackboard and told one of the girls that it was how her name was spelt. Even my teacher started to believe I must be a child prodigy because it occurred just on the second day of our spelling class. No one in my class, let alone to spell a word, seemed yet to know how to form any letter correctly.

It seemed I became a bookworm overnight, like a pupa in its dark cocoon suddenly bursting into a butterfly, after I had been taught the magic of spelling.

If you read each book faithfully and thoroughly to its last page before you devour a new one with the same appetite, you are an egghead, and yes, an honoured bookworm. But in my case, I went overboard. I possessed many, many books as some wacko wants to own every

star seen in the sky. I feel safe and warm only to be close to those books as if they were my security blankets. I need to stack them everywhere, even in the kitchen oven and up to the point that I am not able to finish even half of what I have owned. People who have known me say I deserve to be called a book hoarder or a book-nut — or simply a lunatic — rather than a true-blue bookworm.

Along with gobbling book after book when I was a kid, I found myself scrawling notes on any flat surface materials that were available within my reach: a notebook, a napkin and sometimes on my palms if an irresistible urge kicked in.

Real images and real people perceived through my eyes never break my frozen mindscape. Reality is as weightless as a shadow. My mind has responded to those shadow-like people with little emotion or none at all. It seems like I have an inner blindness that blindfolds me from connecting to the real world. But through words, I have discovered a miracle. I could see and feel like everyone for the first time. Of course, what I have seen and felt were neither through real things nor real people who were crowding me everyday and everywhere. But only through the words I've read and absorbed. Finally, I could see red as real red, and could laugh a belly laugh, and give my eyes the feel of hot tears, all through the heartfelt description inside the world of books. Because of words, which gave me freedom to imagine with no boundary, I could reach both the most sublime and the most horrendous feeling ever created by the human heart.

And once an array of feelings erupted, driven open



by the power of words, I let myself bleed words as others bleed blood. I started to dare myself to take the next step. To write so as to feel hell and heaven through my own creation of words.

They said the drive to write does not make me a true writer. The abnormality in some part of my brain has triggered that drive and churned out the flow of words. I will be recognized as a true writer only through what I have put into my work.

Cure or no cure for this abnormality, I embrace it with open arms. I need words as I need breath because words are the doors that open to the once shut-down world. I know the day I can write no more will be the day I become a living dead as I used to be after that head-fall accident. So, I beg the Muse, please let me write to my last breath.

A serial killer needs to kill so that they can feel alive. And so, I need to write for the same destiny — to feel. We both need to feel the zest of life, and therefore we must seek our own way to feel that sublime.

I still cling to a blinded faith that writing is a gift — a godsend. It's so hard to believe otherwise. So hard to believe a passion to write is just a sign of hypergraphia: a symptom of mental sickness.

So hard to believe, as some must believe, writing is a curse.

## Madame Butterfly

*If you are interested in 'people', you don't need to be an extrovert and drool over every new face you come across. You just feel people never fail to fascinate you and you enjoy observing them from a good distance while wondering why they are who they are.*

Years ago, I was a salesperson in one of Nordstrom outlet stores in San Diego, one of the most tourist-visited towns on the west coast. Therefore, from opening till closing time especially in the peak of summer, the shopping spree never stopped; the store was crammed with customers, both local and tourists from all nationalities.

The tourists from the Orient always flocked together in a large group. I couldn't help bracing myself when they entered the store. Although we dubbed them 'the nouveau riche' from their haute look, they came with their signature of a noisy chaos. Why not? Those ladies

fought tooth and nail over whatever designer brands that had big discounts off their retail price tags. So, we set our rule not to cross their 'war path' while they were arguing over Louis Vuitton purses, Giorgio Armani perfumes, Rolex watches, Prada shoes, Hermes belts, Burberry scarves and so on. We knew that after the tumultuous battle among them bargaining hunters, the ceasefire would come out and the loudest the winner.

Here's another group of customers that never failed to mesmerise me. All ladies from that group were clad with a shapeless black garment from head to toe. They were definitely tourists from the Middle East. Although only two parts of their body—eyes and hands—were exposed into view, those ladies were able to use them with amazing efficiency for catching and snatching all assortments of trendy outfits into their shopping cart. They occupied the fitting rooms for hours on end, humming blissfully while trying on those fanciful apparels, one after another. In front of the mirror, they witnessed themselves transformed in a wink of an eye into glamorous, first-rate supermodels. Of course, there was a twist and turn. When those ladies left our store, they walked out empty-handed, still covering themselves with the same black garment from head to toe and leaving all the mess behind in the fitting rooms. Seeing themselves in super model images was their dream. So, when that dream materialised on the mirror, it meant *mission accompli*. Why did they bother buying our dresses if they were forbidden at any rate to wear them openly in public back home?

And yet, those people mentioned above could pale

in comparison with the most memorable individual whom we called Madame Butterfly.

Not only was she ranked one of our most loyal customers—she would never miss a day, rain or shine, in showing up at this store—but her presence could also stop and startle whoever was cruising past her. They couldn't help turning their head to look back and wonder...*who the hell*. Since no one had known her name, we honoured her with a name *Madame Butterfly*, or *Senora Mariposa* in favour of our Mexican American coworkers.

Of course, she didn't at all resemble that beautiful creature, the butterfly. In fact, she looked like a living Medieval witch. This wasn't in a figurative speaking but in a literal sense. Coming eye to eye with her, you bet her one hundredth birthday must have recently passed. You would never see a worse face whose skin was drawn so tightly over the cheeks it could reveal the shape of the whole skull underneath. Wrinkles and creases battled cruelly to take over the rest of her features to the point that her eyelids and lips almost buried permanently under. What's left untouched was her long, hooked nose that Time seemed not able to beat and therefore left her big nostrils to breathe in freedom.

Yet, we couldn't solve one puzzle; it was almost impossible for a century-old lady still able to bring herself to shop on a daily basis without a single person accompanying her. So, if she was not that ancient as she looked, what in her life had beaten her to such a pulp?

But even so, her impression was not as unique as

her character.

As immediately as the store opened its door at ten o'clock, we would find her among the first group of customers. She marched into the store with the support of a wheeled walker. A solitary, tough and invincible as a steel in contrast to her scarecrow look. She spent the whole morning visiting every corner of the store. Like a butterfly floating merrily and tirelessly from one flower to another. Hence the name we had bestowed her.

But what's wrong with that? She seemed as harmless as a kitten.

Oh, yes. What was wrong came from a mess that trailed behind every move while she was searching, digging, delving, poking, and rummaging with zeal and zest through the racks of clearance clothes. It was our job to clean up all clutters and meddles she made as well as to service her for all her whims and tantrums. I spent half an hour making phone calls to the other Rack stores asking them around for one particular ten dollars discounted item that was long sold out, but she stood her ground that it's my job to find what she wanted and find it now if I didn't want her to file a complaint to the president of Nordstrom Company with my name stood out on that list.

Needless to say, she always got what she wanted and paid all her purchases in cash, never with a credit card, giving no chance to trace her identity whatsoever. That meant she must be a rich old lady who didn't trust the bank financial system and hid her bundles of dollar bills worth a million inside her bedding or in the hole

on her wall.

But no, you shouldn't mistake her for a millionaire. When the store opened the next morning, she promptly came back and returned all she had bought from yesterday and got all her money back. Then she would shop again, hovering over eye-catching merchandise like a merry butterfly and buying all new things with that cash, only to return them over the next day. And the cycle of 'buy-and-return' went on and on tirelessly.

So far, I neither found her actually buying a thing for real nor did I have any idea what she had done with our goods she temporarily owned. According to the store's generous policy, customers were able to return any of the merchandise they bought within 60 days as long as they kept their receipts as proof of purchase. No eyebrow raised and no question asked from us humble salesperson. For instance, I had to accept a pair of rotten sneakers returned by one customer whom I suspected he'd worn while trudging the mud.

One day, I ran across her in the supermarket nearby. I wasn't aware of her presence until I heard unusual noises at the cashier counter. Of course I recognized that voice immediately. Since three more people were lining up between her and me, Thank God, I was able to obscure myself from her. She and that cashier was in the middle of some heated argument. So I perked up my ears and never let a word escape.

I stole a glance and found that cashier girl pouring things from her bag: a loaf of bread, a bottle of jam, a lettuce, and three bananas.

"Did you say you just bought them *yesterday*?"

With the icy voice, that cashier held up one of the three bananas so that the others could see all the bruises on the peel.

“Don’t you dare cheat me? Look! I have my proof of purchase.” the lady fumed and fumbled for her receipt in her bag.

“Ma’am, you should know our rule that you cannot return any fresh product,” she squirmed in disgust at the sight of a week-old looking banana.

“Manager please!” Now her sudden shriek deafened all the noises in this store. “Help me. This is a broad daylight robbery. Help!”

Before the scene she lured more thrill-seekers to swarm in, the store manager had rushed to the front for the rescue. He bowed and apologised to her for her ‘inconvenience’ his employee had created and promptly returned all her money. All eyes including mine followed her as if in a trance until she strutted out of the store as proud as a queen.

“You listen to me all right,” the manager took a deep breath and said to the bewildered cashier. “Next time if that old witch wants to return anything, I said *anything*, you’ll let her. You hear me?” Without a glance, he dumped all three bananas into a garbage can.

“But why?” the cashier tried to hold her ground. “She has no right to return *rotten* fruits.”

“Sorry, I forgot you are new,” he chuckled. “Let me warn you. This old hag comes almost every day because she’s living just next block. So, be prepared.”

“Oh no, get out of here!” the girl was rolling her eyes.

“Everyone knows she is half crazy. She is living alone. No friends, no nothing. All she does is buy things and return things and complain whatever our store has are shits. But what can I do? Call the police to get rid of this crazy old bag? Well, she didn’t shoplift. And returning things is not a crime.”

As I walked out of that supermarket, my mind was occupied with that piece of eavesdropped story. Who was Madame Butterfly? Where did she come from? And what made her so miserable? But above all, what drove her to become an oniomania—an official term for a shopaholic, which meant one who couldn’t control one’s impulse to buy. My heart was sinking. What if a spark of rejoice she could only find from her lonely life had sprung from a chance for owning things she had desired, even though those prize possessions only stayed with her until time did them apart when she had to return them the next day.

When you keep thinking of someone you want to keep a safe distance from, chances are you will often run across that person as if Fate intends to send him or her to you for a reason.

The next morning, I cringed at her unexpected appearance at the bus stop. The drama she’d created in that supermarket was still so lucid in my mind. Her showing up at the bus stop signified that we must reside in the same neighbourhood. Thank god that she ignored me, though she must recognize me the instant her eyes caught me close by. However when the bus I took for work came, I couldn’t just stare blank-eyed at her and let this ancient lady climb up the bus by herself. So, I



rushed to help her get on that bus which, though she seemed not to appreciate my deed, she did not refuse my help. While she was settling herself on the front seat for seniors, her walker folded up beside her. I felt I should do her some more favours to brighten her day by paying the bus fare for her. I put coins into the slot and told the bus driver I was going to pay double for the two people.

“Who do you think I am? A beggar?” she roared. “Get the hell out of my face!”

I stood frozen from shock. At least, not many passengers were witnessing that scene since the rush hours of the day were gone.

I used to encounter worst people of all sorts, from the rudest, the meanest, the nastiest to the most monstrous ones, but this must be the first time I was face to face with someone who at once possessed all mentioned above, someone completely void of human decency, someone ugliest inside out. I swore from that moment, I would wash my hands off her. Let her fall and be run over by a truck for all I cared.

I rushed out of the bus as soon as it stopped. No sooner had I made a few paces farther than I heard a shrilled voice behind me.

“You! Can you help me?”

I stiffened. Here came my golden chance to return what that wicked woman deserved. I fastened my paces, letting her be aware that I simply ignored her. Yet it was too late. A hand gripped my arm as if it's stuck with the glue.

“Can you take me to your store? I don't feel good

today.” Dangling from the handle of her walker was a bulgy shopping bag. And what inside must be things she’s going to return.

Yes, some friends had warned me of giving a hand to the senior people on the street. If they fell while in your care, you would be responsible for their fall. They could lawfully sue you until you were penniless. There were such cases occurring these days of some old weasels looking for some bleeding hearts to exploit money.

I was holding my breath as her grip on my arm tightened while her other hand was pushing her walker forward. I wasn’t tough enough to tell her to get off my hand and go away. That gave her an advantage to anchor her claw into my arm on our way to my store.

“Thank you,” she whispered. I couldn’t guess what followed was her smile or her smirk because I’d never witnessed her smile before. “Thank you,” she repeated her thank you for the second time as if she’s still in wonder of the absurdity coming from that word. “Today’s a good day, isn’t it?”

I nodded grudgingly, doing the best to avoid engaging in conversation with her. I did not trust a blossom of her amiability.

While she was making a gesture with her left hand, a fading tattoo on her lower forearm caught my eyes. I glimpsed a line of five or six numbers on that spot with another smaller triangle shaped tattoo right below. I absolutely had no idea what on earth those tattoos had represented but it struck me as odd.

Her sharp eyes caught my stare on her arm. She

stopped short and grimaced at me. "Take your hand off me," she growled and snapped her hand from my support. But her outrage couldn't discourage my curiosity. I couldn't help wondering aloud.

"Were you...in jail before?" I should have bitten my tongue. Yet, I let loose that unlikely remark.

Her eyes now were blazing in fury. "Do you know who I am?" as she screeched she was shaken as if she's going to have a fit. "I came from one of the wealthiest families in Poland. Yes, my father owned several prestigious fashion boutiques in Warsaw. The dresses that most European princesses wore at that time would be pale in comparison with what my father designed only for me to wear to their party."

I gulped. She'd never talked about herself but once it started, it's obvious she's lying through her teeth.

"Ha! You don't believe me. What if I tell you I was a true beauty then?" she forced a wry laugh and sneered. "You're dying to know about my tattoo, I know. But if I told you how I got it you would never believe me either."

To challenge me, she upturned her forearm and let me squint down on a blurred blue line of unmistakably six-digit numbers buried beneath her old, wrinkled skin. Something on that spot that I sensed made my fingers recoil quickly from that touch.

"They pierced that serial number in ink into my skin. Ever heard of the *Auschwitz* labour camp?" her stare on me was so strange now. "I had them for my name while I was in detention there."

My gaze froze on that tattoo. I felt sheer terror

slowly creeping across my face. Yes, I *knew* Auschwitz. Every man in the entire world must know the answer when asked where *Hell on Earth* was. How a human endured utter inhumanity in that place. Yet how some walked out from that hell alive was still the world's biggest puzzle.

“Over there, the Nazis put us to work to the last breath. I was fifteen at that time and sent to tough work outdoors, pulling dump cars filled with stones day after day. They had beaten me and done God knows what to my body. They cut a fetus out of my belly and sewed its arms and legs into another body in their lab,” as she revealed the true meaning of *Hell on Earth*, her face slowly turned blank, her eyes a pair of strange, dull and cold marbles. “And until the Allies Army came to liberate us, all my family died in gas chambers, my father included. I was the only one alive. Afterward I was sent over here under the care of some Jewish holocaust organisation.”

Finally she loosened a hold on my arm and started a walk on her own.

“When I newly arrived here, my real name slipped from my memory. When they called me Viola my mouth just hung open like some idiot. I kept arguing I only had a number for my name until people gave the name Miss Cuckoo to me. Well, that serial number was the only thing that stuck in my head while everything else had come and gone...”

The instant she completed her soul-shattering life episode, she began to change. Something else seemed swiftly flashing in her mind. She turned enthusiastically

to me and cried out through the ripples of her laugh, reminding me once again of a butterfly floating happily over the bloom of flowers. Now I came to understand how someone's broken soul was mended.

My eyes were filled with tears as she cried cheerfully.

“Come, come. Come shopping with me. Come and get the most elegant dress that will beat all the princesses’.”

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