



# THE DREAM DIGGER

AND  
OTHER  
STORIES

ANCHALEE  
VIVA



**The Dream Digger  
and  
Other Stories**

By  
**Anchalee Viva**

## Publisher's Foreword

Whether you are discovering Anchalee Vivathanachai's work for the first time or have followed her writings in Thai, her ability to captivate readers with her diverse and exceptional storytelling is undeniable. Her first collection of short stories, *Jewel of Life*, written in Thai, won her the prestigious Southeast Asian Writer Award in 1999.

In her mid-twenties, Anchalee and her parents made a bold move to relocate to the United States. This transition to a new country provided her with unique experiences and perspectives that significantly influenced her writing. Anchalee found solace and inspiration in her new environment, channelling her feelings of isolation and discovery into her short stories, allowing her to explore complex ideas and emotions in a concise format.

Since 2017, Anchalee has written English short stories exclusively for *Elite+* magazine, widely read by diplomats, expats, entrepreneurs, and thought leaders in Southeast Asia. *The Dream Digger and Other Stories* is her second English short stories collection, which delves into different genres, including the realm of fantasy, traversing the surreal and the supernatural.

Part of the intrigue lies in seeing Anchalee's stories enter international cultures, bringing fables and parables with Chinese and Indian heritage. *The Face of the Wind*

is a fictional story based on the real historical figure, Tamo or Bodhidharma, who brought Zen Buddhism to China. *The Smile of Pradeep Kumar* follows the story of a wealthy nobleman who, despite his relentless pursuit of happiness for his son, is unable to smile. The son eventually discovers true joy from an old man, revealing the unexpected places where genuine happiness can be found.

We see her brilliance up close in the surrealist fantasy story *The Dream Digger*, about a person observing a homeless man scavenging through a pile of trash. *The Twilight Zone in Las Vegas* is an urban fantasy about a man who, after losing all his money gambling in Las Vegas, encounters a mysterious homeless man with a unique ability that is both a gift and a curse.

In *The Downpour*, Anchalee imagines a town suffering from severe drought that suddenly experiences gold falling from the skies. *That Invisible Hand* centres around a family man's trip to a shopping mall that goes awry because everything he has known is constantly changing by someone beyond his control.

Readers will be taken to an uncomfortable situation in *The Mask*, a psychological thriller about a man who is abducted and forced to wear a mask that conceals his identity, living with another aggressive masked cellmate.

In *Life Is But a Dream*, readers follow the story of a girl who finds solace in her own reflection and a cherished doll. An encounter with a woman and her daughter culminates in a distressing revelation about

the girl's true identity and current reality.

*Thanks for Being My Eyes* is a touching story of a blind girl who navigates life with heightened senses and learns the true value of her unique abilities during a power outage with her younger brother. It beautifully illustrates how perceived limitations may be strengths through resilience, family support, and adaptability.

*Into the Heart of Darkness* grips readers in a two-part suspenseful narrative about a 10-year-old boy who finds himself trapped in complete darkness. As he grapples with fear and the possibility of death, the story blends his past trauma with present peril, exploring the deep bond between father and son. This story is compelling for its blend of psychological depth and supernatural elements, showcasing the power of the subconscious mind.

*When the Bell Told Six Times* shares a haunting story of a woman who repeatedly dreams about visiting an eerily deserted village, where the only sound heard is a mysterious bell marking distorted hours. This story intrigues readers with its blend of surrealism and psychological horror, exploring the thin line between dreams and reality.

The short stories would be incomplete without the introduction of the romance genre. In *The Rathole Love Nest*, Anchalee passionately writes about a lover's relationship that ended due to long distance but unexpectedly rekindles forty years later. *A Rose is a Rose* is a reflective story about a woman's encounter with a neurosurgeon whose scientific and detached view of the world clashes with her poetic and emotional

nature, leading her to question the balance between beauty, truth, and feelings against rational approaches to life and love.

Finally, *The Other Side of the Dream* presents the dilemma of a woman completely mesmerised and captivated by an encounter with a handsome man at the beach who invites her to join him for a walk.

We sincerely hope readers will pleasantly enjoy this series of Anchalee's writings, finding peace of mind amidst the chaos of our daily lives, perhaps lingering in our dreams.

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## The Dream Digger

*Late one night after leaving the pub, I came to visit a soulless place at the dead end of a world-forsaken alley where all life seemed dead and all dead coming to life. It wasn't far from the pub. So, it's my morbid habit of feasting on a sense of camaraderie from its misery-ridden inhabitants.*

The night was uncannily cold. I couldn't believe the fog could come this far from the bay. Its clammy touch chilled me to the bone while the eerily quiet surroundings were creeping me out.

In dead silence, I abruptly heard a loud noise, a clanking and clattering sound about twenty yards away where garbage was piled up and sprawled all over the ground. My eyes caught a movement of something, and then I glimpsed one silhouette figure over there. I was fully alert now. It must be a human. No reason a ghost would do such an unlikely act. I saw the figure in



question start to climb clumsily toward the top of one garbage heap that was piled up six or seven feet high from the ground.

I shifted all my attention to him as he pushed and forced his way up. He slipped down a couple times, causing loud noises in the middle of the dead night. With all his struggle and effort driven by his sheer force of will, he eventually managed to reach the top and precariously perched on it in triumph.

The noise woke up a few stray dogs. They barked at him frantically, trying to defend their claimed territory from the human's intrusion of their turf. I heard the man cursing as he flung an empty can at one of the canines. It precisely hit that dog, making it yelp and whimper and retreat reluctantly.

The man then began to delve feverishly into the pile with his spade while his small pail was clutched in his other hand in case of hitting on a booty. Of course, the higher you were up, the better chance to find the untouched treasures.

Beggars and homeless men and dirt-poor children in this neighbourhood took this dump site as their foraging ground. From dawn to dusk they dug, turning a new arrival of trash upside-down with the hope of finding a hidden fortune. On rare occasions, if luck was mercifully and surprisingly on their side, a few of them could make a big discovery; they might find a ring, a watch or even crumpled bank notes.

There was talk that one kid stepped by accident on a gold chain as thick as his finger while he was tramping across the sprawl of garbage. And the rumour spread

like a wildfire, dramatising and exaggerating the original story, making the discovery of *one* gold chain into *two* and *three* and at last *four*, luring more desperate people to this site. However, if not a gold chain, hitting on anything made of metal — a discarded pot, pan or any broken and chipped utensil — was a good catch. Depending on the weight and value of the piece of metal they had found — from copper to iron, tin or aluminium — they could trade their find for some small amount of money and, in turn, into a decent meal.

But during the busy time of the day, there were often too many occupants quarrelling and fighting over their claims. Therefore, the night, especially in the wee hours, became the most favourable time for this man to seek things all alone. No one else, neither grown-ups nor children, would shamelessly come to bully him and snatch his treasure. Daytime, I believe when he was off guard, the swarm of rascals would come like a hungry wolf pack, ambushing him. They would even taunt him, *you scavenger, I saw you scoop up shit from the garbage heap and eat it*. And he probably screamed back at them after they had knocked him down fleeing with his treasure in their hands.

As that figure conquered the summit, the streetlight above his head illuminated him clearly as if he was on stage under a spotlight, performing in a great reality show. Now, I only stood some yards away, so I could see him in full view while I remained out of sight. The spot that obscured me was in deep shadow under a big tree.

I was startled after a glimpse of his face, unsure

whether I saw a man or a zombie. It was hard to tell his age from his gaunt pockmarked face, broken teeth, scraggy body and unkempt, matted, long hair. He could be as young as thirty or as ancient as two hundred years old. He probably even scared all the dead to a second death with his ghoul-like appearance. His bony chest was bare and only his groin was covered with a piece of filthy ragged cloth, a wretch looking beyond description. Without any chance to see the light of day, he could remain what he was — a living dead — for the rest of his life.

Yet, somehow, the gleeful grin that crossed his face strangely fascinated me. It told me whatever he was doing right now, he believed it would bring him a reward.

He dug and dug. Every movement was forceful and hopeful. A short moment later, I saw him eagerly pulling something from the pile. I held my breath, feeling such anticipation, as if I had become his comrade due to the sense of hope I was sharing with him. A long-lost sweet feeling was now strangely taking over, sparkling, pulsing and warming up a cold void of my being.

But my heart sank. Under the streetlight, I saw in plain sight what he pulled out was a foot-tall plastic doll in a cheap organza tutu. A ballerina doll, I guess, which could be bought for a cheap price at any funfair's stalls. The colour of the doll's tutu must have once been bright pink. Now, the fabric was badly worn and stained with dirt. Both of the doll's arms were missing, making it look grotesque with its stark torso and only two legs.

He peered at the doll in disgust and furiously hurdled it down the garbage slope.

The doll tumbled and landed on the ground, lying lifeless and helpless in the midst of banana peels, broken eggshells, fish bones, a rusty bicycle wheel and countless shards of broken glass glittering in the dark. Poor abandoned doll. Who had tossed her into the vast ocean of junk, now drowning at the bottom of deep dirt? And why I wondered.

*Maybe the story had begun this way...*

Once there had been a little child who had been living under one of the roofs among dozens of shacks and shanties along this gloomy alley. And every night she prayed to heaven to send someone to her — or *anything* at all — that she could talk to and love.

And one day, after awaiting that miracle for so long, her wish was granted.

One afternoon, while digging dutifully in the garbage hill under the fiercely hot sun, as she routinely did to help make a living for her family, her dream suddenly came true. She had miraculously found her treasure: an armless ballerina doll a fairy had at last sent to her.

She was so thrilled her hands were shaking as she hurriedly picked it up, hiding it under her clothes from the eyes of bigger children digging nearby, for fear that they would snatch it from her and run away, taunting and laughing at her as they usually did.

Maybe, the worst person she was desperate to hide her doll from was her old grandmother for fear that the old woman might beat her for bringing home a useless toy instead of something more valuable to help feed her

struggling, dirt-poor family. However, it turned out her stone-hearted grandmother found the doll in an empty jar where she did her best to conceal it.

*Stupid, dumb kid, if you want to go starve just go ahead, but don't drag us with you.*

That old woman screamed at her. And to make her repent, the old woman did not let the girl have her meal that night.

*You get what you deserve — she told her. Lately, you don't bring things of value. And today you came home again empty-handed. Only a hideous doll that doesn't fill anyone's belly. All you care about is fun and play. You are good for nothing — just another mouth to feed. I have been wasting food and money on you for so-o-o-o long. Tell me how many more years before you will be old enough to bring home some money from the brothel out there? When you're fourteen? No, no, not that long. I might starve to death long before that time. Let's make it twelve. Ten will be even better. Yes, yes. Your mother was carrying you in her womb when she was just past twelve. I don't know which of those visitors at that brothel put you bitch in her! It would be okay if she was still alive and fed us. But damn it! How dare she die on us and leave you to me on the day you were born! Now get out. Get out of my face.*

The poor girl crawled back to her dark, bleak corner and curled up with her doll, as quietly as a little mouse. One broken human and one broken doll were cuddling together like two hearts sharing one body. Her empty stomach kept rumbling from a never-ending nagging hunger. And the doll was soaked with her tears as she

kept hugging and kissing it good-bye all night long in the lonely darkness before carrying it back to the dump site at the crack of dawn...for fear that they would not again allow her to eat today if she delayed taking back the doll.

It was such a heart-breaking story of a companionship between a neglected, loveless child and a neglected, armless doll that lasted barely 24 hours.

I found myself plunging deeper and deeper into that out-of-hope story I'd conjured up. Of course, that child never existed in reality. She was only my fictitious creation. Yet, I could sense her presence, hear her heartbeats and feel her hunger for love and care that were far more real to me than of any soul I'd known in the flesh.

Yes, she did exist in the heart of every innocent child who lived an unspeakable life. If only I could have known how many had been living behind the doors of this neighbourhood.

Let's forget such a heart-wrenching story, and let's look around for some brighter hope. What was Mr. Junk's next find? What was he holding in his hand this time? Was it more promising? I wanted to tell him how desperately I needed to have that wonderful feeling of hope again, please.

Oh! His new catch looked like some kind of a flower bouquet: a full bunch of rosebuds tied together with a long silk ribbon. Unfortunately, even from this distance, the whole bouquet looked wilted. I could imagine those rosebuds must once have looked very graceful, their petals velvety soft, their colour deep

crimson and their scent sweet like a summer dream.

Was there a story behind them?

I tried to figure out the origin of this once-upon-a-time gorgeous bouquet. It might start this way. An elite couple had ordered the best quality, fresh cut rosebuds from the most elegant and expensive flower boutique in town. They were bought as a gift to celebrate their darling daughter's college graduation, the proudest day in her life.

And later, what happened? That bouquet of roses, representing their daughter's achievement, ended up at the dump site as worthless and insignificant as the broken pots and soiled diapers sprawled out nearby. Maybe the road for one's hopeful future was never paved with petals of roses. Stripped of all grandiose illusions from one's eyes, in this dog-eat-dog world, the road to success was paved with thorns that could mercilessly make one's dream bleed to death.

Mr. Junk still dug and dug, looking more and more frustrated as time trickled by. Yet, steadfast and stubbornly he went on. With his spade and his own hands, he poked and groped, panted and grunted. He yanked something looking like a bundle out of the pile. He unfolded it. My heart stood still, then bursted with hope that I secretly shared with him.

But no, he found nothing in the bundle. It turned out to be just a tattered worn garment with holes and burn marks and some dark blots and stains. To me, it looked somewhat like a bridal gown; although, hardly any trace of pure white colour could be detected on its once delicate, lacy fabric. I wondered what those dry

stains came from.

Now, I envisioned the brightest smile from the woman who once was in that bridal gown. She must be the most envious bride in the world whose dream had come true. And yet, with some dark blotches and stains on that gown, I wondered how long that dream moment could have lasted.

I tried to think I had mistaken those stains. Hopefully, they were not stains of blood and gore as I had wondered.

I wished now I were a magician and could cast a spell on every piece of junk and turn all of them into pure gold, as King Midas had done in Greek folklore, to make Mr. Junk the richest man the whole world had ever known. Instead, I heard a shriek, a long painful cry uttered from him as he swiftly jerked one of his hands from the pile.

I saw the blood dripping down his hand. Obviously, he got a cut from some sharp thing hidden beneath. I had no idea how deep the cut or gash might be. I saw him put his knuckle into his mouth and start sucking his own blood, swallowing it hastily, one gulp after another.

Maybe his long-life experience as a survivor taught him to save every drop of blood from leaking out. He knew he couldn't afford to lose any of it because he would then require good nutrition, not scraps of food from the garbage, to replace it.

The streetlight reflected on some glittering pieces of sharp shards broken from empty whisky bottles. His knuckle must have been cut by one of those numerous pieces, scattered across the dump site everywhere,



glistening and sparkling in the dark, over here, over there and beyond, as though he were standing in the middle of a dazzling diamond mine.

I had to admit I was far from a bleeding heart. I had been in a dark dungeon of my own misery and loss. I could not break out from its walls to feel and touch the misery of others. Yet, that scene made me wince and shudder.

What if that particular shard of glass that pierced Mr. Junk's flesh came from my own whisky bottle that I discarded the night before?

What a cruel joke! But it could have happened. It could have happened after I had been so drunk and cried my heart out in the pub. I cried because I was a loser who had lost faith in people and lost hope in life. I staggered home, leaving my empty whisky bottle there for someone to toss it into a trash can. Then, in the morning, that bottle started a journey that finally ended up at this dump site, cracked, shattered into shards, smashed into hundred pieces of broken dream, turning up one of its sharp edges, waiting menacingly to hurt and harm.

That made me decide to step out of the tree's deep shadow.

"Don't make a fool of yourself. Get down. What you found are just pieces of broken dreams of somebody else who gave up their hope. That's all. Get down, pal."

My voice, that seemed to come out abruptly from nowhere, startled him. He hastily craned his neck around and then in the direction of my voice and suddenly spotted me standing a few feet below him.

He looked perplexed at first as he was peering down at me. Probably the truth that I'd just revealed did not make any sense to him. Why, his life had been in the graveyard of those buried, shattered dreams for so long he was never aware of that stark reality he submerged in. Just like fish, who could blame the fish for never realising they'd been living under water for their whole life?

An instant later, he screamed at me.

"Get out of my face! I won't stop until I find something, bastard!"

I started to walk away obediently, no point arguing with him. Shame was taking over me while I realised I'd nearly done the worst thing ever, to destroy the most significant beacon we humans must hold on to. Hope. I should leave him there and let him rekindle his hope — a hope to find his dream-come-true treasure out of the heap of those broken dreams — and never let go in the face of hopelessness.

As I stepped forward, farther and farther from that spot, turning my back on him, I still heard persistent noises from his digging and cursing, digging and cursing, echoing steadily behind me. Those beautiful echoes of...hope.

## The Twilight Zone in Las Vegas

*I finally found him at the entrance of the flood tunnel underneath the Strip, the world acclaimed glamorous section of Las Vegas Boulevard. Like many homeless men, he was sprawled on a sleeping bag under the tunnel's concrete overhang. A lone human being among a sea of junk scattered all around him.*

That must be him. I notice the same pair of black, insulated gloves he's wearing, the kind you wear only in freezing winter, not in the Mojave desert's temperature so infernal it even makes hell seem cool and welcoming. This explains why his nearly bare and bony body looks as red as a boiled lobster.

"Hello," he greets me with a snigger. "I knew you'd come."

Before coming to see him, I'd lost all my money in one of the casinos found on every corner in this Sin

City. I'd spent my earlier hours on blackjack and poker and then switched to play roulette before I realised more than half my money was already gone.

This was my first time in Vegas. And the reason was simple. Besides seeking a thrill in the casino, I needed some urgent money to pay a ton of debts.

I'd vowed I would never lose my head over those games. I was determined only to win. Yet, after another hour, instead of coming to my senses and promptly leaving this place, I went on and blew the rest of my money on those slot machines that stood row after row waiting for customers to wander in and be drawn into their traps, like moths flying into a bonfire.

I never realised that gambling is as deadly as letting yourself flirt with a sexy, beautiful woman. When she starts to seduce you with her heart-jumping smile there will be no way you can stop. And once she lets you start unbuttoning her clothes to fondle her you will go head over heels risking your life, let alone all your money, to make her surrender to your shoot-up-to-sky craving. But when that peak moment actually comes, you only find yourself being thrown to her feet. In a wink, the tables have turned. She suddenly changes into a monster and jumps on you, tearing at your throat and sucking your blood to the last drop.

I spent that night on the street sidewalk among a bunch of homeless. I found I still had my last two dollars left in my pants pocket. The damned two dollars were too worthless even to buy the cheapest thing at any

hotdog stand. I cried like a baby, thinking of the rent I had to pay by the end of this week or else I would be forced by my landlord to move out and perhaps end up living on the street for good. I was picturing myself pushing a cart full of my belongings and walking aimlessly because I had nowhere to go. Such a doomed future was at this moment as real as death.

Suicide suddenly flashed in my mind. I looked around for a good spot to serve that purpose and found a dark, abandoned parking lot not far from where I was brooding.

“Young man, you have some change to spare?”

That voice came from a dark corner inside the parking lot. I tried to look in that direction until I saw an outline of a man in the dark shadow. Yet when that figure took some steps forward, the fluorescent tubes from a billboard display above me suddenly cast some flickering light on him, revealing whoever was talking to me was a mere beggar in rags.

“Give me some money and I’ll get you out of trouble,” he reached out his hand to me. I noticed he was wearing gloves, the kind you wear only in winter, not in the midst of this suffocating night heat. That bum must be crazy.

I stared at his pathetic, wretched body and forced a laugh. The foul smell permeated from his body like he just crawled out of his grave.

“Go away. Go! Unless you want to watch someone hang himself.”

That bum looked disappointed. So I forced myself to do something nice once and for all before I would

take my own life.

“Hey, here’s two dollar bills. That’s all I have, sorry.”

He snatched my meagre money as if he was so afraid I would take it back. Before he disappeared into the dark beyond, I heard his raspy voice tear from his throat.

“Tomorrow at the mouth of the underground tunnel near the Eiffel Tower landmark look for a man wearing black gloves. That’s me. If you don’t come, you’ll blow your very last chance.”

So now, I’m settling down on his worn sleeping bag and the most bizarre conversation I’ve ever engaged in starts.

“So, let me guess,” the gloved man says, chuckling, revealing his broken teeth. “I bet you lost all your money to one of those casinos.”

“Yep,” I lower my head. “And you said you can help me.”

He narrows his eyes. “Do you have something more to give me?”

“I gave you my last two dollars last night. Remember?” I cry out. “Nothing’s left now... except my own body.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” he mutters under his breath, looking upset and outraged.

I swallow. Obviously, he can’t even kick himself out of his own misery, so how can he help me? But when you’re at the depths of your despair, you will risk everything to seek help, no matter how absurd and impossible, from the last person on earth you think can

help you.

“But you told me to come if I need help,” my voice starts shrilling. “Now, I need money. A lot - to put me on my feet again.”

“Sure, sure, you’ll get it,” his unstable mood seems to change rapidly. Now, he’s giving me his widest grin.

While we’re talking, he keeps himself busy by swatting flies that love to land on his scabby arms. Most fly off, but one drops to his feet, dead. I look away with disgust, but I’ve no business stopping him. Suddenly his voice becomes grave. “I have to swear you to secrecy. Don’t breathe a word to anyone, dead or alive.”

“Whatever you say.” If that man wants me to jump off a cliff, I believe I’ll do it. “But how can I get...,” I gulp, “money?” I bleakly ask him as I sweep my eyes across the graveyard of junk around us.

It seems the entrance of this flood tunnel has turned into an unofficial dump site: lots of empty plastic bottles, lots of rusty cans, some broken bicycle wheels. Just think of anything that pops into your head. I even found a small, broken refrigerator without a door among those worthless items.

“Um... Let’s see,” his eyes are suddenly dancing around excitedly. “Now, I want you to go right over to that pile of junk yard and pick up one item. Take only one item, big or small, I don’t care, and bring it to me. You understand?”

“Hey!” I cry out at him. “Don’t play a stupid joke on me. It’s not funny.”

“You heard perfectly what I said,” the man starts

to get upset. "Or just get out of here and find a place to hang yourself."

I have no choice but to walk over to that junk. He said I had to pick just one item that catches my eyes. How can I force my eyes to sweep through all this junk, let alone dig my own fingers into these repulsive, useless things?

"Time's up!" his voice is now becoming impatient. "Hurry up, jerk. The sun must be killing you."

I squeeze my eyes shut and fish something out of the junk. Then I brought it to show him. It is a bottomless stainless kettle that looks tolerable enough compared to all other useless stuff.

"Too bad you didn't choose a bigger item," he is shaking his head as if feeling sorry for me. "A bigger item, like that microwave over there."

"That's too heavy to carry..." I gulp.

"Now, before a real performance. Let me show you an overture."

He slowly takes off his gloves to reveal two bony hands that look so colourless as if they're already dead. I wonder how they have been kept covered and have never had the chance to see the light of day.

He then bends his head down and sweeps his eyes around on his sleeping bag. Then, with two fingers, he picks up something that looks so tiny. It is that dead fly. He puts it on his palm and closes it while laughing in triumph.

"Hey, look!"

When he slowly opens his palm and shows me, what I witness — oh Jesus Christ in Heaven — it is not



the fly. Not any longer.

Yes, it's true! When one says, to see it is to believe it. Although it is still in the shape of a fly, it's now glinting and sparkling in the glaring sunlight.

That fly has turned to pure gold.

A moment later, when my shock and bewilderment subside, he starts telling me what happened to him. Honestly, I am still too shocked to absorb the whole story. And yet I'm listening with all my intention.

Oh, that fly, that damned golden fly on his palm.

"If you knew me just six months ago," the man starts with his now more sober, yet bleaker voice, "I wasn't always the deplorable homeless man as you see me *now*. I lived in Los Angeles and owned a small newspaper stand. It's a pretty good job if you work every day and are wise enough to save your hard earned money without blowing it in stupid ways like buying drugs or gambling. If you want a rush of adrenaline, better go skydiving or cage diving with a school of starving sharks or even watching some porno movies at home like I did sometimes. Anything, but just don't go gambling and lose your soul. You hear me?"

"So, I guess you also blew all your money the same way I did."

"Ah! Smart ass," he laughs. "Yep, exactly."

"And what happened then?" I can't wait for the climax.

"Guess what happened to a moron who tried to kill his boredom the wrong way. That dull, steady life drove me to become a thrill-seeker. Nothing could kill that

*ennui* better than the thrill of gambling. Why? At that peak moment you aren't just some dude anymore, you can feel the power of God Almighty shining through you because you think you can create and shape your *own* fate and destiny. Ah, that's what all thrill-starving men desperately need when they choose to gamble. Yes, even though it means they have to put all they own at stake. But, if you ask them, they will say that kind of thrill's worth risking to be a loser. To make it short, I went to some place and gambled away every dollar I had in exchange for a thrill that would last no more than a few minutes."

"And that thing... What does gambling have to do with that *thing* in your hand?"

"Listen. After I'd lost my marbles in gambling, I crashed on the street in this vile city. Why? Besides my own money, I stole all my roommate's and lost it, too. He will cut me into pieces if he sees my face again." Then he cracks a joke. "All in all, I believe he is now homeless himself in L.A.."

"And?"

"When you are homeless, you still need to eat, right? So you beg, you steal, you pick-pocket to survive. The cops? They are too busy catching real bad guys, like drug traffickers or serial killers. They won't bother chasing bums like me who roam the street and steal shit. That's why I was getting bolder until one fateful night..."

He pauses and shudders, apparently from what he's going to tell me.

"While I was roaming the Strip, I came across a

weird looking guy. It was Halloween night. So, I thought what he was wearing must be some sort of costume for a Halloween party. It looked like attire a mediaeval sorcerer wore, a long sky-blue cloak, a peculiar tall hat and pointed slippers - just like he was walking out of a Disney studio. He also had white hair and a long, long white beard which could have been fake. Weirdest of all, I saw an owl perched on his shoulder. It wasn't a fake owl because it was staring right at me with the biggest, curious eyes while that guy walked past me. Now, I believed he must be old and senile because he kept mumbling to himself and did not even look at me. What caught my eyes was a fat leather bag he was carrying. Well, if not money, there could have been goodies in that bag I could trade in. So, I decided to snatch the bag and sprint away."

Suddenly, he startled me with his scream.

"And the owl...that damned owl swooped down from his shoulder and attacked me with its large wings and sharp beak until I fell onto the street. I tried to get to my feet to run away, but my sprained ankle wouldn't let me. Sprawled there, I waited until that long bearded weirdo stooped over me. He stared at me through his odd shaped spectacles and spoke with a very strange accent.

*'Thou wants to take things that are not thine. So Thief, this shall be the curse upon thee. From now on, what thou touch will turn into pure gold. But nay, not for thee. Thou cannot own the gold. After a swift moment, it will return into what it once was unless thou giveth it away to someone else. Then it shall remain gold for*

*all its worth till the end of time. And, under this curse, thou shall help all the unfortunate paupers out of their misery whereas thy misery will remain with you forever. Because thou can only giveth but cannot taketh from those thou giveth, a true giver shalt thou become. Oh, shan't you feel more honoured to be bestowed on this noble deed of chivalry?'*

"Then he called his owl, '*Archimedes, pray fetch me my wand.*' The owl then opened the bag with its beak and dragged a three-foot long stick, which obviously was too long to fit inside. Anyhow, it brought the stick to the strange man who mumbled some Latin words while circling the stick above my head. He then called his owl once more, '*Now, thou fetch the gloves,*' and the owl dragged a pair of gloves from the bag and laid them at my side. Then they were gone like a swift wind."

"I'm at a loss. What is this? An urban fairy tale?"

"These are the gloves," the man pointed at his gloves beside him as proof. "Oh, before he disappeared into thin air, he also warned that as long as I wear these gloves and don't let my bare hands directly touch anything, the curse will have no effect. So, I have to wear them most of the time. Otherwise, he warned, I could become a target for real evil men like the CIA. Yeah, I swear he mentioned the CIA," he scoffs. "He warned me that if I let the entire world know I can turn shit into gold, the CIA or the KGB would abduct me to use me like a guinea pig in secret experiments."

It sounds crazy. But no, he didn't lie. I've just witnessed a dead fly be turned into gold. If so, that white

bearded man must have been *real*.

"Yeah, he was as real as you and me. I know now he is the legendary Wizard Merlin from King Arthur's court during the Medieval Age, way, way back 1,400 years at least."

"Did he tell you so himself?" I gasp.

"Hey, don't forget I once owned a book stand. And I read, all right? But why did I find him roaming the streets of Las Vegas? Well, who else is able to travel to every part of this globe and at every period of time from the beginning of time till its end? He might even have showed up at King Midas's palace during the classical Greek period and placed a curse on that greedy king which enabled him to turn everything he touched into gold, including his food and daughter. Yep, it's possible that the wizard might have applied the same curse on me."

"Curse or no curse," I told him, "I want to help you in return. I'll sell that kettle after you turn it into gold and share the money with you. The price of gold is skyrocketing. We can put ourselves back on our feet with the money."

"Don't you understand why I asked you for two dollars instead of bargaining to split a huge amount of money from selling the gold? It's from his curse that once I turn anything into gold and give it to someone, I can't take a penny back from him. Nothing. Not a penny. And if I take it, can you guess what's going to happen?"

"That's not good, I guess."

"Yep, the gold will return to its original state: a

stainless kettle, a broken glass bottle or whatever, as soon as we split the money. And both of us will get into real trouble from the gold dealers. They will move heaven and earth to hunt us down because they believe we know an alchemistic secret to alter other elements into gold. Who the hell will believe Merlin or some pervert put a damned curse on me?"

"Oh my! He who cursed you is so brilliant. He has shut every door to stop you getting your share of the gold," I sigh and shake my head in disbelief.

"So, I help the penniless become rich," his voice is now bitter. "But what I earn for helping them is just from whatever they can barely scrape out of their pocket when they are *still* penniless. Just like last night, you had scraped out your last two dollars for me."

He looks at me with his forlorn eyes.

"Now you can guess how I earn my living. Each night, I look around to find some losers like you, who are as many as the flies in this casino-infested city," a mocking tone in his laugh.

"Then I offer them my help in exchange for whatever they still have in their empty wallets. Believe it or not, most of them reject my offer. Thinking I am crazy. Only a few like you accept my help. The most I ever got is ten dollars and the least, a dime. But I help those fellows anyway so they can get back on their feet. Those I have helped have gotten their life back while most who refuse end up on the street, waiting to drop dead from a disease and drugs, just like me..."

Now, his eyes filled with tears.

"One time, I turned a useless laptop found in the

garbage into solid gold worth a million for a guy and all I had gotten from him was a dime..."

"At least you still have that fly with you...that gold fly. The gold price is now so high..." I lower my voice to a whisper so that whoever put that curse on him won't be able to hear.

"Just look. See what it's become when I've kept it with me for more than ten minutes."

He opens his palm. I expect a gold fly still in his palm. But it's not.

"I held it for more than ten minutes," he said in his flat voice, "So, it went back to its original state. I have to give it away real quick."

Then he squashes that dead fly and brushes it off his hand.

I feel bad for him and want to hug him to give some comfort despite his stench. But it's probably not a wise idea because his hands are still gloveless. With the slightest touch from his finger tip, he can turn me into two hundred pounds of solid gold in one instant. That picture gives me a shudder.

"*C'est la vie...* pal," he nods sadly. "Now it's time to get another job done."

He turns to that stainless bottomless kettle and starts to touch it.

## That Invisible Hand

*If only Don had had a hunch that his life was going to change forever in an immeasurable way.*

“Dad?” his seven-year-old son asked him today. “I call you Dad. Mom calls you Don. But Uncle Dee calls you Bro. And that’s not enough. Yesterday, that peddler called you Sir. So, who are you? I mean who are *you* really?”

The boy Sunny, who was also called Mr Chatterbox by his own father, always found weird questions to ask him. This time, Sunny looked at his hands as if they were the strangest things that protruded out of nowhere. Then he blurted out another question and expected his father to find a good answer for him.

“I wonder why I have to be *me* all the time. Why ain’t I able to be someone else who isn’t me?”



“Why? What makes you come up with such a weird idea?”

“I want someone else to feel pain for me when I cut my finger,” he grinned. “So, I’ll be pain-free every time I hurt myself. Isn’t it possible?”

“You’re asking the wrong person, young man. You have to go ask someone up there, not me,” Don sighed and pointed his finger toward the sky. “That one probably keeps all the answers you want to know because he is our Creator.”

This Saturday morning, before Don prepared to drive his wife to the shopping mall—a kind of ritual they never missed on every weekend—they’d heard the doorbell ring. Someone was ringing the bell non-stop urgently. Mom went to open the door and found a male stranger outside.

She didn’t expect to see a stranger. Moreover, she found that the instant that man saw her, he never took his eyes off her. His strange gaze was fixed on her face as if he was put under a spell. It was such an intense gaze supposed to be given only to someone close and intimate. She felt so uneasy from that unlikely stare she withdrew inside and called her husband.

“Someone I’ve never seen at the door, Don. Come talk to him.”

Don frowned and strode to the door.

The stranger’s expression suddenly changed into something close to shock. It was as if he was seeing a ghost when Don showed up at the door.

“Do I know you? I don’t think so.”

“Is your name Don...?” the man’s face whitens, his

voice barely a whisper.

“What do you want?” Don didn’t hesitate to show his annoyance.

“Just tell me...” the man became more desperate.

“Sunny and Chance... Are they still here with you?”

“Of course, they are my kids. Now, I have to go.”

As he pulled the door shut, that man tried to stop him. “Please, just let me see if they are okay,” as he begged him his eyes were nearly in tears. “

“Hey, what’s your problem? You have no business here,” he was raising his voice.

“I...I brought their favourite comic books for them. So, can I ask you to give these books to them?”

“Oh hell. No!” he slammed the door in the stranger’s face and shouted to his wife. “That guy is just plain crazy. He said he wanted to see the kids. So, I chased him away.”

“Well, he looks sad and miserable,” she added. “Probably he’s needing help. Do you think so?”

“Just forget about that man. Now, let’s go.”

When the couple arrived at the mall, Don parked his car in the parking lot and parted with his wife. She was going to shop for clothes on the first floor, and he would hang around on the third floor until she finished and called him to meet her downstairs.

First, he visited the bookstore to buy comic books for Chance, his ten-year-old daughter, and Sunny, his seven-year-old son. He had promised to buy them their favourite books. After that he still had plenty of time. So, he went inside his favourite café on the opposite

side of the bookstore.

As he enjoyed his latte, he noticed that the café's walls had been newly painted. The walls' were now pale blue. Last week when he came, he remembered the same walls were lime green. He liked lime green better because it rendered a warmer atmosphere.

Then, to his astonishment, he noticed the café was now twice as big as the last time. It was like the walls had been lifted and moved farther away by some gigantic hand. Probably this café underwent renovation since his last visit. Yet, it seemed too fast for the construction to be finished, in just a week, and without any trace left. But that was not his business, so he stopped thinking about it.

Then, after he left the café and took the escalator down, all he could do was to blink and gasp in bewilderment at what he saw in front of him.

The same spot where the bookstore had stood a moment ago, which was opposite the café, was now an entire blank wall all the way to the restroom. And the escalator he had taken earlier was also gone, replaced by an elevator at the nearby corner. People walked past him to get into that elevator as if it had been there for ages. It seemed the whole format of this floor had been altered in just the blink of an eye. How this happened was beyond his scope of comprehension.

He called his wife several times on his cell phone to confirm his mental state. He needed her comforting voice to assure him he hadn't abruptly gone insane. But he got no answer, which upset him more.

While he stood frozen in front of the café, a man

in a security guard uniform was walking by. Don stopped the man before he walked away, held his breath, and then asked, "Have you noticed that the escalator over there is now...um...gone? I swear I just used it only moments ago." Then he added, "And...and, the whole bookstore has disappeared as well. They're all gone. Oh God!"

"What? Are you serious?" the guard laughed and stared hard at him. "I've been working in this place since it was built. Sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about. Man, you need to have your brain checked."

Then he left Don to stand alone in frustration.

Finally, Don decided to take that elevator to the ground floor. He kept his fingers crossed upon entering it. Before the elevator door closed, his last glimpse saw that the café had also disappeared into thin air. In full-blown panic, he closed his eyes and prayed that this bizarre and inexplicable event would stop once he met his wife.

But he was wrong. He was deadly wrong.

The woman he saw waiting for him at the entrance door was not his wife although she was wearing Pam's bright yellow dress. His wife had a slim body and always had a sweet, pleasant smile on her face, but this woman, he could see in one glance, looked overweight and overbearing.

"Hey, what the hell kept you so long? Don't you know the traffic is now getting worse?" she barked. Yet, he swore to himself that it was unmistakably Pam's voice.

“Pam...?” He said his wife’s name to see her response. But she started walking and he, with no choice, had to follow her to the lot where rows of cars were parked. Thank heavens, the parking lot was still here. It hadn’t vanished like what he had experienced on the third floor.

“Why do you keep standing like an idiot? Get in the car. Now!” That bitch was yelling at him.

His face turned blank. He scanned all the cars in his vicinity but couldn’t find his own, a brown Honda Civic. Oh, would this madness never stop?

“Which one...?” He whispered in despair.

“That’s not funny, jerk,” she growled at him.

Fortunately, she took the car’s remote control from her handbag and strode to a black Toyota Camry parked to her left. Then, she opened the car door and ordered him to get inside.

Don drove the car out of the parking lot as if in some kind of trance. It was possible that he was dead and already in hell. That’s why he found himself stuck with that foul-mouthed woman who was sitting by his side and kept nagging and yacking non-stop. Or maybe he was still in bed dreaming because whatever manifested in a dream never had reason or logic. The best he could do for now was to wait to wake up. So, he could return to his real life and to his real wife he worried had disappeared as well.

Suddenly, a thought crossed his mind. It startled him out of his wits.

“Oh my god! Chance and Sunny! My kids!” he let

out a scream. "Where are they now? Tell me where they are!"

"Hey, what's wrong with you?" she shrieked back at him, but this time alarm showed on her face. "They *are* at home, stupid! You act like you're losing your mind. Honestly, I can't afford to talk with a nut. So, just shut your mouth and keep driving. You hear me?"

No use trying to beat the unbeatable. So, he set his mind on driving home as fast as he could to see if his kids were safe from this absurdity which was now looming over him and threatening his very existence. However, he felt thankful that whatever was happening to him was merciful enough to let him drive all the way home without altering direction. *Please, whoever or whatever you are, please don't make my kids disappear. I beg you... I beg you...*

He found his two-storied house just the same, right among the same neighbours' homes. And his old dog jumped to greet him with all the joy as it always did when it saw him. Thank God, his own dog did recognize him. Maybe things were beginning to return to normal - if only this awful woman, who claimed to be his wife, would disappear.

"Chance, Sunny, where are you? I'm home, kids!" Don shouted at the top of his voice the instant he threw open the door and flew into the living room. He ignored the woman howling at him, warning him to stop acting like a lunatic or else. He never felt so panicked as his eyes swept the whole room, searching for his two kids.

Relief spread all over Don as he suddenly heard footsteps coming toward him. The living room door

burst open, followed by the familiar, hilarious giggles that he recognised immediately.

“Daddy, Daddy! Here we are. Ta-da!”

But his heart almost stopped from the shock the instant both of them showed up.

Yes, the girl and the boy who raced into his arms were undeniably Chance and Sunny because their faces, their features and their voices still made them who they were.

Except their ages were reversed.

His ten-year-old daughter, Chance, was now a smaller seven-year-old child while his seven-year-old son, Sunny, was now a ten-year-old kid.

*No, no. This couldn't be happening. It just couldn't.* He tried to scream, but the shock weakened his scream into a mere whisper.

“Dad, did you buy the comic books for us as you promised?”

“Let me go. Let me go!” Finally, he forced himself to scream at the top of his lungs.

He managed to run out of the house, so he wouldn't collapse from a sudden heart attack.

When alone on the street, he sat down on the sidewalk and watched as people passed by with his vacant eyes while trying to make sense of all the things that had begun to creep into his ordinary life since he walked into that shopping mall.

No one, except Don, seemed aware that some strange things were going on around them—strange things that were defying the law of logic—strange occurrences that had no regard for reason. But he was

way too powerless to make everything return to normal.

However, he seemed to be the only one who was intact. He remained his own self whereas everyone else surrounding him had succumbed to the whim of that invisible hand. They all, in one way or another, had undergone the change that made them into somebody else.

That Invisible Hand had thrown his life into sheer chaos. It even screwed up the sequence of time. He was sure it was five o'clock in the afternoon. But when he stared at his cell phone, it showed the time was eight o'clock in the morning, which meant time had moved back.

He sat there for one hour until he decided he couldn't run away any longer. He must go back to face his fate, whatever it would be. He had nowhere to go except to his own place where he belonged.

Besides, no matter how terrified he felt, as a father, he must protect his kids. He just couldn't leave his own kids to fall into the hands of that Unknown who seemed to play with people as if they were just toys.

Finally, he forced himself to stand at the front door of his house. He'd waited there for one long minute before he managed to gather up the courage to ring the bell.

His heart beat frantically as he heard footsteps coming toward the door.

It was Pam.

She was the same Pam he had spent his life with, for better or for worse, for twelve long years. Pam came to open the door and found him outside. She greeted



him with a warm smile he was so-so familiar with. He felt himself go limp from immense relief. His wife was at last coming back into his life. And that nasty, dreadful bitch was finally gone.

But all the words he was going to say suddenly dried in his mouth the instant she spoke to him.

“Hello, how can I help you?”

Although her smile was warm and friendly, it was a meaningless smile she would give to any stranger she met for the first time.

“Pam? Don’t you remember me? It’s Don...” he gave himself one last chance. “We’ve been married for twelve years...”

“Don?” she repeated his name. As she was staring at him, her eyes went as empty as a blank sheet. He found not even the slightest recognition of him in those eyes.

And the worst was yet to come.

She quickly slipped inside. Then, he heard her voice talking to someone behind the door.

“There’s someone at the door. *Don*, can you come talk to him? I’m at a loss.”

Don felt like the earth beneath his feet was turning upside down when he saw the man whom his wife called *Don* coming to stand face to face with him at the front door. There was no resemblance at all between himself and that man. Although both of them were around the same age, Don was a plain, average-looking person while the other Don would stun anyone with his masculine aura that would sweep most girls in this

neighbourhood off their feet.

“Hi there.”

To his surprise the man didn’t show any hostility or rudeness to him. He even came to greet Don with a big smile. What a nice and pleasant person Don thought.

It seemed that the new Don had been made to perfection.

Suddenly everything came to him in a flash. He began to see a reason for the changes he had gone through. Now he came to understand it all happened for a reason.

*This* had happened before like some cycle of fate. This new man emerged for a purpose to replace Don as much as he himself was meant to replace another who had come to ring the bell earlier in the morning and begged to see his kids. Poor thing, he had chased that man away from his house for fear that something must be wrong with him. He wondered where that poor soul was now. It was very possible that he was gone forever because the Invisible Hand had deleted him out of existence.

Don began to realise that he was the next to be discarded and thrown into a void because he was no longer needed. Everything that once had belonged to him—his wife, his kids, his house and, worst of all, his own identity as Don—was now transferred to a more fitting man who had been shaped to perfection for this role.

Finally, the concerned voice of the new Don brought him back to the present moment.

“Are you alright? You need some help?”

Don stared at the man and said forlornly. “I really hope it will stop now. I hope it will stop with you for good.”

The new man stared back in puzzlement. “Excuse me?”

“Never mind,” Don hesitated, “Just take good care of your family. That’s all I will ask you.”

Then he turned and walked away and waited.

He knew it was useless to tell anyone that they were brought into existence merely with the pen of some writer who tried to revise their story over and over, ignorant of the apocalyptic effect they had on the lives of the characters they created in their story.