



# THE LOOP

'Death is the beginning'



Witida Ditiecher

## Acknowledgments

The Loop, an enchanting literary creation by Witida Ditietcher, tells the profound belief in karma, which serves as the fundamental essence of Thai cultures. It illustrates the intricate interconnection of every element in the universe, akin to a loop created by the continuous occurrence of karma.

The author artfully portrays the intricacies of human lives through beautifully written pages. The captivating aspect lies in the interwoven complexity of the characters, where every nuanced factor is seamlessly connected. Coupled with a narrative that is neither excessively lengthy nor short, The Loop possesses its own unique qualities that are impossible to overlook, enticing readers to stay engaged and continue reading.

Certainly, there is no doubt that The Loop rightfully earns its position as the 1st place winner of the Chommanard Book Prize 2020.

## **Publisher's foreword**

Under the umbrella of Praphansarn Publishing Co., Ltd., Woman Publisher has been honored with the esteemed Chommanard Book Prize since 2007. This recognition enables us to publish outstanding literary works that have been announced to be in the top three positions of the competition. Renowned author Yuwadee Tonsakulrungruang, the creative force behind “A Walk Through Spring,” gained international recognition when she clinched the first-ever Chommanard Book Prize. The esteemed Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, princess of Thailand, presented the deluxe trophy to the project aimed at empowering Thai female writers, a gesture that served as a beacon of encouragement. In collaboration with Bangkok Bank, Praphansarn Publishing Co., Ltd. has proudly continued the Chommanard Book Prize for an additional nine times until 2020. Consequently, Woman Publisher has also published the literary works of the top three winners for nearly the same duration, marking these moments as some of our proudest achievements.

Throughout the years, the Chommanard Book Prize has adapted to various themes, including non-fiction, propelling numerous female writers to success in both sales and media recognition. Notable figures such as Thanadda Sawangduean, Chanwalee Srisukho, and Ui-Hui-Siang (pen name of Sudanee Booranabensatien) have made significant contributions to the literary circle. Unfortunately, there were instances where no qualified works merited the title of winner or runner-up, a testament

to Woman Publisher's commitment to maintaining the prize's high standards. At the eighth Chommanard Book Prize in 2019, the theme reverted to fiction, and Woman Publisher, regrettably, did not publish any works during that particular year.

In the context of the Chommanard Book Prize 2020, we received 39 literary works, leading to the recognition of 3 most outstanding works as the winners. Despite the time constraints, Woman Publisher successfully published these masterpieces within a week of the announcement, while maintaining a rigorous editorial review process.

Our commitment to quality control in book publishing is an integral part of our process, conducted with passion and diligence. Despite time limitations, we prioritized our focus on the first prize winner, "The Loop," without compromising the attention given to the other winners.

On behalf of the Publication Department at Woman Publisher, I extend heartfelt gratitude to all those involved in the Chommanard Book Prize, with special appreciation for the founders, Khunying Chamnongsri Hanchanlath and Dr. Suchitra Chongstitvatana. Our dedication to presenting the first-place winner's work in English has significantly contributed to garnering substantial attention for the Chommanard Book Prize from both Thai and international audiences. During the publishing journey, I had the privilege of accessing *The Loop* before its official release. In the midst of the clattering metal sounds emanating from the publishing machines, I discovered the captivating beauty within the author's writing style, offering profound insights into the intricacies of human lives. *The Loop* intricately navigates the realms of karma and the cycle of life, presenting a narrative that, though seemingly unreal, resonates with a profound sense of reality. Its complexity adds to the fascination, making it a compelling and thought-provoking piece of literature.

We express our heartfelt gratitude to Praphansarn Publishing Co., Ltd., and all our partners, with special appreciation for Bangkok Bank, the largest and enduring sponsor, and B.Grimm Power Public Company Limited, our esteemed new sponsor this year.

With beautiful bouquets to our dear readers,  
Executive Editor of Woman Publisher

Elite Creative Literary Agency

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

NIRAMOL .....	9
BOTAN.....	24
SOOKJAI.....	37
GUO JING.....	54
PERMPOL .....	65
THONGCHAN.....	81
PUN & PONG.....	97
WITTAYA & MALEE.....	109
PUNPONG .....	126
PUNDHUCHA.....	155
SUTTHAWADEE.....	171
TAO.....	197

# NIRAMOL

Niramol was startled awake by the ringing sound, soaked in sweat on the cold bus. She grabbed her phone and looked at the pitch dark screen, realising she had been dreaming.

In the dim light, the other passengers were sound asleep. She slid her phone back into her pocket, rolled onto her side—face to the window—and bent her legs into the seat, which swayed gently to the rhythm of the vehicle.

She dozed off for a few moments. The phone still rang in her ears now and again, but her mind told her it was all a dream. She slept for a long time before waking up from the unexpected harsh braking that nearly threw her out of her seat. Fortunately, she was wearing her seatbelt.

The driver grumbled about a motorcycle emerging out of nowhere from an alley. Niramol opened the window curtain halfway, examining the outside. She saw the entry sign to the Farmers' Market on the left side of the road, knowing Bangkok was not far away. When she sat up straight, she found her phone had landed on her lap because she had forgotten to button her shirt pocket. Luckily, it did not fall to the floor. She swiped the screen to see the time—nine o'clock in the morning—and she was wide awake by then.

The bus remained there for more than five minutes. Some

passengers became restless. Niramol turned to glance to the right, where a couple sat frowning.

“It’s Sunday,” the husband said, shaking his head. “Why are we stuck in such bad traffic?”

“Chinese New Year is two days away,” the wife replied. “Today is the day for shopping, so people might go out and buy things.”

The husband moaned tiredly. One of the passengers called up to the front, asking when the bus would arrive at Mo Chit Bus Terminal. The bus hostess dressed in a pink fuchsia uniform turned her head with an unappealing smile, rose up, and spoke clearly for everyone to hear.

“Dear passengers, we have been informed there has been an accident at the next intersection. A truck and a van collided. Only the left lane is now open for traffic. Prapop Tour apologises for this inconvenience.”

The passengers mumbled. Some stood up and stretched their arms, tired of sitting for ten hours from Chiang Mai till now.

Niramol had nothing better to do, so she opened her Line app—Punpong had not yet read her message from the night before. She’d wished him a good night’s sleep. He most likely dropped off shortly after their previous phone call. She felt sorry for him when she saw his pale face in the image he shared. He caught a terrible cold and no one took care of him. She came down to Bangkok without telling him since she wanted to surprise him at his condo and hoped she wouldn’t scare and make his illness worse.

The group of her university friends had sent out a lot of messages. Niramol erased them awkwardly. She laughed at how little she knew about technology. Her phone had once run out of memory, and she had just recently learned from Punpong how to clear junk data. The last time they met, he helped her reset her phone and delete all the unnecessary files.

The foam box under the seat stayed in the same place.



Niramol bent down to look and was relieved. The bus braking hadn't turned it upside down. In the box were Punpong's favourite food—Chiang Mai sausages and green chilli dip. She bought them yesterday at the fresh market. She asked the vendor to put some dried ice in the box to keep the food cool. These might be funny gifts to Punpong.

The bus stopped in front of a department store and more than half of the passengers got off. The couple said their goodbyes to Niramol, and the wife kindly asked, "Don't you want to get off here? Traffic is so bad. It takes a long time to get to Mo Chit. If you take a van and use the tollway, you'll get there faster."

Niramol hesitated. She was about to gather her belongings and follow them, but they both left before she did. She sat back down in her seat, took her bag off the armrest, and set it on her lap so she could take a look at the important document that the bank had given her the day before.

What would Punpong say if he knew he'd be getting more than sausages and chilli dip from her?

"We will not stop anywhere else," the hostess announced. "We will only stop at Mo Chit station because we have already wasted hours. Does anyone else want to get off at this stop?"

Almost all of the passengers left, looking tired and depressed. They might have reasoned they'd be better off eating at some shop than sitting on the bus.

Niramol turned her head to glance back, and a group of four or five teenagers moved forward from the back seats. Each of them smashed their backpacks against the seats they passed—notably the last lad whose arm hit Niramol's shoulder. His neon yellow sneakers tied to his backpack whacked her hard on her forehead.

He made no apologies. Niramol grinned to comfort herself and pondered on her recent disaster. Yesterday, she was as busy as a bee. In the morning, she got hurt when she accidentally kicked

her toe into a peg while arranging tents for tourists at the homestay. At midday, she was riding her motorbike to the Land Department when a car driver, failing to use his blinker, took a sharp turn and knocked her off her bike. Luckily, she was wearing a helmet. In the afternoon, she hurried to the bank, this time praying for good luck—yet, she bumped her head on a table while stooping down to pick up the pen she dropped. Punpong would say that she was always a kid if he found out.

Looking at her bitten fingernails, Niramol smiled. She was now twenty-three years old and no longer a fourth-year university student, as she had been when they first met. But Punpong had never seen her as a grown-up.

The teenagers sat down, stretching their legs and chatting loudly. The owner of the neon yellow sneakers cast a glance at Niramol, but his face was hidden by his hat, so she only saw a grin. However, she was not paying attention. Being hit by sports shoes seems small when compared to the cut on her toe.

Her stomach growled. Niramol bent down embarrassingly, hoping it was not too loud to be heard. She simply reminded herself that she had not eaten anything since yesterday evening. Last night, she was sleeping when the bus stopped to allow passengers to dine at a restaurant along the way. She had dreamt of Punpong, missing him and longing to see him. So much for the power of love. It caused us to lose our appetites when we were in love and gain weight after a breakup because we ate non-stop.

The snack box—handed out by the hostess last night—was still in the seat storage. To quench her hunger, Niramol eagerly opened it and devoured the entire piece of coconut milk cake. She sank back in her seat and listened to the teen lads talk. One of them offered to go to Chatuchak Market for a meal, while another wanted to go to a Japanese café. After a while, the topic was turned to K-Pop girl groups followed by a net idol known as 3Bs — Beautiful Big Boobs.

Niramol, almost choking on the cake, abruptly stopped listening and pulled open the curtain, allowing herself to drift off.

Bangkok was unfamiliar to her, nothing like her hometown, Chiangdao district. Her childhood home was a two-storey wooden house surrounded by longan orchards. The street was quiet after dusk, with just insects making noise. Her university friends made fun of her for not knowing the outside world, comparing her to a cricket living in its burrow. Without Punpong, her life would be stuck in a loop forever, like a tiny toothed gear in an outdated machine.

Monday to Saturday, she worked at a homestay and saved Sunday for a temple visit. Last year, Punpong invited her to Bangkok. Niramol felt like she'd been transformed into a small beetle amongst colourful cotton candies, sweet and scented, but it was not what she desired.

That was the first time she saw the real capital city, rather than one on TV, and also the first time she slept in a condo with a man—thankfully, nothing went wrong. Punpong was not a womaniser or opportunist. That night, he let her sleep in his room while he rested elsewhere.

No matter how wonderful the mood was when they were together, Punpong had never done anything more than lean his head on her lap, look into her eyes, hold her hand, kiss it, and nip her fingertips softly like a young child. He loved when she stroked his hair. He told her he wanted to enjoy that very moment with her—as long as he could.

Punpong was a gift that fell from the skies before Niramol asked for it. If she were a cricket in a small, dark burrow, he would be a faint blue light bulb.

His presence did not bother her—it did make her feel warm. She loved his soft curly hair, his small white fangs at the corners of his mouth, and his dark brown eyes that always smiled—even in the deepest misery. He never mentioned his family's wealth. When

he invited her to his condo, he told her it was a small, empty room his mother bought for family members who had business in town. It made Niramol smile every time she remembered what he said. If the six-hundred-square-metre condo in Bangkok's most expensive neighbourhood was just a little place to live, her house in the heart of longan orchards was nothing but a bird's nest made from grass flowers.

His wealth dazzled her, but she did not appreciate it. She fell in love with him not because he was rich. They began their relationship knowing nothing about each other's identities.

Yesterday, Punpong sent her a message, telling her that his mother wanted him to come to Bangkok to be scolded. Even though he was not feeling well, his mom and sister never asked how he was. They were heartless.

Niramol knew Punpong was drained from his social volunteer work, which consumed both his physical and mental energies. Yet, he chose to sacrifice himself.

The bus rushed to make up for lost time as the traffic began to flow. Silence returned since the teenagers had grown tired of speaking—having nothing else to say. They turned to their phones to play games. The flashing screens replaced noise pollution with light pollution.

Her shoulder bag lay on her lap. Niramol gently touched its delicate checked pattern. Punpong had given her this bag for her birthday. It was made from pink and white paracord and had a drawstring closure. Her colleagues cheered and yelled when she first used it—finally, a nun had turned into a fashionista.

The nickname 'Nun' came from her favourite red-brown monk bag which had belonged to her father. Her peers chanted 'Sadhu' whenever she wore it to work, treating her like a nun.

---

\* A Sanskrit word means good or excellent, used to show praise and acceptance.

Niramol looked left and right before opening her bag and staring at an important document in a plastic envelope. It was funny that her hand trembled. She'd never taken such a large step.

She had just finished college a year ago. Her homestay salary was roughly ten thousand baht per month. If she didn't feel like cooking, she would go to the district market and get something to eat—less than twenty baht every time. She may also buy seasonal fruit in the hill tribe market for ten baht a bag on her way home. No one would have believed that a person like her—who had never touched a huge sum of money—would be brave enough to mortgage her house and land for millions of baht.

Her mind went back to the time she signed the document, her hands quivering as the Land Department officers teased her. How could she not be excited about what she was doing with her title deed—the only thing her parents had left her?

It was cooler on the bus because there weren't many passengers left. Niramol buttoned her denim shirt to her neck, while glancing at the seven-digit number on the cashier's cheque. She kept it secret for two months, waiting for bank permission. With the cheque in her hand, she was going to tell Punpong what she had done. She knew he'd scold her, but she couldn't do anything else. If she had told him she wanted to help him pay off his debt, he would have never agreed.

Niramol trusted him after years of dating. Punpong was charming and self-imposing. He never told anyone, not even his mother—Sutthawadee — about his problem.

A hollow space filled her heart. She was born into a loving family with a caring father and mother. When her hand was softly slashed by a cutter, even her mother felt pain. Punpong's family was beyond her imagination. She could not believe a wealthy mother would treat her own child so harshly.

Punpong had told her about his life. His mother devoted

herself to the family business. She only cared about money. He was left with his grandma. When he was sent to boarding school, the old lady cried her eyes out. She begged his mother to keep him home, but she was turned down. His grandpa agreed after his mother insisted. Punpong was forced to leave his beloved grandma and attend a school in another city. His grandma soon fell unwell and died without saying goodbye. This left a scar on his heart.

After finishing secondary school, Sutthawadee sent Punpong to study abroad. Though she ordered him to study commerce, he picked philosophy. Once she found out, she cut off his financial support—as well as any contact. Punpong worked like crazy to pay for his studies. When he returned to Thailand, Sutthawadee forced him to work for the family company. He couldn't stand it for long. He'd had a dream since childhood. He chose to do social work without thinking of what he would get in return. So, he escaped and became a volunteer teacher, travelling to teach in border villages.

His convictions opposed his mother's. Sutthawadee wished for her son to be a businessman, not a saint. She used her power to do whatever she wanted and refused to give him money in hopes that he would beg her for some — but Punpong never did, even though he knew he was an heir to his grandpa's will.

Over time, mother and son's ties grew more distant. Punpong had become the family's black sheep. His mother and sister ignored him. They did not talk to him at all. So, he didn't want to return home. Instead, he wanted to live in peace and continue his community development work. If he came back to Bangkok, he would live alone in the condo.

Niramol had looked into Sutthawadee's background. In an online newspaper, she found an interview entitled 'When the hen crows louder than a cock'. Sutthawadee had spent thirty years building her business, becoming a leading business figure. She turned the grocery store her husband's family ran into one of Thailand's

top fifty billionaires. She said she was a widow, but she didn't talk much about her family during the interview. Her husband died when she was young, leaving her with a son and daughter. She spoke only about the girl, Pundhucha, and said nothing about Punpong at all.

People didn't know about the Techasinthop family until Sutthawadee was on the front page of a newspaper at the end of last year. In an interview, her sister-in-law said that she had stolen the family property by forging her nephew's name and giving his shares to her daughter.

Niramol wasn't greedy, but she gasped when she saw the list of Sutthawadee's priceless possessions. It might be a headache for her to run such a giant firm. No one knew how the fight over the inheritance would end. Punpong told her his mother and aunt had fought for a long time. Niramol figured out from the story that Punpong's grandpa allowed his daughter-in-law to manage the family property after his only son died. So, Sutthawadee gained full control over the family's holdings.

Being born with a silver spoon in your mouth does not guarantee happiness. Niramol put the cheque back in her bag, certain that she and Punpong had a shared destiny from a past life. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been so impressed with him at first sight. The more Sutthawadee snubbed him, the more she felt pity for him.

The locket around her neck carried her parents' ashes. Niramol touched it. Her father died when she was in primary school, but her memories of him had never faded away. Her mother said he retired as a teacher because of illness and became a fruit grower. He was religious—his bookcase was full of dharma books. He taught her the law of karma, both good and bad. As a young child, she was clueless of his teachings and only enjoyed painting the Wheel of Life on the book covers.

Her father died of lung disease. His symptoms started like a

cold, but he developed blood poisoning. His condition improved after being taken to the hospital. The morning he died, he walked her to school, holding her hand with tears in his eyes, kissing her cheek and saying sorry, he did his best. She laughed and said, “Daddy, tomorrow will be fine,” about forgetting to bring a pot of bean sprouts to her teacher. Her father was always like that, apologising for every little thing.

Niramol never imagined that would be the last time she saw her father’s face. At noon that day, he died of a collapsed lung. People in the area said he was having trouble breathing and eventually passed out and died.

After his death, her mother took her to a temple every week. Her father’s teaching—like the first candlelight—guided her along the right path. Even after she had lost both of her parents, she continued to go to a meditation retreat in a forest monastery.

Her solitude separated her from others. She didn’t care about social media, didn’t criticise anything, and didn’t wear makeup or dress up. Unbelievable, a simple girl like her would meet Punpong.

They began dating last year. The abbot of the forest monastery was collecting donated items to distribute. Niramol agreed to help sort and box them for a hospital and children’s foundation. At that time, Punpong drove a van to collect some things. He wore a woven red shirt like a young Karen man. Niramol had no idea he was the son of a billionaire. As did most of the Bangkok volunteers who taught here, she thought he was a “come and go” type.

He was a good-looking guy with fair skin, like many Chinese people. His eyes showed his thoughtfulness. That day, he brought along his students, who surrounded him and called him Master, reminding her of her dad. She was born after he quit school, and her mom always respectfully called him Master. This left a deep impression on Niramol, making her admire the teaching profession. After high school she had to decide between studying Home



Economics or Education. In the end, her mother helped her pick the first one.

Niramol hadn't considered getting involved with a man before she met Punpong, but they fell in love at first sight. He left his lavish life in the large city to live in a remote town and teach for a few thousand baht from an NGO, which gave her the feelings she had for him. And she grew to admire him every minute.

He told her the school on the hill had to close since it didn't have enough students. He went down to town with the village leader to talk with government officials, but nothing came of it. The district director suggested using a Buddhist robe-offering ceremony to fund a temporary school and promised to help. In the end, very little money was made from this project. To avoid disappointing the villagers, Punpong gave his own money to build the school and buy books and other needed materials. Nobody knew he had borrowed money from a loan shark through an online gang. Interest was charged every three days. And if payments were late, rates would rise.

It was just now that Niramol learned Punpong had paid more in interest than the original loan amount. She told him to call the police because loan sharking with crazy high interest rates is illegal, but he didn't. He was afraid of being in the media. It would make his mother feel ashamed. The longer the time, the higher the interest rate, and he was almost done. He also had to buy a pickup to carry hill tribe products to town to sell to make money for the community.

Within almost a year, his debts jumped from ten thousand baht to one hundred thousand, and at some point several hundred thousand. He had no business sense and his seemingly endless debt confused him. Niramol immediately mortgaged her house and land with the bank to support this good man. She would repay her debt monthly. How could she leave him to handle everything on his own, ignoring his terrible situation?

The hostess announced their arrival at Mo Chit station. Niramol stood up and waited for the teens to exit first. She noticed another man in the right back seat. He wore a Mandarin collar shirt like a Tai Chi Master. His partly grey shoulder-length hair made him look old.

She smiled at him when he looked up, and he smiled back by lifting the corners of his lips. He looked fierce with his black face, but Niramol was too busy. She quickly carried her shoulder bag and foam box to the door and glanced back at the old man—who was sitting quietly.

Half past ten. She dashed to the Skytrain station. Without the accident, she would have already arrived at Punpong's condo. A 10% discount on a return ticket gave her two extra bus hours—this kind of bonus was not welcomed.

Tripping on her shoelace, Niramol felt, 'I have to hurry,' she thought, balancing. 'I need to see Punpong's face as soon as possible. I'm curious about how he will react. Oh! How dare you!'

Without caring for a person in love, the unkind shoelaces loosened on both shoes. Niramol dodged a motorcycle—that honked and drove onto the pavement—and knelt to knot the laces in a double bow till her feet hurt to make sure they wouldn't come undone again.

"Girl, you dropped something there."

The motorcyclist pointed ahead with his thin, wrinkled index finger. Niramol found delicate yarns of various colours on the ground. She couldn't tell what it was, so she was going to say it wasn't hers. Meanwhile, her bag strap was yanked, and she wrenched it back—terrified!

She just realised the motorcyclist was a robber who dared to steal in broad daylight. He pointed to the ground to draw her attention. Niramol straightened up as the motorcyclist cursed at her and yelled in a harsh voice.

"Give me my wallet."

No way, bro! Quickly, Niramol backed up. He wore a mercury-coated helmet. She almost told him this helmet was illegal, but a crook like him would never listen.

Her brain told her to memorise how he looked—before fleeing—so she could describe him to the police officers if asked. Yet, she couldn't see through his helmet and could only spot his long silver hair. Based on his hair and voice, he wasn't young.

No way, old boy! She said again in her head, changing how to call him. Before she could run away, he struck her face so hard with his fist that she saw the Wheel of Life—with eight spokes—twirling. When she was smacked by the sneaker on the bus, the pain was not as bad as this iron Kung Fu fist.

She was dazed, but tried not to fall. Her hands gripped her belongings like superglue. She looped the bag strap several times around her wrist and wrapped her arms over the foam box. Nobody could take what she wanted to give Punpong.

A keen weapon shone in her eyes. Niramol groaned. The motorcyclist held strange scissors in his hand. Such a weapon would hurt her twice—one stab two wounds and two stabs four wounds!

She flinched and felt helpless, realising her fate. She'd had a string of bad luck lately. Someone screamed for help. Niramol had no idea it was her own voice—it sounded like a dying grandma.

The back of her neck hit the pavement—causing extreme pain. A bright light appeared around her like the sun had fallen in front of her. The spinning Wheel of Life split into multiple wheels. It was like someone dumped a ladle of Chinese spicy hotpot soup down her throat.

Niramol knew she had fallen. Her back was to the ground and her hands on the rough cement. She couldn't move, feeling like someone was sitting on her.

A roaring motorcycle flew. A teenager yelled—a woman was stabbed—and dogs barked—the street is a stage, right?

What happened to Bangkok? Niramol wondered why the sky went dark after being bright a minute earlier. She heard water dripping, a metal bell ringing over and over, and a car horn honking off and on.

All eyes were on her. She lay still, her eyes open, staring at the teenagers from the same bus who had been discussing 3Bs. They knelt around her and said the police and an ambulance were coming.

‘Don’t forget to call a funeral service,’ Niramol mentally joked. The lad with the yellow sneakers caressed her hair and gently touched her cheeks with the back of his hand. If he regretted the shoe incident, he never apologised.

“Does it hurt, girl?” He spoke nicely, but called her a girl—how dare you?

Niramol was dizzy, confused where to look—everything blended and moved left and right. She tried to stare at the yellow sneaker owner, but his nose, lips and eyes whirled like a blender. His high school crew cut was all she had to recognise him. She wanted to ask if they were going to Chatuchak Market or the Japanese café, but her voice was gone and warm, mushy liquid came out of her throat instead. She suddenly realised she had been stabbed in the neck by the robber’s sinful scissors!

That’s why she had problems breathing and made a weird sound. She’d be the first page of a newspaper—Bangkok Dangerous! A city robber used a deadly weapon to commit a heinous crime—could that be? Locals are shocked! A rural woman was stabbed with scissors, leaving horrific holes. Her blood was all over the ground! Could that be?

To stem the blood, the lad put a towel on her neck. Niramol gave him a thank you smile. She hoped Punpong was here to praise her quick thinking in tying the bag strap around her wrist—the old robber couldn’t steal from her.

The crackling sound of a broken TV surrounded her. Niramol

wanted to bring her arms closer to her body so she could check the belongings in her bag—was everything safe? But her stiff body and eyes wouldn't let her. So, she didn't know the robber had cut the bag strap and taken her precious gifts for Punpong.

The food foam box was open. A black dog with white spots on his face fought with a mangy blue hound until it ran away—bloody and wounded. The black dog proudly snatched the entire pack of Chiang Mai sausages—what a wonderful morning, getting all this food.

A middle-aged man appeared. Niramol remembered he was the Tai Chi master on the bus. He murmured gently—too soft to be heard—and his dark hand held her hand to check her pulse.

Niramol grinned. She wanted him to know she was breathing so he wouldn't have to check her pulse. But when he flew up in the air—weightless—higher and higher—till he vanished, she realised...

He wasn't a Tai Chi master.

Elite Creative Literary Agency

# BOTAN

Since she was ten, Niramol had heard countless sermons about the circle of life. Any desire, no matter how small, would bring you back to live again and again.

She had no idea she had died at the age of twenty-three from just a couple of stab wounds—so fragile-hearted! To make things even more confusing, she was reborn in the past, not the future.

In her previous life, her parents were virtuous and polite, and she had always lived peacefully. But her new life seemed like a fall from heaven to hell.

Botan Huang—born in 1967—was her name. At the time, Thais had no idea about mobile phones, Chinese spicy hotpots, or the net idol ‘Beautiful Big Boobs’. They only knew the popular movie actress ‘GBs’, or ‘Great Bazookas’.

She was raised by her grandpa in a market in Phichit Town. Khab Boondongkwang was 100% Thai, a trash collector who lived in a shabby row house near the Nan River. It used to be a shrine owned by an enchanter named Boonyoung—who could cast spells to make someone fall in love with his clients—so the door frame was engraved with Khmer characters.

Boonyoung’s wife, Sawangsri, was two cycles, or 24 years, older. People in the neighbourhood told Botan about her. She was

thin, olive-skinned, always wore a loincloth, and had red lips from chewing betel nuts. She ran a market flower stand and lent a little money. She was stingy with borrowers and even her own husband. He had to give her all his money and beg for it whenever he needed to buy anything. Every time he asked, she accused him of spending money on a whore or having a mistress. He never spoke or argued. The neighbours felt sorry for him and hated his wife. Some urged him to look for a new girl—someone plump and fair.

Eventually, their wishes came true. A police officer's lover asked Boonyoung to cast a love spell. Nobody knew exactly what happened during the rite, but they ultimately fled together one night. The night before he left, the neighbours heard Sawangsri yelling. Because everyone in the area was used to the show, they listened to it like a soap opera on the radio.

The drama had gone too far, and nobody realised the Master had killed his wife. The next day, her body was found with her hand tightly gripping her betel basket. The village headman thought Boonyoung wanted the money, but Sawangsri disagreed. He then stabbed her with her betel scissors and threw them away so no one could find them.

The murder kept people away from the house. Some were scared of violent ghosts, and others of Boonyoung's 'golden son'. The building owner did nothing to ward off the spirits, so Khab took over the house easily.

Botan had grown up hearing about Boonyoung and Sawangsri. People often asked if she had seen a ghost. When she said she heard a rat at night, they looked at one another and thought it was Sawangsri's spirit searching for her betel basket.

Her mother worked in Bangkok and only visited once a year to see Chinese opera at the market shrine. She hardly gave her father

---

\* A young boy doll that gives good fortune and protection to believers..

a few hundred baht each time. Her grandpa chastised her mom daily. He called her an idiot—in person and behind her back.

Botan's father came from a poor Chinese family in the Taphanhin district. His siblings were scattered. He'd worked as a truck driver, going anywhere he was told. He died of malaria before Botan was born, leaving her mother a young widow. His sole gift was a pawn ticket, so she couldn't support herself and left her child with her father.

Khab was a cold-hearted man. He hated his neighbours and their dogs. He would throw stones at them anytime he saw them. After Botan was born, his anger spread to his daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter. He disliked his son-in-law because the lad cheated on the dowry—he promised two baht of gold, but only gave one. Worse, he asked to pawn it and died before getting it back. Khab wished every day that he would catch malaria so he could kick his son-in-law in front of the guardian of hell.

Botan's grandpa was mean, seeing everyone as an enemy. He always threatened to feed her ashes instead of milk. If she couldn't remember her past life as Niramol, she might have been a troubled child.

Khab never had enough love, money, or morals. His crooked, thin-lipped mouth was like a broken, rotten pot. When he got money, he would buy alcohol. Botan deeply understood the meaning of 'not enough to make a pot boil' in this life. When her grandpa spotted a little rice left in the pot, he shouted for all the market to hear—his granddaughter was a damn pig eating his food. Because she only ate once a day, she was the skinniest pig ever.

Botan had waited patiently for the chance to go to school. She planned to earn money by helping the villagers fill out official papers. She could read and write through Niramol's spirit, but her little hands and fingers made it hard to write for a long time. Aside from that, superstitious rumours of being possessed by a ghost might



spread in the neighbourhood if she was too good to be true—best let them think she was educated at school.

After she got to grade one, she not only made money by writing letters—fifty satang\* to one baht fifty satang each—but she also discovered shocking secrets of some people; all young women were jealous of the beautiful sesame granola bar vendor when she married the son of the richest butcher shop owner, but no one knew she paid Botan to write a letter asking her ex-boyfriend—who was working in another province—to return and take her away with him; a millionaire grocery store owner hired Botan to write a letter to her son who was in prison for drug crimes, but she told everyone he was studying civil engineering in Bangkok; the village headman's wife—who was as happy as a clam—privately asked Botan to write to her daughter to tell her to break up with her futureless husband—a man who never finished his studies—and come home to marry a man chosen by her parents.

Their secrets were like acid in their mouths, slowly seeping into their hearts and painfully damaging the fragile organs within. They had to keep their grief to themselves and never tell anyone.

By earning money, Botan went from a damn pig to a golden-egg-laying goose, becoming her grandpa's ATM. His wrath towards her waned, but he kept saying foul things, as if he would get a sore throat if he didn't.

As she grew up, market people loved her more. The vendors, both men and women, asked her to do little things for food. Botan used Niramol's skills to count goods and prepare grocery books. The shrine medium was also fond of her. Every time they met, she would give her five baht and predict good fortune for her.

"This girl vely bright future lah," she said with her Chinese accent. "If you take her as your daughter-in-law, you will be vely

---

\* One satang is equal to one-hundredth of a Thai baht...

lucky lah.”

Botan had little interest in necromancy and could not understand what this woman saw in her. While she was Niramol, she always meditated before sleeping. Because children fall asleep faster than adults, she could focus on her breathing for just a short time and fall into a slumber, listening to her grandpa’s snoring like a lullaby till dawn.

Her good deeds were like pieces of sandpaper while Khab’s heart was like a rough stone. No matter how hard she rubbed, it would never be smooth. Even though his granddaughter was smart, understood a lot, and worked hard to make money, Khab didn’t know how to love her. Only when drunk would he lie down and talk to her.

“Boooo Tannnn,”—his breath smelling sour—“when you grow up and become a big girl, will you run away from me to live in Bangkok?”

“Would you like me to stay here?”

“Damn you. Why don’t you answer me? No one can stop you from going. If you do, never return. If you get married, don’t leave your child with me like your mom. Idiooooooot!”

Using the same word over and over again, he insulted her mother. Botan sighed quietly. Her neighbours told her that her grandma said she was an orphan and that she would have to marry to survive. Nobody wanted Khab. He grew up on farmland and had a good family, but he liked to gamble and lost all his assets. He lived as a bachelor until he met his wife at forty. Not long after giving birth to Botan’s mother, she died. Khab had never planned to be a father, so he always cursed his daughter—the same way he cursed Botan.

“When I’m grown up, I’ll get a job to make money and take care of you.”

“So you say. I don’t think so.”

He tapped her on the head, laid down with his eyes open for

a while, and then asked, “Are you really going to take care of me?”

“Yes, Grandpa.”

“Do you promise?”

“I do, yes.”

“Umm.” His eyes got all dreamy. “Your mom and Pun’s daughter both work in Bangkok, but act differently. Every two or three months Pun’s daughter brings pork, duck, and chicken home — lets her parents eat well and live well.”

“I’ll do exactly the same.”

“Don’t try to fool me,” Khab growled. His mood changed again. “Do you think I’m an idiot like your mom? I’m not a pig. Don’t lie to me. I don’t care if I eat pork, duck, or chicken. Your dad was a crook you couldn’t count on. When you get older, you’ll be just like him. Who would want to eat what you give?”

Botan sighed once more. She didn’t know if this story was funny or sad.

“If you don’t want to eat my food, I’ll give you as much money as you want.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Botannn. You’re a wolf in sheep’s clothing. You are so mean. You want a robber to come after me. I would gamble if I had money. Listen up! When I was young—”

Botan lay down and listened to his story for the hundredth time—the only thing he said was how brave he was. He thought if he spent money rashly, he would be a hero. But when he lost all of it, he got sad and cursed his wife and daughter over and over to hide his shame.

“Do you know why your dad died young? I’ll tell you. Have you ever heard of a death spell? I always wished your dad would die in a car crash, but he died of malaria instead.”

Botan chuckled. Khab got annoyed and yelled, “Why do you laugh, you bad girl? Don’t you believe what I’m saying? I’ve known this for a long time. You don’t think of me as your grandpa. Your

grandma was a hussy. She slept with every man she could find in the market. I didn't make her pregnant. I'm not sure you're my grandchild. Get it now?"

He grumbled about his wife till he was tired. Botan had never heard the word 'hussy', but she knew it must mean something bad.

"Girl," Khab asked softly after a while, "are you asleep yet?"

"Not just yet."

"Really, is it true when you grow up, you want to go to Bangkok?"

Botan pretended to nod. She then noticed Khab's eyes were sad. He was like a dead tree with a hole in the trunk, filled with loneliness and fear. He dared not say he loved his grandchild.

One who bottles up his true feelings is pitiful. Botan gently squeezed her grandpa's hand. Khab stared at her and muttered, "I know if you go to Bangkok and have money, you won't come back. What should I do to remind you of your promise? How will I get any pork, duck, or chicken?"

A poor man like him could only eat meat at religious rites. The price of pork was high at that time. The villagers mostly cooked chicken, sometimes duck, and rarely pork. Khab was a drunk with a nasty mouth who liked to bully others, so no one in the market ever gave him anything. Without Botan, he would only be able to eat plain rice and chilli fish dip.

"Don't worry, Grandpa. I won't leave you ever."

Khab seemed relieved, but still said harshly, "I don't believe you. I'm not as stupid as your grandma. She was so stupid that she couldn't even sew. She never patched the ripped mosquito nets. She just tied them up. She could only make chilli dip with boiling vegetables, especially bitter melon shoots. It tasted bad and slid down my throat and out my buttocks. Your mom is also stupid. She chose a poor Chinese husband over a rich one. What an idiot!"

He went on blindly, his voice gradually growing drawled. Botan

clenched his crooked fingers with her small hand, closed her eyes, and counted how many times he said ‘idiot’. Will it reach a hundred times—beating the previous night’s record?

“Botannn, you little idiooooot!”

“Yes.”

“Still listening to me?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you keep turning your head away?”

“I don’t, but you do.”

Khab laughed, clapping his withered hand in rhythm with Botan’s. He always acted like this when he was in a good mood, but it happened only once in a while. He began to sing ‘Lost Buffalo’—the famous song of Suraphol Sombatcharoen, King of Country Music.

Botan listened, giggling when he repeated CHA-CHA-CHA loudly. Not long after, the singer fell asleep and became a snorer.

His thin fingers grasped Botan’s wrist, and his face was calm. If wrinkles were a sign of suffering, his suffering was greater than the number of mosquitoes flying outside the net.

Botan lay down, trying to meditate—the image of Punpong entered her head. She sighed. She had hoped the memory of Niramol would disappear when she grew up, but even after many years, it remained.

Her heart sank every time she thought of Punpong. She had not yet given him the cheque to pay his debt. She wanted to know what would happen after that. Niramol travelled from Chiang Mai to Bangkok only to be stabbed to death—what’s the point of all this?

She still couldn’t figure out why she was reborn in the past. As Niramol, she had watched a movie. In it, the leading man could travel back in time to meet the leading lady and then be drawn back to the present world, where he died heartbroken.

People often talk about recalling one’s previous incarnation,

but this is not the same as travelling back in time. The form, sensations, perceptions, and formations of her present ‘body’ were not Niramol’s—only the consciousness was.

How Niramol died and became Botan was a puzzle. She reincarnated thirty years before Niramol—is there a parallel universe? If so, Niramol could be different in this world, and Punpong, if he existed, might not be the same person she knew.

The light from the delivery truck shone through the door slit. Botan raised her left hand, examining the rope-like scars around her wrist. People in the market told her that when she was small, Khab bound her to the house post every time he went out. She had crawled around once, and the rope had tightened and slashed her left wrist, leaving the scars.

Before dying, Niramol wrapped the bag strap around her wrist—what a coincidence!

The galvanised steel roof flapped in the wind. Botan meditated again and reminded herself—karma rules everything. The karmic connection made her worry about Punpong. But he wasn’t here in this life—only Khab, whom she loved and promised to care for.

One thing she wondered—if Niramol were reborn, would her spirit stay in Botan’s body or leave?

Botan’s world was coloured by the purity of her youth. She enjoyed her first ten years with her grandpa, battling scarcity, mending the mosquito net, listening to cha-cha-cha, praying for the roof not to blow away in the wind, and keeping snakes out of the house during the rainy season.

Like today, she nailed a piece of wood from her grandpa’s trash dump to cover the crack between the walls. A snake crawled inside the house through this crack last night. Grandpa slept like a log from alcohol. She awoke frightened under the mosquito net and dared not get up to chase the snake away in the dark. All she could

do was stare at the dazzling silver skin here and there. She finally fell asleep, sweating heavily. She told her grandpa in the morning, but he ignored her. A kind neighbour helped her in spraying gasoline to find the snake, but it didn't appear.

A pair of odd-looking pliers—terrifyingly sharp— was on the mattress. Botan found it stuck in the crack where the snake had gone.

“Botan,” Khab called from outside, “Why haven’t you made food yet? What are you doing after school? What a sloth!”

His voice came before he appeared. His life would be dreary till he drank alcohol.

“What are you... Hey, where did you get those betel scissors? Give’em to me right now. Are they made of silver?”

The strange pliers were actually betel scissors. Khab weighed them and placed them on the empty shelf above where he slept. He walked around and kicked things until Botan gave him some money. Then he dashed out the door to a retail shop in the market to get a drink.

The smell of a burning torch floated from the stove. Botan put more dry twigs on the fire, glancing at the flame. She felt awful every time she gave money to her grandpa and he spent it on drinks. However, if she didn't, he would ask the store for some and pay later, cursing her brutally and loudly and disturbing the neighbourhood until he was tired.

Botan was determined to help him emerge from the dirt.

Since she was old enough, she kept on doing good deeds, which seemed to soften his heart, but he never stopped swearing, bullying, and, above all, drinking—the root of his sin. His brain was wrecked by alcoholism, leading him to lose control. Botan used to tell him to go to a hospital, but he yelled, “Idiot! You want to treat me like a pig or dog?”

Neither medical therapy nor dharma helped. Neighbours

always told Botan about how sinful her grandpa was. He got hooked on gambling as a young man and went to temples to ask for small amulets of Buddha, saying that he would keep them for himself, but he sold them and then gambled. So, the abbots ordered the monks to stop giving him any amulets. Instead of being embarrassed, he argued with the monks. He threw filthy things into their cubicles—a dead dog, rotten fish, cow dung, pig poop, and so on—causing chaos.

Things became worse when Muang—a monk from a forest temple—got involved. He was a former cock fighting hooligan. Muang planned to watch Khab from a bush to catch him in the act. Khab threw a dead rat over the temple wall, Muang splashed him with dirty water. Khab then grabbed his alcohol bottle and smacked Muang until he passed out. When Muang woke up, he whacked Khab's forehead with a crowbar, leaving a white mark until now.

For nearly thirty years, the war between the gambler and former fighting cock hooligan was an entertainment for the villagers, as was the hatred between Khab and Luang Pee\* Muang, who later became Luang Poo Muang. Even when they were both 70, they still didn't like each other. They never got closer than fifteen steps. Khab hated monks so severely that he would curse anytime he saw a temple roof. If he spotted a money tree for a Kathin\*\* ceremony, he would kick it over and stomp on it. Luckily, no one wanted to wage war on him.

Botan was bothered by her grandpa's misbehaviour, but she never gave up. She recalled an arhat, a man who had committed a great sin, murdering many people, but after realising it was wrong

---

\* Monks up to the age of 50 are referred to as Luang Pee. Monks older than that are called Luang Por or Luang Lung, while the oldest are called Luang Poo or Luang Ta. Pee, Por, Lung, and Poo/Ta mean brother, father, uncle and grandfather, respectively.

\*\* The event where the robes are given to the monks, held at the temples annually.



he was able to attain enlightenment. So, she believed she would find a way out for Khab. If she grew up and got a job, she would take good care of him. She hoped his fear would fade and he would stop doing bad karma before it was too late.

Since Botan always got high marks, the principal believed she would be the first girl in the school to finish college. Her teacher said she would get a high school scholarship. When she told her grandpa, he was surprised and, trying to hide his pride, complained that her high education would make it impossible for her to find a husband.

It was sad—he didn't live to see his granddaughter's glory.

After two nights of heavy rain, Botan walked home from school with mud on her legs and skirt. Today was the last day of exams. She was happy and sure she would get a flawless score again.

As she strolled past the market, a snack vendor told her grandpa had gotten into a fight at the forest temple.

"You need to hurry to stop him. What a hard-headed old man! He caught fish in the river in front of the temple. He sinned again. The monks and novices asked him to stop, but he wanted a fight."

Botan ran ceaselessly, carrying a school bag in her left hand and a pinto lunch box in her right hand. The temple and market were two kilometres away, so she arrived in under twenty minutes. She felt bad that she had told her grandpa to relax by watching fish drift in the river. He couldn't pick up trash for two days since it had rained endlessly—making him bored and grumpy. She couldn't believe he'd go fishing near Luang Poo Muang's temple.

The Nan River was muddy red. Botan looked towards the bridge, where she saw monks and men swimming, diving, and shouting furiously. Someone yelled to fetch the village headman. Botan didn't see her grandpa. She turned around, unsure what to do. Meanwhile, four or five of her classmates came up and said her grandpa wrestled with Luang Poo Muang and they both drowned in

the river.

It was a chaotic scene; people took off their shirts and jumped into the river to find her grandpa and the monk. Botan was stunned, clutching her schoolbag and pinto while peering at the river. Since the water had become filthy following the heavy rain, many fish had died and were floating on the surface.

The sky was grey. The drizzle turned into a downpour, stinging her skin. Botan had no idea how long she had been waiting there, who had taken her home, or that she had held her school bag and pinto all night. She could only think of the pale bodies of her grandpa and Luang Poo Muang being hauled from the water. They hugged like lovers who jumped into the river because their parents forbade their affair. It took the people a long time to pull their bodies apart.

Khab's ten fingers formed hooks. The red-brown threads of Luang Poo Muang's robe were caught in his nails. A funny story about a drunk gambler and a former cockfighter turned scary. A boatman who passed by late at night told people he saw the ghosts of Luang Poo Muang and Khab fighting fiercely in the river. Pitiful!—they all exclaimed, shaking their heads, saying that people who died violently would always wander around the place of their deaths. If the ghosts were still angry, they couldn't move on to another life.

Nobody knew Khab never turned into a ghost in the river. Instead, he followed his granddaughter because of what she had promised.

# SOOKJAI

Botan's life changed after her grandpa died. The village headman sent a telegram to her mother, who arrived fifteen days later. The cremation ritual had already been carried out because the corpse could not be kept for so long during the summer.

With her mum, Botan moved to Bangkok to a tenement near the Saen Saeb canal. The room's only piece of furniture was a cheap pink plastic wardrobe with flowers. A grouchy electric coil stove in the corner was ready to kill anyone at any time. To avoid an electric shock, Botan had to wrap a cloth around her hand whenever she plugged it in or pulled the plug out.

Her mother's name was Sookjai, meaning 'happiness', but she always looked unhappy. Botan didn't exist in her world because she didn't want to have kids. There was nothing inside her body but the air she breathed and the smoke from her cigarette. She would leave Botan alone in the room with a spare key when she went to work.

The summer holiday was almost over. Sookjai never planned to send her daughter to school. The tenement owner warned her—if she didn't take the child to school, she would be arrested and fined thousands of baht. He considered Botan to be a relative because they shared the same surname. So, her mother took her to look for a school with a vacancy. Almost all of the surrounding

schools were full. Some charged high tuition fees. Finally, Botan ended up in a temple school, which was three kilometres away from where they lived.

Bangkok in 1977 was quite different from the year Niramol died. Mo Chit BTS station didn't exist. On Saturdays and Sundays, there was only the Sanam Luang Flea Market, which had yet to be relocated and would eventually become Chatuchak Market. Botan wandered around the neighbourhood several times, spotting how busy it was. She saw how many shops had put the term 'original' after their names. During Niramol's time, people liked the term 'grandma's dishes'—Grandma's Pad Thai or Grandma's chicken noodles. Even bubble milk tea, which was new to Thailand at the time, was promoted as grandma's recipe.

Growing up in the countryside, Botan was used to walking. She found it easier to walk to school instead of taking the bus. The tenement owner gave her old school shirts and shoes, saying his granddaughter grew quickly and had to get new uniforms almost every year. Botan only needed to embroider her name and the school logo. Luckily, she grew slowly, so she didn't need a new skirt and simply lengthened the one she'd been wearing for four years.

At school, she didn't look any different from anyone else. Most of the students came from poor families. Her Chinese surname and country accent, however, set her apart from them, and—as a Chinese village girl—she was mocked by her male classmates. Some even called her Huang Rong—the heroine of the popular Chinese TV series, *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*. To match her, a dark-skinned fifth-grader was called Guo Jing—the soap's hero.

Guo Jing once followed her to school in the morning. So, she thought his house was in the same direction, but he sped up before arriving at school, handed her a square folded paper, and hurried away. When she opened it, she saw the words 'Botan, you are so beautiful,' and a colourful paracord bracelet. Botan laughed. She

felt he was adorable.

She did not see Guo Jing at school that day. Nobody knew why he didn't come. The next day a classmate told her that Guo Jing's mother had been a widow with two children—Guo Jing and his younger brother—and had recently married a labourer. Her new husband was from another province and would move back once the job was over.

Miss Phairoa was Botan's teacher. She was a petite young lady with huge eyes and a lovely voice, just like her name, which meant 'melodious'. She was nice to Botan and always asked her to help her with little things after lunch, like putting books in order on her desk or writing lessons on the chalkboard.

Botan knew her teacher wanted to spend more time with her since she was much quieter than the other students. Phairoa was worried she might be mistreated and repeatedly asked about her family, wanting to know whether she was really okay.

"Do your parents live together?"

"No."

"So, with whom do you live?"

"Mum."

"Where's your dad?"

"He died when I was small."

"Can you still remember his face?"

"I can't."

Phairoa's eyes showed sympathy. "Do you have any picture of your dad?"

"No."

She let out a soft sigh. "What is your mum's job?"

Botan paused before answering. Phairoa was slightly startled. As she asked her next question, she looked around to see if anyone was close by.

"Your mum works in a soapy massage parlour?"

“That’s right. But she works there only as a cleaner.”

Phairoa gave an uneasy smile. Botan understood she didn’t believe her and thought that her mother had taught her to say this. This neighbourhood was one of the most popular red-light districts in Bangkok. She was not the only student in the class whose mother worked in such a place, but she was sure that her mum was merely a cleaner.

Sookjai was tall and thin, with untidy red hair and crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes. She looked ten years older than her true age. She used to be a dancing girl before marrying her husband. She might have been pretty at that time. After her husband died, she worked in a noodle shop and a grocery store, and then for a year at a massage complex. She wore a magenta maid’s uniform when she went to work at one o’clock in the afternoon and returned home at midnight. Fortunately, she had learned how to give a basic massage, so her employer asked her to massage the V.I.P. guests as a compliment in addition to the service performed by young women, allowing her to earn some extra tip money.

Botan’s mother inherited emptiness from her grandpa. Sookjai was quiet. She never spoke to her own child, never admired, never blamed, and never showed love or hatred. When they looked at each other, Botan only saw blankness in her mum’s eyes. Sookjai just gave her money when she got the school bill. Because the temple provided financial support, only a tiny sum of money was needed to cover each term. The students were given free lunch, and the monks frequently donated milk and snacks.

Sookjai had a dream. She wanted to work as a masseuse in a foreign country. She had difficulty saving money to pay the commission fee. So, Botan was like a shackle that held her back as long as they lived together, especially with the money she had to spend on books, PE kit, and various other things.

When she left Botan with her father, she expected her

daughter would marry or run away with someone. She never thought the old man would die before the girl grew up.

Botan had just been staying in Bangkok for three months when her mum's emptiness became like a thunderstorm brewing inside. She would throw a plastic bag holding food onto the floor, leaving Botan to untie the bag and put the food on a plate. If there wasn't enough food, she would become displeased and tap her plate noisily. She never wanted to share anything, not even a small piece of fish or one or two pieces of gourd fried with egg.

The tenement owner felt pity for Botan. When he came to collect rent or fix something in the room, he would bring her school materials left behind by his granddaughter. There were so many that Botan shared them with her classmates.

"Sookjai is careless. How can she be a mother? Her cigarette money would be better spent on your school."

Botan listened calmly and did not respond. Growing up with such a grandpa helped her get along with her mum. Sookjai treated Botan the same way Khab had treated her—both were victims of ignorance. They had an unhealthy habit of collecting evil deeds.

Unfortunately, Botan could not work in Bangkok. Most people were educated. Nobody hired her to write letters as she did in Pichit. She tried to get a job washing dishes at the food stand below the building, but the owner laughed and said she was too tiny. He told her to come back when she turned fifteen.

In her past life, she read about Vidhudabha, a king of Kosala. The Buddha once told him, "The shelter of your own clan offers far better shade than that of any tree." Botan's heart sank when she thought of her clan as a shelter with a shattered roof. It was overrun with disease-carrying insects and could not protect her from the heat or rain.

She failed to make her grandpa quit drinking, and she couldn't make her mum quit smoking either. Sookjai did not want to know

her or love her. The first thing Botan needed to do was convince her mum that having a child was fine—she wasn't a burden. She skipped breakfast and dinner and ate free lunch at school to help her mother save money. After school, she would wash clothes and tidy the house, and if her mother didn't go out, she'd act like she didn't exist in the corner.

At home, Botan lived in a small, quiet world, but she was as free as a bird at school. Phairoa and Niramol were the same age, so the teacher could be her friend. Botan told her about her old house, which was an enchanter's shrine, writing secret letters to make money, snakes that crawled inside during the rainy season, the betel scissors she found stuck in the crack, and the rotten mosquito net ready to be torn from a deep breath.

Nothing was scarier than Khab and Muang drowning in the river after fighting. Her teacher was stunned while listening.

"You know you must study hard," Phairoa spoke seriously. Botan's familial background made it difficult for her to have an ideal life, especially because her mother worked in an entertainment complex. Her concern for Botan grew.

The warmth in her teacher's eyes reminded Botan of Sopa, her mother in her past life, whose name meant 'beautiful', and she was gorgeous inside and out.

Botan wanted to know where her mother and father were right now. If she ever met them, how could she not run towards them?

They'd surely laugh if a Chinese girl called them Mum and Dad.

Her heart pounded with gloom. The night watchman struck his gong twelve times from afar. She curled up and hugged the blanket, missing her mother from her past. She'd realised how orphans felt. Even with Niramol's wisdom, she yearned for love and warmth.



The door swung open. Sookjai approached the room with someone smelling like perfume and cigarette. Aunt Porn lived next door. Her full name was Doungporn. She was an endless talker—twenty-five years old with long hair, perfect brown skin, and a piercing face. She used to work in Japan and returned with over one hundred thousand baht, so Sookjai accepted her as a close friend and advisor.

Sookjai opened the door wide, sat, stretched, smoked, and talked with Aunt Porn, actually listening to her. Porn talked about a young, handsome, rich man she went out with, giggled and dropped her voice when she said ‘yummy’, then got serious.

“He said he’d give me twenty thousand baht per month if I agreed to stay with him for half a year.”

Sookjai groaned, her face flushed with disappointment. Botan used to hear her mother whine when she was drunk. Most of the wealthy men were pig-fat. Sookjai had to use a lot of energy for a small tip while young girls just gave an enjoyable little touch and those guys readily passed them plenty of money.

“I’m thinking about bringing my hubby to Bangkok to live with me.”

“No!”

“Why not? If I leave him alone, he’ll have an affair with another girl.”

“What about the rich guy?”

“He travels back and forth from Hatyai. I see him only when he comes to Bangkok. He sometimes brings his family, and then he probably won’t call me.”

“What about your husband?”

“What about him?” Aunt Porn took a long drag on her cigarette. “He’s a pimp with golden wings who never works. He wouldn’t dare raise his voice at me. He’s lucky to be handsome. A toy in my bed. If he comes to Bangkok, I’ll rent him a taxi so he can make some money.”

Sookjai groaned again. She got used to Auntie Porn's careless way of life. Porn made a lot of money off her looks, but she also spent a lot of money on men's looks.

About a week later, Porn brought her husband to live with her and rented a taxi for him. Marut was his name. Botan called him Uncle Rut. She couldn't believe he was a pimp when she first met him. He appeared to be polite, friendly, and gorgeous. He was dressed casually in a long-sleeved shirt, black trousers and a leather belt that matched the colour of his shoes. His neat look gave the impression that he worked in an office.

On days off, he would leave the room door open. If he saw Botan walking by after school, he would ask her to buy stir-fried noodles and coconut milk custard from the shop beneath the building and give her ten or twenty baht.

Uncle Rut liked to read. Every day, he bought plenty of newspapers and weekly magazines, and he gave her everything after he finished reading. While she was Niramol, she only read dharma texts. Punpong was an avid reader who recommended some excellent books, but she never listened. She simply read what the school required and didn't bother with anything else.

As Botan, she wished to be a bookworm.

"Take it with you to read in your room," Uncle Rut smiled. He handed her a paperback with a black cover. "This book about ghosts in a hotel is exciting. Are you afraid of being alone in your room?"

"No."

"If you are afraid, turn on the light."

Botan nodded and brought the book to her room, noting that the back cover had some white stains—most likely from coconut milk custard.

She cleaned it with a damp towel. Normally, she didn't read books at night to help her mother save money on the energy bill,

but the translated book borrowed from Uncle Rut seemed interesting. She read the caption on the back cover: a five-year-old boy with mental power goes on a terrifying journey in a haunted hotel. She meant to read only two pages, but she couldn't stop herself. She was so caught up in the book that she had no idea what time it was.

Evening came. Botan quickly bathed, clothed, closed the window, turned on the light, and continued reading.

The boy in the story explored every room in the hotel, and found a female ghost rotting in the bathtub. Botan's hands were cold. She unconsciously slipped her finger in her mouth. She had an uneasy feeling.

She was not alone.

Her heart was thumping. She sat up. She had never before been afraid of a ghost. While looking around, she noticed a shadow moving beneath the door and got up to check it out.

Someone in the corridor turned his back and walked away, only around four or five metres from her room—Uncle Rut. He'd probably gone to the building's corner window for some fresh air. Even if she only glimpsed his back, she recognised him.

She closed the door, returned to lie down, and continued reading. After some time, the same old feeling reappeared. She nervously glanced towards the door and spotted a pair of eyes peeking at her.

Botan jumped to her feet. The shadow of a man underneath the door vanished, leaving only the sound of footsteps behind.

She was shocked. To allow for airflow, there was a two-inch gap between the door and the edge of the threshold. She'd only just realised someone was staring at her through this gap.

Because she was only ten years old, she wore a t-shirt and loose shorts without undies. This peeping Tom was disgusting.

She remembered the man who had walked outside—Uncle Rut.

Her heart was racing with fear and anger. Marut pretended to be nice to lure her. He let her borrow a horror book and told her to turn on the light while she was sleeping.

“Turn on the light while you’re sleeping,” Botan grumbled through her teeth. Marut had meant to terrify her into turning on the light so he could see her clearly. She had no idea how many times he had done this.

Since her mind belonged to Niramol, not to the innocent Botan, she recalled the stain on the book that Marut had put in her hand with gleaming eyes—so vile!—she had been too naive then.

Every room in this building had only a doorknob and no latch. Botan double-checked to see if the doorknob’s push-lock was already pushed in. Most of the tenants worked at night, and her mum usually returned around eleven o’clock. Other rooms on the same floor were often empty, but she wouldn’t dare to knock on their doors to ask for help. It would most likely be, ‘Out of the frying pan and into the fire.’

She brushed the book away and turned off the light so Marut couldn’t see her. She went to the toilet and squatted, feeling nervous once more.

A human shadow at the window!

Botan pulled her pants up and sprang up quickly, almost tumbling. The light in the room was turned out so the human shadow could be seen clearly through the frosted glass window.

She was terrified, so she grabbed a plastic bowl and prepared to fight. The shadow disappeared suddenly. The cement edge of the building’s wall was only a few inches wide. Someone had taken a huge risk.

No one else!—Botan breathed rapidly in rage. No one else but Marut. His room was right next to hers. How long had he done this? How could this be? She was only a young girl. She was lucky to have closed the door early to keep mosquitoes out, but she had

never considered any threat from the man next door.

She dropped the plastic bowl and looked at her very thin arms. What would she do if Marut lost control and tried to break in the door or window?

Punpong's face rushed into her mind. She tried not to think of him after accepting that this body belonged to Botan. She couldn't help but imagine how much easier it would be if he was with her right now.

She could hear herself sighing desperately. Punpong could not exist right now because he had not yet been born. Sookjai was her only living relative.

Botan leaned against the wall—hopeless. She hadn't enjoyed living with her grandpa since it felt like a survival camp, but she hadn't expected that living with her mother would be much more difficult.

The downside of being a young girl was that she needed protection. She was as fragile as a little chick.

For the first time in her life, she felt hatred in her heart—she hated having a brainless mother.

She had a sense of humour even with her last breath in her previous life. Children are like white cloth. Niramol grew up in a pure environment, while Botan in a polluted one—a muddy red river after a heavy rain—so deadly that all the fish died.

Her fate in this life forced her to change. Her mum was ready to abandon her at any time. Sookjai did nothing in the room while they were together except blow smoke at her, as if she wished to infect her with cancer. Her eyes were cold whenever she glanced at Botan.

What if Niramol's memory fades? Botan thought. How could she possibly survive as a little girl with no one and no past life to comfort her?

The door opened. It surprised Botan to see Sookjai. She rushed

to hug her when she entered.

Sookjai stood still, puzzled, holding a flashlight and pushing Botan away, saying, “Power cut.”

Botan didn’t see her mother’s expression. Sookjai’s arrival relieved her. She wanted to tell her what happened, but Aunt PORN appeared.

“No electricity, no work,” she said cheerfully.

Botan just noticed it was dark. The massage place must be closed, so her mother got home early.

Sookjai placed her flashlight down on the floor. Aunt PORN came in, sat down, and handed Sookjai a papaya salad bag while pointing towards her room.

“My hubby should be sleeping. It’s way too early for me.”

She asked Botan to join them, lit a cigarette, and deeply inhaled through her orange lips.

Sookjai untied the plastic bag. The papaya salad was very smelly with salted crab and pickled fish. She put it on a plate. There was also grilled catfish and sticky rice.

“Botan, come! Join us,” Aunt PORN said again. “The salad is not too spicy, only four or five chillies. You can eat sticky rice with grilled catfish if the salad is too hot. Where is my sour pork? Oh! I didn’t take it, or perhaps the vendor forgot to give me. I’ll go get it tomorrow.”

Sookjai turned to Botan and told her to go get the sour pork.

“No!” Aunt PORN cried. “Don’t let her go out in the middle of the night.”

“Just close by,” Sookjai said without showing any feeling as she lit a cigarette and began to smoke. She kept looking at Botan.

“It’s best not to. Pity her! There is no street light right now. Botan, are you afraid of ghosts?”

Botan shook her head—she’d rather be afraid of PORN’s husband than of ghosts. She tried to find the right moment to tell

her mum. Luckily, Aunt Porn rose up and said she needed to change.

When she stepped outside, Botan came closer to Sookjai and whispered, “Mum, Uncle Marut peeped at me.”

Frowning, Sookjai pushed her aside. She looked at Botan with disgust, as if her daughter were a germ.

“Uncle Marut peeped at me,” Botan repeated, pointing to the door gap. “He also climbed to peer at me through the window.”

Sookjai looked away. Botan wondered if she could hear her. Her mum was often half-awake from cigarette and alcohol brain damage. So, she stated it for the third time.

“What exactly do you want me to do?” Sookjai yelled at her, furious.

Botan gasped. She had no idea why her mum was angry—did she hear but not care? Or did she think her daughter lied?

Aunt Porn came back, her sarong covering her chest to her knees. Sookjai stared at Botan, kicking the blanket at her, and yelled, “Go sleep.”

“Calm down, sis.” Porn laughed. “Let her eat first. It’s only eight now. Botan, do you enjoy going to school? Which subject do you like most? Study hard or be beautiful to find work. So many scars on your wrist—what happened?”

She peppered her with questions, but never wanted any answers. Her nails were painted peach. With her thumb and index finger, she put papaya salad into her mouth, chomping while whining about her beautician.

“She let her trainee do my nails. Look how they turned out! Better if she did it herself. I’m fine paying more. Her trainee was terrible.”

Sookjai inhaled deeply while looking at Porn’s nails. Botan took the blanket from her lap and stood up.

“Aunt Porn,” she spoke clearly and firmly. “Uncle Rut peeped in at me.”

Porn was putting the tomatoes to the side of the plate. Now she stopped, glanced up and stared at Botan as if she saw a ‘golden son’ appear.

Before Porn could say anything, Sookjai—with the cigarette in her lips—reached for Botan and kicked her forcefully in the chest. She was thin but strong, whereas her daughter was ill-fed and too weak to bear such a blow.

At the same time Botan fell, footsteps and the blaze of a flashlight were coming up the stairs. She was as scared and hurt as Niramol when she was stabbed.

“What’s going on?” asked the tenement owner. “What’s up, Botan?”

She sat on the floor with teary eyes. He repeated his question because there was no reply.

“Nothing,” Porn broke the silence. “Because she didn’t want to sleep, her mother lightly hit her. Only once. As they say, spare the rod, pamper the child.”

“Lightly hit?” The tenement owner shook his head, saying, “I heard someone falling hard.”

Botan wiped her tears and stroked her neck. Her chest hurt. She stood up and crossed the room, past her mother, to the tenement owner.

“What happened to you?” He kindly asked.

Botan glanced up and said, “Uncle Rut peeped at me through the door gap and climbed to our window while I was in the toilet.”

“Damn it!” He shouted in Chinese. Porn dashed towards Botan and squeezed her soft cheeks hard with her sharp nails.

“This girl is crazy. She is framing my husband. Liar!”

Hatred filled her eyes. She smelled from the salty crab papaya salad on her fingers. Botan struggled to be free, but the pretty aunty tightly gripped her shoulders.

“Let her go, Porn. She’s too young to make up such a story,”



said the tenement owner. "I've heard many bad things about your husband. The renter of the room next to hers said the same thing. When she opened the door to check, your man pretended to be innocent and left—a slippery eel."

Porn yelled at him. Botan stepped back. Her mother was smoking and staring at the scene as if watching TV, not a thing bothered her.

Two women from nearby rooms opened their doors. After hearing the tenement owner and Porn argue, they came out to join them.

"It's true, Porn. Your man has done this to many women. I can't believe he would do such a thing to a young girl."

"Yes," the second woman added. "I've heard he stroked a woman's legs through a door - the pervert!"

"What if he breaks down the door and rapes her?"

"You can't leave it this way, or else all the women will leave."

The tenement owner gritted his teeth so hard that his temple blood vessels swelled.

Turning to Porn, he said, "Bring your husband out to discuss the case, or I'll call the police."

Porn turned pale and quickly unlocked her door to enter the room. She kept silent for so long that the tenement owner had to call her.

"Come out! Now! I hate this."

She slowly opened the door and leaned half her face out.

"Where's your husband?" The tenement owner gripped his flashlight tightly.

"He said he didn't do that," she spoke softly.

"Why doesn't he speak for himself? Botan is still young. Her mother always returns home late. I don't want anything to go wrong."

"I told you—he said it wasn't him."

“Why doesn’t he say it himself?”

“What the heck! He did not do it. Do you hear?”

“I’ll call the police if he doesn’t come out.”

“You don’t have to,” Porn screamed. “I don’t want to stay here anymore. I’ll pack my things and leave in a few days. Dammit!”

“Dirty mouth!” The tenement owner raised his voice. “Neither of you should stay here. Your husband has no shame. And I won’t return your deposit.”

Porn slammed the door. The two women watching shook their heads, disappointed. They expected a more thrilling episode and were ready to testify at the police station, but the story stopped halfway.

“Are you hurt, Botan?” the tenement owner asked and gazed at the red marks on her cheeks before turning towards Sookjai. “Leaving your daughter alone is dangerous. Botan is a girl. Every day, she grows. You will—”

Sookjai stood up and shut the door, leaving Botan outside.

“What a horrible mother!” The tenement owner shook his head. “Isn’t she your child?”

“Poor girl,” commented the woman next door.

“When she grows up, she’ll likely—” The other woman couldn’t finish her words when she looked into the girl’s bright, loving eyes.

Botan stood quietly, recalling her earlier bursts of anger, fear, and disappointment. Those awful feelings had driven her out of the room to alert the tenement owner—she intended to stand against her mother.

Niramol’s wisdom had usually carried her through tough times, but she had run out of patience.

Tonight, she realised her life was doomed. This would mean Botan would be alone in the world after she forgot her past—she needed to be safe before that happened.

Sookjai pushed open the door and dragged Botan inside. The tenement owner spoke seriously as he stopped the door with his flashlight.

“If you don’t love her, give her to someone who wants a child.”

Sookjai pushed the flashlight out of the doorway and kicked the door shut. She folded her pillow and laid down to sleep, leaving Botan standing motionless, like the plate of papaya salad in the middle of the floor.

“Never seen anyone like this before,” the tenement owner said outside. “Such a blackhearted mother. Her heart is as filthy as the water in the Saen Saeb canal.”

In the corner of the room, Botan sat hugging her knees, staring at her sleeping mother, who was facing the wall. She listened to Sookjai’s breath, knowing she was in deep sleep with an unlit cigarette between her lips.

The streetlight reappeared. Botan picked up her pillow and laid down, peering out the frosted glass window at the outside light. The dull radiance seemed like the hope of despair.

She had just tasted the bitterness of being nobody’s child.

## About the Author



Witida Ditlech, a Bangkok native, remembers her childhood and the activities she most enjoyed—shopping at D.Thai Charoen after school, visiting Bangkok planetariums, and reading by the fish pond at home.

Witida used to think that the furniture was simply there to store books. She spotted books in cupboards, drawers, on televisions, on the rusty iron shelves in the storage room, on the kitchen shelf with sugar and Ovaltine, and on the swing beside the red apple guava tree.

Books could be seen everywhere in her house, even old cardboard boxes in the garage. Her happiness was to open a box and choose a book to read based on her age. This love of reading stays with her, becoming a lifelong pleasure and addiction.

It was previously difficult for urban children like Witida to venture outside of their hometowns. Among the well-known destinations were just Bangsaen, Pattaya, Cha-Am, Chiang Mai, and Hat Yai. At the time, a child's world was pretty small. She could, however, explore a vast world and broaden her worldview through the eyes of Koon from *A Child of the Northeast*, Zeze from *My Sweet Orange Tree*, Sakaewan from *Dream during Rainy Season*, Salila from *Rusty Society*, and Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*, learning about love, knowledge, belief, and forgiveness across culture, statuses, and generations.

Despite her business administration degree, Witida submitted her articles to numerous magazines and even applied for a job in a publishing business as she grew older. Thankfully, she found work with three publishers, where she received support and advice from seasoned editors, photographers, and journalists. She wrote less during her time overseas because she believed she had written enough, but after marrying and becoming a full-time housewife, she discovered an energised passion for writing. She began working on a novel and shared it with internet readers, finally capturing the attention of a publisher, who offered her the chance to re-enter the field she adores.

Witida invests time and effort into her writing, yet she does not regard it as a career, and she gets thrilled every time her fingers touch the keyboard.

She seeks to stay in this karma circle for a long time.

Elite Creative Literary Agency



Niramol lives a quiet life in a tiny village surrounded by longan trees. She hadn't even seen the capital city with her own eyes until Punpong comes into her life. A young man from a wealthy family who devotes himself to the poor, he is like a light blue bulb that warms her heart.

Their romance begins, but little by little, his troubled background is uncovered. Niramol is willing to do anything to help him in any way she can. Who would have thought she would die at the hands of a foolish robber at the bus station? Even more shockingly—she is reborn as a little girl from the past.



**Praphansarn.com**



**@Praphansarn**



**PraphansarnPublisher**

**www.praphansarn.com**