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THE STALKER

Anchalee Viva

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Elite Creative Literary Agency



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Prologue

The Midnight of December 8, 1941

*Tonight, the heart of Bangkok
was unusually damp and chilly.
The fog floating over the river since dusk
had begun to creep onto land,
swallowing dim streets and dark alleys along the river quay.
All sounds muted into eerie silence;
All colors blurred into gray hues.
Even the amber lights on street lamps
glowed ghostly in its dull, dark, damp blanket.
The fog—an indistinct form of an enormous creature
with its immense open mouth,
grew more capable of swallowing every existence
from rows of homes and buildings,
to clumps after clumps of trees,
to lines of motor cars and trolleys,
to every soul lost in its foggy path.
The visibility above and beyond became so poor
even infinite and unreachable stars,
high, high the Heaven above,
seemed to vanish into its massive mouth,
one after another, till none seemed left in the skies.
So surreal it could occur only in a realm of dreams
where the Stalker reigned for infinity.*

To night, I watched the fog's uncompromising invasion, half in apprehension and half in awe.

What a morbid beauty—the sublime creation of Darkness. For a whole week, the fog had appeared at nightfall. On the first night of its primordial birth, most people barely noticed the wispy and almost transparent thin layers that began to linger and hover on the surface of deep, cool water in the river. But as each night passed, it kept on growing and growing. And tonight, its gray mass appeared so dense it looked alive and even animated.

It seemed hard for everyone to ignore its threatening presence. This phenomenon rarely happened in Bangkok in the past decades since the climate stayed hot, humid, and sultry day and night nearly all year round.

It could be explained by the simple fact that this period was in the midst of winter, with a temperature naturally dropping at certain degrees at night. And this year, it became unusually cold, especially after sundown. The water at night turned cooler, yet the air retained heat from the sunny day, creating unprecedented creepy fogs.

But many people, particularly the old ones, had never considered the simple fact of the fog manifestation as I did. The sea of fog spreading everywhere as far as their eyes could trace had scared them out of their wits.

At nightfall, when the veil of fog boldly appeared, they stayed behind their locked door, never thinking of stepping outside into the cold embrace of fog. They lay prostrate before the Buddha altar, praying amidst the curling smoke from burning incense, asking for His boundless mercy to save all of them from the Maleficent One who always followed the fogs.

They were superstitious people ready to embrace their belief of a dark and sinister side of all existences still unknown to them. The fact of cause and effect would never be applied in their mental domain. To them, all uncanny and unknown phenomena would be promptly pronounced evil, and there would be no need to prove otherwise.

They believed the unprecedented fogs en masse were the

ominous sign of an impending calamity: an epidemic plague of a colossal scale or some unimaginable Apocalypse, wiping half of humanity from the face of the earth.

Doom Day, in short.

That was the day I set my mind to commit suicide. There would be no more prolonging.

And also, this particular day happened to be my twenty-fifth birthday.

The reason I chose to end my life was that if I broke down twenty-five years of my life into days, it meant I had so far lived my life for ninety-one hundred twenty-five days. Or, for a more vivid picture, that was thirteen million and one hundred forty thousand in minutes that I had already carried my life through.

Have you ever asked yourself if you ever felt true happiness just for one or two minutes a day? I wondered what your most honest answer would be.

I bet the answer would cause you to lose faith in life forever.

As in my case, if I tried to pull all minute moments of rejoicing from my long nine thousand one hundred twenty-five days and then combined those scattering moments of joy to see the outcome, of course, the total moments of happiness that I had all my life would still hardly amount to one single day, which meant after taking out that single happy day, I still had nine thousand one hundred and twenty-four days full of misery left with me.

If someone had lived for twenty-five long years and had the combined moments of happiness out of those twenty-five years as short as barely one single day, there should be no point in going on.

A moment of joy was as scarce as a tiny drop of cool water one was searching on a vast expanse of empty wasteland. A barely visible speck of particle against the infinite universe. It always made me wonder if ninety percent of our entire lifetime had to be spent entirely on pain, hurt, grief, despair, distress, loss, agony, shame, and, of course, incurable hatred, hatred, and hatred, with no room in life left to fulfill a dream that worth our

breathing, if so, what was a purpose of our existence? It remained the most profound mystery no one had ever comprehended, let alone making sense of it.

All we were able to acknowledge and be aware so far were only the fact that our from-cradle-to-grave miseries had been gnawing our existence, day in and day out, down to the core of our life, crippling our mind, numbing our heart, clouding our creativity, weakening our spirit and even corrupting our soul—like a hungry carnivore predator devouring its prey, cracking its bone and sucking its marrow until the last drop of life perished.

All I wanted, while drinking my life away with liquors and with no one bothering me, was to brood over most parts of my life, the parts I desperately wanted to wipe out from the face of my whole existence.

You probably wonder if I detested them that much, why I still bothered brooding over the worst parts of my life and feeding and fattening their presence. Why didn't I make them perish for good by forgetting them all, like living in oblivion? My answer was logical, and yet was also complicated. My agonizing pasts, like cancerous cells, had been taking up most of the space in my life. If I had destroyed them all, I would have destroyed ninety-nine percent of my existence. If so, with only one percent piece of me left, I would have barely existed. My whole being would have shrunk to near zero. And barely could I have any evidence, out of the nearly invisible piece of me, to prove my existence on earth. I needed to save that hopeless existence to justify the suicide.

I wanted someone to stand in my shoes, just for a moment, to feel the weight of these nine thousand a hundred twenty-five days and understand why I couldn't bear to add another. Perhaps then, they'd understand how despair can slowly, silently consume everything, until there's nothing left but a shadow of a life.

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PART ONE: THE PREY

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Part 1: Chapter 1

A Speck of Life on Infinity

The mystery of my mother started right at the dawn of my existence, and this was the core of my story from the beginning to the end.

I was born on December 8, 1916, the year of the Dragon. For as long as I can remember, my father was my whole world. He had never talked about my mother. However, when I was six, I began to wonder about her and was so persistent to know. Soon, I told him that every boy in our neighborhood had at least one mother and even knew his or her mother's name. One of those boys even bragged that he had three mothers (and five fathers) and asked me how many mothers I had now.

I lied to him that I had ten.

After that day, I begged my father to find just one single mother for me instead of a wood truck toy for my coming birthday (which Lek, his close friend, would make for me). At first, he did not answer. He only gave me a dark, strange look that made me afraid I might say something deadly wrong. I began to cry because I had never seen him with that look.

“There, there, don’t cry, Baby Boy.”

When I was that age, he always called me by that funny name, *Baby Boy*, rather than *Pran*, my real name.

“Everyone has only one father and one mother. No more or less. I tell you, that boy made up a story. It’s probably because he doesn’t have parents, poor kid. That’s why he has no idea about the right number, ”

Suddenly, he picked me up in his arms, his eyes flickering.

“All right, I’m going to show you your mama now. Aren’t you happy?”

“Papa, Really? Where? Where is she?” I shrieked.

He didn’t say anything more. Instead, he carried me outdoors onto the veranda, pointed his finger to one huge cloud floating in the late afternoon sky, and told me tenderly.

“Your mama is *up there* now.”

I swiftly turned my face upward and squinted hard at the above clouds. My heart began to beat fast.

“We can’t see her because she lives amid the clouds, but she can peer down and see us. Look! Look! There she is. Her face’s emerging from that cloud now. Look! She’s over there!”

The blinding sun now was too intense. I had to close my eyes briefly and slowly reopen them.

“Where? Why don’t I see her?”

With a surge of excitement, I screamed and started to jump up and down.

“Oh, no! Now she’s gone. You just missed her,”

I began to sob. Quickly, a sob turned into a wail.

“No, don’t cry, Baby Boy, don’t cry...” he hushed me. “She just can’t let us see her longer than a split second because she no longer lives among us. Her home now is in heaven. Well, at least I could glimpse her waving hand and smiling sweetly at us. So, don’t be so sad, Baby Boy. Just remember your mama is always up there. Now, you know she always sits on one of the soft, fluffy clouds watching over you. Always.”

“Papa, you saw her, right? What does she look like?”

“She has a shining rainbow aura around her face,” said my father, his face coated with a smile that seemed a little too bright. “So, always do good things to make her proud of you. Promise me, little one?”

I nodded vigorously. Then, another question just popped up.

“Is she happy, Papa? Is she lonely up there?”

“Never be happier. She’s always with a thousand like her as birds flying to wherever they dream of for eternity up there,” he nodded. “Yes, for eternity.”

“What is my mama’s name, Papa?” I finally asked him timidly.

“Her name...” he paused, frowning, and then cheerfully said. “Her name is Siri.”

I gasped. “Is that Mama’s name?”

He nodded and smiled.

Now I knew her name as everyone had known their mother’s. What a lovely, lovely name. *Siri*.

My father told me that before this house was built, the constructors had dug out a large amount of soil from the ground to fill up the lowland on which the house now stood, protecting against the seasonal flood during the monsoon. As a result, they left an elongated large hole in the backyard area, which eventually became a pond.

In the dry season, between January and April, the water in the pond dried out. First, the brimming water slowly turned into soft, cool mud. Then, the soft mud hardened into parched, solid cakes of dried mud. All lives and beauties perished, buried deeply beneath the dry crust, but miracles suddenly occurred as soon as the rain returned. More miracles followed each day as more rain poured down in great abundance.

When the rain came to visit the earth, it blessed our pond, turning it into my father’s favorite site. On some wet day, he brought me to watch the pond through the thin sheet of soft, light rain. Fresh raindrops rolled down our wet clothes in crystal

beads, soaking us from head to toe. I stuck out my tongue to taste the rain, which rendered a thin, sweet aftertaste. He said the blurred pond seen through the white rain sheet reminded him of Claude Monet's impressionist dreamlike paintings, a blooming avant-garde French artist at that period. My father loved paintings and art, although he never practiced them.

In the pond, I saw a picturesque display of lovely and shiny water lilies blossoms, soft pink and pure white, blooming above their glossy green oval pads and spreading their beauty everywhere. Sunshine, in the late afternoon, bathed and brightened the sea of water lilies until all looked like illuminating lanterns against the pale blue sky. Soon, shadows at twilight came to soften and darken them until they were mere silhouettes against the deep purple horizon.

Bees, bumblebees, and gauzy-winged dragonflies busily visited the pond, droning, humming, and buzzing all day. Frogs croaked cheerfully as they jumped into the cool water, hiding under lily pads and creating endless ripples, one after another, as they swam to and fro. With one loud splash, we would glimpse the water bubbling around a lily pad as fish emerged to gobble up some water bugs while skimming the thin surface of the water.

It was a spot always full of sights, sounds, and movements of life. Yet its atmosphere was so serene, so tranquil that one could—my father assured me—hear a sound so mysterious yet so magical that one could not hear elsewhere; it was the sound of silence. Then he murmured verses in a poem, which I found later that he had written himself.

*Not through all five doors of thy Senses
But a window of thy Soul
That thou could see a blaze of Darkness
And hear the thunder of Silence*

“When I was young, I dreamed of living by a big, big pond filled with water lilies. So, when I moved to live on this property, I planted them in this pond and waited until they turned into the sea of water lilies as we see them today.”

He closed his eyes and sighed. That was the only time I ever heard him talk about his childhood.

I sighed with satisfaction at every answer my father gave me.

Sometimes at night, before I let the sleep take me completely, I had sleepily murmured to him,

“Papa... When am I going to see Mama?”

“If you are good, when you leave this world, you will stay with her in heaven forever.”

He confirmed me as he stroked my hair gently on our shared bed.

“And you too, Papa? Will you go with me up there, too?”

“Of course. Now, close your eyes and sleep.”

“You mean three of us will be together up there.”

“Yes, my Baby Boy, three of us,” he said with a vigorous nod.

With a long sigh of relief and contentment, I promptly did as he said.

However, the rain also showed a dark and terrible side.

When the monsoon came, dark and menacing storm clouds perpetually overwhelmed the whole sky, followed by flashes of lightning and the furious roaring sound of thunder.

First, as the sunny sky suddenly darkened, the atmosphere turned unusually sultry and oppressive. Not a single leaf on any twig rustling, a piece of laundry on the clothesline fluttering, nor a swing on the tree swaying as they usually did, so still and lifeless like one whole dead painting. As if all were not enough, it was so steaming and suffocating hot that I was bathing in my own sweat. I felt as though a force of some primal elements was crushing down on the bungalow and squeezing me into a pulp with its utter stillness, so hard that I was about to explode from its tremendous pressure.

Suddenly, there came the deceptive, cool, refreshing breeze

that swiftly turned to a chilly gust of wind swirling and blowing small things like dead leaves and scrap papers on the ground on its path. Thunder started to rumble in the distance, and the roar of the storm escalated.

I was safe and sound under my roof while looking out the window, watching rows of trees lining up the perimeter of our small bungalow sway against the gusting of the wind. However, I could not help looking up at the sky, my eyes scanning around with a concern for somebody up there.

At that moment, I watched with dread as the sky split open. It screamed the loudest painful moan, echoing its rage and agony over and over before exploding and pouring down dense white sheets to sweep the face of the earth. Millions of raindrops were lashing the ground, slamming the closed window with such a ferocious force, and hitting the roof with their deafening noises.

And across the front yard, my homemade swing hanging down from a sturdy mango tree limb, was now shaking and swaying so hard in heavy rains like a helpless tiny piece of toy tossed back and forth by a gigantic invisible hand. Its dense leaves and smaller limbs rattled against the stormy wind as if its trunk would be uprooted and swept upside-down in an instant by the monsoon storm. Suddenly, another thunderbolt struck the earth. *Boom!* The light was so blinding. And the sound. Oh, the sound! I heard a ringing in my ears as if my eardrums were splitting open.

At that point, I rushed to my father as he got down on his hands and knees, busily mopping the rain-splashing floor in one of the kitchen corners. He looked up and saw the sheer alarm on my face.

“Papa, Papa, the lightning’s going to strike her now. Do something to help her.”

“Her? Who is she?” he frowned.

“It’s Mama!”

I screamed at him almost hysterically. Heaven was explod-

ing. The skies were turning upside-down. There was no way she could find someplace to hide up there.

"There, there, there, Baby Boy."

He put the mop away and drew me into his arms as I was still shaken from fear.

"Mama's going to die, Papa, please..."

"No, no, and no. Have you heard of a fish dying of drowning? No. Right? That's the same with your mama. How could she die since she is already immortal?"

Though I did not quite understand his answer, I nodded with great relief. The translation was that she was all right.

"All *Devidas* are always thrilled when it rains. Why! They are having fun in the open air without bothering to take a shower. How convenient!"

A *Devida* that he mentioned, meant a fairy in paradise.

My face brightened up. I liked his second answer a lot better. He knew how I hated to go to the bathroom to clean myself.

Every answer always satisfied my hunger to learn about my mother. He kept on feeding me the single image of a loving and caring mother who was now living in heaven and still faithfully waiting for us to join her up there. I was never tired of listening to this part of the story over and over.

These were beautiful white lies meant to shroud me from ugly, dark truths.

When I became a grown man, I even felt sorry for my father's lies. However, this made me feel deeper affection toward him. I realized that he had painstakingly invented those lies not only to protect me alone but also to himself from some unbearable truth.

He had been living in his own lies, like a pupa huddling inside its cocoon in serene oblivion.

Those lies fed his desperate need to feel good. Simply put, he needed to feel good about everyone he met, in every occurrence he had taken some part with, and on every *why* he must

answer—such as a why at my mother’s absence from our life.

If I told him that the slimy creature I hated most was the earthworm—a glimpse of its wriggling on the soil made me cringe—he would gently pick it up, letting it wriggle freely and vigorously on his palm, and watch me screaming and shutting my eyes with dread nearby. (At least he did not force me to touch it.) And then he began to lecture me in a solemn voice.

“Don’t you know what will happen without this little critter?”

I shook my head, and I didn’t care a bit as long as there would no longer be a swarm of slimy red-brown earthworms crawling onto our cement-paved backyard and taking it for their temporary refuge from the monsoon flood. And, of course, my father acted as their rescuer; if he came across that calamity, he always rushed in alarm to pick them up from the cement floor one by one and put them back safely into the soil.

“There would have been no life on earth—only bare rocks and craters, and dust just like the moon,” he replied grimly, and that startled me a little bit.

“Its contribution to the world was far greater than all living things combined. Why? For millions and millions of years, they’ve been busy making every single grain of soil on earth for us. Besides, this little poor critter never ever harms a soul.”

Then again, he gingerly put it back to the soil where it had belonged for millions of years.

Another time, while we were having lunch at a noodle stall by the street sidewalk, a leper approached some other customers at a table nearby and asked for a few coins. His repulsive, grotesquely deformed face instantly turned down my appetite. The hungry disease that afflicted him had chewed up a chunk of his body, with half of his nose and the tips of his fingers now gone. All the men and women at that table looked at him with alarm and disgust. They even moved away to the farther corner. My father did the incredible, earnestly beckoning him to come to our table.

Everyone in that shop, including the vendor, gasped and frowned heavily on him. However, he seemed unaware or even naive of it. A couple at the table by our side who had just walked in and seated themselves on the stool suddenly jumped up and walked out as they covered their noses from the awful stench permeating the leper's partly rotten body.

"Papa, don't let him come here," I whimpered. "Look, people are glaring at us now."

He frowned at me as he smiled up at the leper now standing humbly at my father's side, folding his hands palm to palm as a gesture of begging. He seemed so cautious not to let any part of his body make contact with anyone nearby. His foul smell was overwhelming now as if he were hanging a chunk of rotten meat around his neck.

"May prosperity and longevity be with you as the rewards of your kindness, sir," he started reciting his well-prepared blessing with a trembling and raspy voice, his eyes meekly down casting.

My father gave him a handful of coins from his pocket. He put them into his clean white handkerchief, making a secured knot, and dropped it into the leper's palm, making him almost in tears from his unexpected luck. My father even thanked the leper for the blessing he had given him.

"Papa, his face really scares me. Aren't you afraid of him?" I still trembled from fear and disgust even after that leper was gone.

He looked me in the eyes and said, "If you see someone you hate or someone so awful or deformed or so wrinkled and shrunken with old age...then try this tactic. Picture him way, way back when he was just a tiny weenie innocent baby in his mother's arms. He might even have dimples on his little chubby, soft cheeks. Everyone was a cute baby once: you, me, or that leper. And believe me, it works. It's my secret to help me not to hate anyone..."

He paused, then winked at me.

"...And to stop me from hitting someone's face who's

peeing me off.”

But when he made one man very happy, he could make another unhappy equally. The vendor rushed to our table, yelling furiously at my father. His eyeballs nearly protruded from sockets. The vein on his temple throbbed. I believed if he had had a gun or a club with him, he would have undoubtedly used it against my father.

“Look! Look! You are driving my other customers out of my stall. Every day, I fight tooth and nail, trying to make my business hang there. Now, you’re ruining it, you stupid son of a bitch!”

I gasped at such an unexpected attack, but my father had just given him an apologetic smile in return and promptly paid him for our food before walking out.

Yes, I believed my father did not see a mean and miserable owner of this shop in front of him but a disarming baby, perhaps with the cutest dimples that once he had been.

This overwhelmingly optimistic nature of my father had made him a strange or even—forgive me—a weird person, one of a kind among the ordinary ones. I was unsure whether to call it a curse or a blessing. For all his short life, he’d lived in a state of denial of all the dark sides under the sun. It, in turn, assured him of going about his life more happily within his cocooned world full of self-made illusions. Should we judge the worthiness of a thing by its genuineness or its usability? Had my father had a chance to answer, it would have definitely been this.

“Give me one good reason. Why do you live with what’s sinking your heart over what can lift your spirit, only because the former is real and the latter not? Why does painful reality have greater value than healing hopes and dreams?”

I believe no one could come up with a better version of reason than my father.

* * * * *

Part 1: Chapter 2

Dark Side of the Tide

My father was my best memory, one percent of happiness out of ninety-nine percent of the miseries I endured. If I had ever learned love, I would have known how to love people from him. We only had each other against the whole world. He alone brought me up. And as an inexperienced young man of twenty-one then, he had done a great job raising me.

Who I am today was not his fault or responsibility. On the contrary, I could have been worse without my cherished but short childhood episode I shared with him.

He said I was born in a small bungalow house in the Old Capital. Its front faced a canal that ran sluggishly and smoothly in an ebbing and flowing tide. That canal connected to the main river, the Chao Phraya, which divided the banks of the Old Capital and Bangkok. Small rowing boats were our lifeline, the essential vehicles for crossing to the other side to do any business.

Beyond our backyard were our neighbor's orchards and groves—mangoes, tangerines, plantains, coconuts, betel nut

palms, and so on. Far beyond lay vast fields of green vegetables belonging to the Chinese community.

Our small wooden frame bungalow had a baked clay tile shingles roof and a narrow wood veranda running around its four sides. It always lay under the cool shade of interlacing branches of the tall, canopied mango tree. Papa said it was a new tree grown from the old stump whose trunk had fallen during a storm when I was born. The bungalow was built ten feet or so above the ground for flood protection, leaving the spacious, cool space between the ground and floorboards of the house for me to play and run through and for my father to read a book and listen to his brand-new radio set broadcasting news at mid noon and to doze off after that on his hemlock tied between the two strong stilts of the house, each made of a stout log. He had an old gramophone for playing authentic Siamese music and Beethoven's Pastoral, his favorite Western classical piece. Yet, nobody else in our neighborhood had even heard of this Pastoral.

My father could not afford the costly installation of electricity and running water, a system recently introduced in Bangkok; he had to choose one. Finally, he decided on electricity due to his love of reading. No wonder that around the house, there was a row of large red ochre earthen jars stored with cool rainwater collected from the gutters lining the roof edge. It was our primary source of drinking supply.

Water fetched from the canal during the high tide at night, especially on full moon night, was considered good and clear enough for bathing and washing clothes. During the ebbing tide at noon, especially during the dry season, the water became muddy as it sometimes receded nearly to the bottom. I could go down and even wade in knee-deep, quaky mud until I reached the other side of the bank. All canal traffic inevitably halted; all trips were canceled until another high tide came to rescue them as soon as the evening approached.

Bangkok and the Old Capital Thonburi of that period were

well-known to foreigners as Venice of the East for its hundreds of canals meandering and sprawling like a network of interconnecting wires across its vast and low flatland. During a boat trip along one of these numerous canals, one could locate a sprawl of wooden and thatched-roof house after house along the winding and lush green bank since it rendered the richest soil for cultivated land and the most convenient area for living and traveling.

However, at nightfall, one could glimpse only the dark silhouettes of those dwellings and shadowy clumps of trees. Above was the huge ink sky glittering with millions of stars; below, millions of insects were chirping in darkness, drowning all noises on earth, if there were any at all, in the dead hour of the night.

Yet, in dense bushes along the two winding banks, one could witness a fantastic phenomenon that could take one's breath away. It was a spectacular display of glowing and twinkling fireflies reminiscent of thousands of golden lights on a Western Christmas tree lit up against the night's pitch darkness.

But rivers and canals had their ominous, dark side.

I vaguely recalled one afternoon when I was barely four years old. I was playing alone on the veranda. Suddenly, I heard shouts from a plank bridge that jutted across the canal's edge into the water under where our small row boat was tied. From the alarm of their voices, I knew something terrible must have happened at the bridge.

"Stay where you are. Don't go over there."

My father told me sharply as he jumped the flight of the bungalow steps, and off he went to the bridge in front of our bungalow.

I stood up, stretching my head out, trying to look out. Then, I focused on my father from a distance. He was helping these men carry something from under the bridge onto the bank. My curiosity grew until I could no longer resist. I tiptoed toward

the bridge, bending myself low so he would not notice my approach.

Then I stopped short, unprepared for the awful stench that suddenly hit me as if someone had used a solid club to hit me with a hard blow. I choked and held my breath tightly, crouching and hiding behind the dense brambles. What I saw made me immediately recoil and come close to vomiting.

On the edge of the canal bank lay the naked body of a child about my age.

I could not guess whether it was a boy or a girl because the body was severely decomposed and bloated beyond recognition. One of the child's eyeballs protruded from its socket like the bulging eye of a goldfish, and the swollen tongue hung out from small rotten lips. The flesh on its cheek exposed part of a white skull, probably by fish nipping and gnawing. What appeared on the missing patch of flesh was part of the white skull. And Oh! The stench, the intolerable stench that pervaded everywhere.

"There *she* went on a prow! again," I heard one of our neighbors say as he shuddered. "I always warn the children."

Superstitions had been predominating the local people. They all believed there was a dead female roaming our neighborhood at night. Some swore they had seen her appear in a white bundle. A rumor spread that that dead woman had been looking for something or someone she had lost. Never would she rest in peace until she could find that one she wanted.

As a child, these stories terrified me. But my father ardently denied it. He declared it's one of the most nonsense things they put into a child's head.

I fled home from that gruesome scene as fast as I could. Fear gripped me until I couldn't sleep well that night.

In the wee hours, the sound of footsteps suddenly broke up the silence of the night. Someone was stomping along the veranda with a loud *thud-thud-thud*. With half fear and half curiosity, I got up from bed, tip-toed toward the bar window opposite my bed, and gazed out.

What I caught was a figure in silhouette. The moon illuminated that figure's long hair, showing it must be a woman, not the drowned child I was dreadfully expecting. A thick white blanket bundled around her body made her slightly stagger while she tried to move.

Though her face was obscured in shadow, her eyes were somehow gleaming in eerie moonlight, like the eyes of a cat in the dark. As if knowing I was watching her through the bar window from my bedroom, she suddenly turned and moved toward me. I wanted desperately to run, but mounting fear kept me paralyzed. A terror of fear was at its peak when I saw her open a dark hole that had once been her mouth.

Pran, it's your turn now...

I realized that I was screaming when my father abruptly shook me awake.

"I saw someone out there, Papa. A woman." I pointed to the window. "She was all covered with a blanket, and she..." I stumbled, "She...tried to get in," I shuddered as I managed to continue. "Then she said...she really said...*it's your turn, Pran*. She...knows my name, Papa." Then I burst into tears.

Because the room was dark, I could only hear his soothing voice and feel his warm, reassuring hand clutching mine.

"Look, I did see you still in your bed when I rushed in. It means you didn't get up from bed or walk to the window and see whatever you thought you had seen. You just had a bad dream. Now, go back to sleep, Baby Boy. You know I will never let anything in the world come in to harm you. It would be best if you didn't have this nonsense nightmare again. So tomorrow, you will go to sleep in my room. Better?"

Yet, he didn't go back to sleep. He turned on the lamp, went straight, and shouted as if expecting his voice to carry far into the dark beyond.

"Get out! No more boogeyman, once and for all!"

Then, he shut the window panes with an unnecessary force.

Bang!

Later that day, I eavesdropped on the adults' conversation. One of them whispered that Pim, our neighbor's little girl, was missing after she had strayed into a pretty isolated area along the bank and played alone. A few days later, the current brought her body down that canal, and it finally got stuck beneath our wood bridge.

The news horrified me and kept me crying for several days. Pim was my playmate. Her parents worked in the orchard near our house, and we knew this family well. Papa said her mother had helped him look after me once in a while when I was a baby and fell sick all year round. Pim and I usually played hide-and-seek and tree climbing together in the afternoon. That day, she asked me to play outside with her as usual, pointing to an old tamarind tree by the barbed fence.

"That woman yonder... Look! She's hiding behind that tree. She wants me to take you to play hide and seek near the canal."

"Oh!" My eyes followed her finger over there, squinting to look for whoever she talked about, to no avail, "Do we know her?"

"Nope," she shook her head before smiling as if she was holding some secret. "But she said she has toys and stuff for us. Come on! Let's go." Pim urged me in her jolly voice.

But that day, I had a mild fever, so I told her that Papa wanted me to stay indoors.

The last thing I saw of her was her romping merrily without me toward that tree and then out of sight.

I was too scared to tell Papa or anyone what'd happened between Pim and me that afternoon. I felt so guilty about her death that I took some part in it. Soon after, my father taught me to swim with coconut shells as buoys, knowing the danger canals posed to children. He tied a pair of big coconuts around my chest so that I could bob up and down safely in the cool brown water until I could get the hang of it. The fatal rate of drowning among small children was as high as natural death, such as succumbing to typhoid and pneumonia. Therefore, swimming was inevitably a necessity as walking.

Before sunset, when the water was still at high tide, my father and I would stride together, side by side, to that long plank bridge to take our daily bath. As we plunged into the water, diving, and swimming in its cool embrace, we always waited for peddler boats or fishing boats floating past us so that my father would beckon them to stop and buy their catch of the day.

That evening, he would happily cook fresh charcoal grilled fish. The thick smoke spread all over as the delicious smell permeated the air in the small kitchen. We ate our dinner quietly yet contently under the dim lamplight as he listened attentively to the broadcast from his radio set. It connected him to the wide world far beyond our cocoon of a small bungalow.

At an early age, he decided to stay home to care for me since he trusted no one to do this task. He still had some money left in the bank. The source of that money was unknown, as he revealed little about his past. But most of the land back then, still dense with trees and bushes, was affordable. And with the monthly interest from his savings account, he had enough to get by, though not quite comfortably; it gave him some peace of mind for having me by his side nights and days.

He told me in good humor that it was such a miracle both of us survived the most torturing two-month period of my infancy. I was a screaming machine operated twenty-four hours without a turn-off switch.

During my early infancy, he woke up every couple of hours at night to feed my hungry mouth with bottled milk, as good quality powdered milk as his meager money could afford during that decade. (All powdered milk was imported from Western countries during that period.) Throughout the night, he had to cradle me patiently in his arms, pacing in a circle around his small room with his eyes half closed because I had never stopped shrieking and screaming from my colic pain, which uncannily attacked me every night when the clock exactly struck midnight. Fortunately, that indigestive symptom eventually faded away

when I was three months old.

I remembered that on my seventh birthday, he surprised me by bringing me to the edge of the backyard toward an old, tall tamarind tree by the fence of our house, a favorite place for us, Pim and me, to sneak out and climb up its sturdy trunk to pick its sweet and tart brownish meat in the pods. My father was not happy whenever he found me playing around that tree. He would call me back to play elsewhere, saying he'd found snakes in that dense, overgrown area.. But that day, he stopped under the shade of that tree. And out of the blue, he bluntly said.

"Look. Do you see that spot under that tree? That's where you were buried."

"What...?" I asked blankly, not getting what he meant at all. He patted my head fondly and amusedly smiled.

"It means you were born twice."

"Born twice?" I repeated, perplexed even more. "Is it the same as a chick? Before it is actually born, it must be born first inside an egg, right?"

"Smart boy!" he beamed.

After that, a gruesome yet fascinating story unfolded.

Since birth, I had been a frail, sickened baby. At his first glance on the day of my arrival into the world, I looked just like a tiny newborn hairless mouse with raw red skin as wrinkled and shrunk as the ninety-year-old man's. Upon my arrival, the midwife grimly announced I was stillborn since I neither moved nor breathed. My face was so swollen and blue as if someone had tried to choke me to death.

As an old custom, when a newborn died at birth, they would put its body into a clay pot and bury it right away under some large and shady tree. The faster, the better, for the soul, they believed, would reincarnate into the same family without unnecessary halt. My father had covered that pot with the lid and buried it under that old tamarind tree near our house with my unmoved body underneath a shallow grave that he'd dug with a shovel.

A short moment later, he thought he heard a feeble cry, so weak he did not at first pay much attention because he thought the voice he was hearing might be from some stray cat hunting for lizards among the bushes nearby. He was about to leave that spot when all the work was done.

Then he gasped.

He suddenly clutched his shovel and threw all his strength into digging out the buried pot a few feet underground. He panted and panted with extreme fear mixed with exhaustion as he threw the lid open. Inside that clay pot, he saw me opening my mouth, wailing and gasping for air while my tiny hands and feet were flailing feebly, clinging to life, fighting Death.

So, he salvaged me. He took me out, bundled me in his loincloth, cradled me in his arms, and wept.

He told me I was born a fighter. That meant I was destined to live a fighter and would never die a loser.

“Although you are always my Baby Boy, you must have this auspicious name that I gave you because *Pran* means *breath of life*,”

He then crushed me into his chest and whispered his blessing to me.

“Many returns of the day, Pran. Wherever you are, may your life be your best gift ever.”

My father was a born storyteller. He loved exaggerating his stories to hold attention, especially tall tales. But pulling me out alive from my grave in time must have a grain of truth in it.

He also told me that the first time he bathed me in a tub, he nervously held me around his arm as if my body was made of a fragile eggshell so easily to be broken just in one single drop. Every early morning, he painstakingly washed and scrubbed my soiled diapers, hung them neatly on the clothesline, and let them crisp and dry in the hot sun side by side with his clothes. He always proudly watched his laundry billowing cheerfully in a soft breeze as if it was one of his most outstanding achievements while a flock of sparrows was hopping and

chatting amiably under the laundry's shade.

Through my first year, he eye-witnessed my progress from my first creep to my first crawl to my first stand up and finally to my first step, which I wobbled toward him and fell in his arms. And one day, while I was sitting quite in a good mood on a training pot doing my bowel movement, he told me he suddenly heard me utter my very first intelligible sound—*pa... pa... pa... papa... papa*—while I was grinning from ear to ear at him, forcing him to blink back his joyful tears.

As in the old saying to my father, the sun rose and set on me.

Whatever a mother should take care of her child, my father did them all for me except sing a lullaby to coax me to sleep. It was beyond his capability because he had a terrible, off-key voice. But I was not an easy sleeper, so the national anthem, the only song he could sing, was often used to make me fall asleep.

I grew up among the sea of books, some stacking up neatly on the bookshelves and some scattered at every corner of every room in our small house—under a bed, dining table, chair, and carpet. Once, I found a book, the one my father had been frantically searching for a whole week. It sprawled deep inside the kitchen cupboard with a couple of day-old left-over foods. Who had absentmindedly left it there if not he? If my father was somewhere and not to be seen in the house, he could be tracked easily by the books he left behind right after he had finished, like a deer in the woods that could be trailed from its droppings by a bloodhound.

So, I learned how to crawl and walk with all the sprawl of books beneath my feet. When I started teething, my favorite thing to gnaw on vigorously was any book I could find within my grasp. I ravenously shoved it into my drooling mouth, maddening him more than anything I had ever done to him. I always looked up at him so disarmingly that it swiftly melted his anger away.

I had never seen even one piece of luxurious furniture or decoration in his room. My father said we had no money for

such things, but there was no space for them either. A full-sized bed, a chest of drawers for keeping our clothes, and a desk were squeezed in, and that's all. If these things were not absolutely necessary, I believed he would, without a second thought, throw them out for more space. All the four corners of the world and its seven seas were somehow shrunk and crammed into his room—from foreign literature and volumes of poetry by prominent authors such as William Blake, Walt Whitman, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Miguel de Cervantes, Rabindranath Tagore, and last but not least his favorite of all Herman Melville and his *Moby Dick*. However, those alone never satisfied his craving and enthusiasm for knowledge. He included history books, religion books, Buddhism and Christianity likewise, philosophy books, both Eastern and Western, science knowledge, and finally, tons of his law textbooks stacked neatly and separately on one dedicated colossal shelf.

Those thick and solemn law textbooks told me about some of his untold life. They forced him to reluctantly admit that he had dropped from the prestigious Royal Law School in his second year and had struggled ever since, trying to find odd jobs here and there to take care of me. In short, he was my walking encyclopedia, whose brain had an uncanny ability to consume all kinds of pure knowledge without exhaustion.

Consequently, there probably was no room left in his mind for learning human nature. Its mystery and complexity seemed beyond his awareness and comprehension.

If I had to describe him in a nutshell, I'd say my father was a naïve child in a man's body, with the mind of a savant, the heart of a saint, and the soul of a rebel.

There were two topics my father tried as much as he could to avoid.

One was about my mother. Another was his own family.

No matter how frantically I searched, I could not find a single picture of my mother in the house. I had played a detective,

looking for any hard evidence to prove her existence and every time, it seemed like I was back to square one. Her identity was anonymous to me except for one thing: she was in heaven. That was all I knew about her from him—no more and no less.

Yet, in the case of my grandparents, it was even dimmer. My father must have his parents somehow, somewhere. He couldn't be dropped from the sky onto the earth like a shooting star. Yet not a word ever slipped from his mouth when I curiously asked about their whereabouts. I told him that I often saw a Grandpa or a Grandma come to pick up my classmates at school. When my father had brought me to a place like a preschool for little children nearby, I saw those grandparents' faces shine as their little grandchildren jumped with joy, greeting them. One of my classmates bragged that Grandpa was even better than Papa because Grandpa always indulged him with candies, toys, and hugs.

Immediately in the middle of the conversation, he pretended to look for one of his books and abruptly walked out on me, leaving me there on that spot, puzzled and hurt.

But one afternoon, while my father was taking a nap in his hemlock, I was doing my daily chore—dusting his mahogany desk and books lining up on the shelves in our bedroom. His desk was always cluttered with half-open books. (He never had enough patience to finish one book before starting another.) The top drawer in his desk was always locked, but today, I found it left ajar.

He must forget to lock it back, probably in a hurry. My heart was drumming rapidly as I slowly pulled open the drawer, trying not to make any squeaky noise. I knew I wasn't supposed under any circumstance to peek into his private possessions, but it was true that curiosity could kill a cat.

My father loved to tell me children's stories, both folklore and foreign tales. I remembered he had told me a story from ancient Greek mythology about the first female on earth named Pandora, who pried open God Zeus's forbidden box out of

curiosity and released all kinds of evils ever known to men, like plagues, famine, misfortune, and so forth into this world. So fortunately for us humankind, my father said she closed the lid of that box in time. That's why Hope, the only thing Pandora was able to save inside that box, had remained with humanity up to today. He had told me he always wondered if that story had become the other way around, what would have happened to us now—living in a heaven-like, perfect world but without hope and dream since there was no room left to hope, perhaps? To him, it could be as good as living in hell.

I anxiously squeezed my eyes, bracing for what I would find.

The instant I opened my eyes, what I found inside disappointed me. Instead of some treasures as I expected in a pirate's story, as my eyes swept thoroughly, I found only one worn, black, covered thick journal book and one old, manila paper envelope at the bottom of the drawer.

In sulky silence, I flipped through all the journal leaves, still searching with flickering hope for more exciting items. But all the pages were only filled with my father's scribbles, which I could not read since, at that time, I had just started school.

Half the letters scribbled in black ink on that journal book became blotched and blurred from rain soaking. Rain must have leaked from the roof and seeped inside, damaging what he had written until the first half of his journal was barely readable. I curiously flipped through the second half and found those pages, though worn out, still intact and in relatively good condition. But if I could understand their content, it would surely bore me to death.

Then, my attention shifted to that brown envelope. My hands were trembling from excitement as I began to remove its contents individually.

What came into view this time was a real surprise. They were three worn-looking, old photographs in fading sepia color taken in the past.

The first one was the picture of a middle-aged lady in her elaborate and old-fashioned dress seated in her grandeur on a couch, with a strikingly handsome boy around four or five years old on her lap, wearing a sailor uniform and a sailor hat. The boy looked straight into the camera with his soft, dreamy eyes, his bright smile revealing two cute, deep dimples. An English cocker spaniel dog was crouching by their side. Even the boy my age knew that no one at that time could afford such an imported pet except that they must be well off.

My eyes glued on that boy almost breathlessly; no doubt he must be Papa—his smile, eyes, and characteristic dreamy expression. There was no doubt that the elegant-looking lady had to be his mother from the way she was holding him in her arms in an excessively protective manner. *I had a grandmother!* I knew I had one, although I had never expected my grandmother to look so superior and ladylike. Even though she seemed in her middle age, I had never seen any woman anywhere, especially in my neighborhood, having even half of the grandeur and beauty she possessed.

But I had no idea who the man in the second picture was—the middle-aged Caucasian gentleman in an imposing European suit perching on the arm of a big armchair with his walking cane clutched in one of his hands. Yet he must be significant enough for my father to keep his picture with him for all those years.

What turned out to be the most intriguing was the last picture, a portrait of a young Siamese girl in her mid-teens, dressed in the European fashion of a refined lacy blouse and long skirt. One of her hands was holding an open-laced parasol. This photograph was taken outdoors, somewhere in a flower garden. Yet the landscape background was far from familiar to my eyes. I assumed it must be taken in some foreign place far away, perhaps in one of the European countries where the rain mystically turned into ice upon falling on earth in winter.

It was too bad that the girl's features were quite homely: a

square, plain face, a broad, large nose, flat cheeks, and small eyes, hardly impressing or attracting anyone at first glance. Yet, her subtle beauty lay in her smile that seemed to shine and radiate strangely out of the photograph, immediately captivating even a small boy like me. What a striking smile on such an undistinguished face. And although the girl's actual smile, which she had opened in front of the camera, might last merely a few seconds before it naturally faded and lost its existence in time, that smile had been captured and perfectly preserved in that photograph to be marveled and cherished by anyone of a present-day who found this long-hidden picture and had a chance to steal a glance at the timeless smile of hers.

In a flash of lightning, something struck my mind. The impact of that sudden thought made my heart skip a beat.

She must be my mother.

I was breathless and thunder-struck. She fit the description my father had given of my mother—a kindhearted fairy in heaven.

Without that unique smile, her face was far from pretty. Perhaps I'd inherited her plain looks, which explained why I wasn't as strikingly handsome as my father.

As my eyes transfixed her warm yet plain face, as if spellbound, I felt inexplicable tenderness toward her. My eyes lingered on her face and welled up with tears. At that most heavenly moment, I was oblivious to every existence in the world, especially the fact that the person in that photograph was an absolute stranger to me.

On the back of that photo, I found a line of foreign script, which I assumed was English, written in my father's distinctive hand.

I jumped, put those mysterious pictures back, and closed the drawer as I immediately heard my father's footsteps approaching. I suddenly realized that I had violated his privacy. I'd just trespassed right into the heart of his bygones, which completely excluded me. However, when he rushed into the room—as if the room was being on fire—straight to his desk

with his nervous and suspicious look to lock that drawer, he only sighted me at another corner busily dusting his bookshelf, my back on him as if unaware of his presence.

As soon as he saw me turning to face him, he sighed with relief as if surprised at his sudden ambush. Then I flashed him a saintly smile, making myself smell like a rose. And thank heavens, it worked. I only prayed my father would never hear my heartbeats, which were thundering behind that open-my-heart smile.

I had asked myself a million times since that incident why I didn't go straight to him and ask him if that was a picture of my mother. But instead, I had never told him I had discovered his 'keepsake' inside that drawer. I always decided against it at the last minute because I couldn't stand to witness his dread if I forced him at bay. It was as plain as day that he didn't show me those pictures because he didn't want to, for whatever reason.

Perhaps all earthly reasons known to my father, who had steadfastly revered logic and reason as his God, were useless to save him in the face of some specific crises. Therefore, the only tact to deal with what had been haunting him was to seek refuge in such a way that had nothing to do with reason. Therefore, locking up his family pictures in a dungeon-like drawer for good was chosen as his means to solve his problem.

I never found another chance to glimpse those three pictures. Since that day, that drawer had been perpetually locked up. Each time I came to clean up the room after that day, it became my secret habit to check that drawer, hoping for one more chance of Papa's carelessness. But never again had he left it unlocked.

By then, I learned that he could not confront what deeply troubled him. Somehow, he could close his eyes from it but he could not force himself to believe that those troubles, whatever they might be, had never happened to him.

Everybody can reject reality as long as he lives, but no one can deny its existence.

* * * * *

Part 1: Chapter 3

Sail across the Seven Seas with the Wrong Hand

I always remembered one episode of my life when I first started school at six.

It was a private preschool for small children before entering the elementary class. The school was run by a fifty-year-old matriarch, a well-off widow whom everyone called *Kru Riam* (Teacher Riam). A section of her house was converted into a classroom with a capacity of twenty children, where she taught and ruled alone. My father left me in that place among all the unfamiliar faces for half a day before he came back to bring me home.

In this way, he would have more time to find a temporary job, from a part-time store clerk to a hired laborer and a fruit picker in nearby orchards. Any job was indiscriminately good to him as long as it was an honest and decent job. With his fluency in English, he could quickly get a more prestigious and well-paid job, such as a translator for the government or a school teacher. However, he told me those works required time and all

commitments. He'd rather wait until I could be more independent, care for myself, and stay home alone during his absence.

The first day in school for a new student traditionally fell on Thursday, considered the most sacred and auspicious day of the week for obtaining wisdom. As a tradition, I carried with me a bowl made of woven banana leaves containing a large cluster of red *Ixora* flowers, a handful of grass blades, and a small bunch of purple eggplant blossoms—all grown and found in abundance on the ground around our backyard—together with a few incense sticks and candles, all for honoring and paying respect to my teacher.

A cluster of red *Ixora* flowers with their tiny needle-like shapes symbolized sharpness and brilliance; hardy Bermuda grass blades grown everywhere in abundance, flood or drought, stood for resilience and a profusion of knowledge; and bow-down eggplant blossoms signified obedience and humbleness. These were the three traditional virtues that a student should bear.

In the early morning, as long blades of grasses on the ground still moist and fresh with glistening morning dews, we trudged our way across our backyard, through a dense tangerine, plantain, and mango grove and finally gingerly and precariously tiptoeing on a slippery extended palm tree trunk cut and used for crossing a narrow ditch. Once in a while, sunlight peeked in, filtered through dense foliage, and dappled our faces. As we trudged into the deeper shade, the fresh scent of moss-covered, damp, soft earth from last night's drizzles permeated the air.

Suddenly, I caught sight of something that almost took away my breath. Above our heads, a circle of multicolored butterflies, golden yellow, lime green, copper red, and indigo blue, danced with their fluttering wings as if they were on a parade dressed in fancy embroidery costumes. As the lead singers, magpies sang sweet songs among tree branches, and a chorus of cicadas and other insects were noisily chirping among dense underbrush and thick brambles.

"Listen to this symphony orchestra of life, listen..." he

whispered in awe. “Today, the world is rendering its brightest side to you. Listen to the sound of the earth pulsing with life to celebrate you, son. It’s the best promising sign for a new chapter of your life.”

My father was exuberant in his lift-up spirits. He, not me, acted more like a boisterous schoolboy on his first day. He even whistled some old tunes, a rare habit for him, while holding one of my hands, guiding me ahead, whereas I felt nervous about facing an uncertain new world awaiting my arrival. On our way, he sensed my increasing nervousness. Therefore, to encourage me, he loudly recited a poem, his favorite, from a Siamese literature textbook when he was young. His voice was strong and clear as these verses flowed from his lips.

*Knowledge is a priceless cargo from a faraway land
Thus, prepare to set yourself as one dignified barque,
Your hands as the sails facing a blow of wind
Your feet, two anchors holding the barque—
Your fingers, the ship’s masts
While ominous tempest lurks
Take your perseverance as an inexhaustible workforce
To traverse against all odds
While your eloquence, a navigator,
Your congeniality, your supply provision;
Your sense, a propeller on its rout
Your insight, a field glass guarding your vessel
From reefs and rocks
Throughout the long voyage across the seven seas
Lassitude will emerge like a school of sharks—
To wreck the ship
It must be slayed by a cannon—
Fired from your adamant heart
Then, through all hindrances—
With your most ardent effort
Will you at last reach the haven of your destined port*

After fifteen minutes, a walk trip to school was done. We emerged onto the clearing where my school stood. I held my breath and clutched his hand as firmly as possible.

Behind the row of pink oleander and bright red hibiscus shrubs stood a two-storied house with four sides of veranda running around it, somewhat like ours except that it was much larger. The capacious space between the house and the cement-paved ground below was converted into a classroom, yes, a classroom with no walls except for the thick bamboo blinds that could be rolled down from the ceiling for all four sides when it rained or was too sunny. There were no chairs except for a single one belonging to the teacher. Instead, a large mat was thoroughly paved to cover the ground so all students could sit. There were four rows of foldable low desks for students and a large blackboard in front of the class.

As we approached the classroom, curious eyes from sixteen boys and three girls turned to us. Those open stares churned my stomach and weakened my legs. My father squeezed my clammy hand gently to signal his encouragement. It was the first time I encountered a new world and new faces—so many simultaneously.

My father nudged me toward the lady teacher at her desk. Her gaze fell steadily on us, mostly on my father. I had to kneel in front of her as I presented her with my bowl of offerings. She accepted it with a half-smile and her traditional blessing in return. Her acceptance of my offerings officially pronounced my status as her new student and assured me I would belong to this domain where she had been a sovereign from that moment.

It was the first and last smile she had ever given me while I was attending her school.

After that brief ritual, my father had left. Kru Riam pointed to one unoccupied desk in the middle row, gesturing for me to settle myself over there, which I did promptly. All the desks were so low everyone had to sit on the floor paved with a large mat. After that, she taught the class how to write the Thai

alphabet. She stood big and tall in front of the class, with a piece of chalk in her hand, neatly and carefully writing all the forty-four letters onto that large blackboard. The lesson has now officially started.

Then, she asked all her new students to trace those letters onto their slate tablets, traditionally made for young children to practice writing. This way, we did not waste notebook paper because we could erase what we had just written down from the slate and start again. The whole class followed her command. Everyone bent his head and kept himself busy with a slate pencil and tablet. A few moments later, she began to strut past every row of desks to check each of her students' work.

I froze as she brusquely stopped at my desk and peered at my still-blank slate tablet. I felt my blood turn cold as she frowned at me. My palm, as it firmly grabbed a slate pencil, was now damp with cold sweat.

"You don't listen to me, young man. I've just told the class to copy some letters on the blackboard onto the slate. Now do it!"

"Yes, Ma'am," I lowered my voice to a whisper.

I took a deep breath and then slowly let it out. How stiff my five fingers had become as if I had long neglected them to rust in the rain. Why was my small hand so weighty, as if it had already turned into a slab of stone? It was so heavy that I could not control my whole hand as I forced it to drag a line and bend a curve to form the first letter of the Thai alphabet, which seemed quite easy to command just by the look. Finally, I drew my breath again. That letter came out at last. But it seemed out of proportion, too illegible to make any sense: something as close as a scribble of a two-year-old on the wall.

"Now what?" she thundered. "What's wrong with you, young man? You can't make out a straight line or a curve to form a letter, right? Or do you want to give me a hard time?"

"No, Ma'am," whispered I again, too scared to say more to aggravate her temper.

“Let’s see whether you can improve by tomorrow,” she declared.

As I dazedly blinked and looked around, desperate to see hope, I found all eyes ranging from mildly curious to nonchalant to intense get-what-you-deserve stares.

There was no friendly smile on their face, only a cold sneer.

When the class was dismissed in the early afternoon, I spotted my father waiting in the front yard. His brightest smile greeted me, and I immediately jumped into his arms as soon as I had glimpsed his sight. He grabbed my hands so tightly that he spun me around and around in a circle, as he usually did to me, just for my having fun.

“How is your first day at school? Lots of fun? How many friends can you make so far? Let me guess. Nine? Ten? Or the whole class? Hey,” he winked at me as he went on, lowering his voice into a mischievous whisper. “Any cute girls?”

He cheerfully bombarded me with question after question as I managed to smile at him.

“Are you all right, Pran?” he stopped. His smile faded as he sensed something not quite right stamped on my face. “You aren’t happy in school, are you?” He looked me in the eyes.

“Yes, yes, Papa, I’m fine,” I nodded vigorously, averting his scrutinized stare. I know how happy and relieved he was to see me start school. I did not have the heart to ruin any of his dreams that he was intent on making it come true for my future.

“I... I just feel sad...because I miss you.”

What I replied to him was not a lie since this was one reason for my misery at school. However, I intended to omit another reason, a more serious one: the hostile atmosphere of the whole class.

“Miss me! Come on, you aren’t a baby any longer,” he groaned and chuckled good-naturedly as we walked home. “Soon, you will be a young man with your own family to take care of. I will become a grumpy old man. And one day... I won’t be around any longer.”

I burst into tears. I could not bear the thought that one day, he would be gone and not with me anymore. It was more than the sun and the moon, and all the stars in the sky stopped shining altogether.

As a few more days passed by, I hardly showed any progress, infuriating Kru Riam more. Everyone in the class could write many letters without glancing at the blackboard, but I still struggled. She must think that I was either a troubled boy enjoying challenging her or had a big hole in my brain beyond her help. What? A six-year-old grown-up boy with the writing ability equal to a two-year-old toddler. However, she decided to cling to her first thought: I was a bad boy.

Kru Riam was a matriarch who took care of large areas of orchards. She was one of a handful of women who could read and write. People in our neighborhood sent their small children to her school because she had a good reputation as a strict teacher who ruled her students with chalk in one hand and a stick in the other. Chalks were for writing, and sticks were for punishing.

Throughout a decade, these two guaranteed her students' success. Years after years, her students finished her school with good handwriting and some scars on their butts as a bonus until I came to ruin her pride for the high respect she had earned in forcing all her students, even the dumbest ones, to know how to write. What if one of her students had told his parents about her incompetence in teaching one single boy to write?

If one parent had known the whole neighborhood would too, she thought so, and overnight, all her good reputation would be in question.

Therefore, to save herself from all the blame, she must let the whole class see with their own eyes that I had a problem with my dumbness, which was beyond her ability to help.

So, one hot afternoon, as her patience ran thin and thin, she asked me to stand up in front of the class. I was handed a piece

of white chalk to draw on the blackboard to show the class how progressive my alphabet was. Still, I struggled with my weak, baby-like muscles. My hand seemed lost in the vast blackness in front of me.

“Not the slightest sign of progress!” she contemptuously declared. My repeated failure finally pushed her over the edge. “Why! This boy reminds me of...”

Suddenly, she paused and turned quickly to the class. Apparently, something was crossing her mind.

“...Of what? Can anyone give me your best answer of what he reminds me of?”

A few hands were raised simultaneously, but Kru Riam picked one earnest boy sitting in the third row. He was the oldest boy in the class, with his stout body and small, restless eyes darting repeatedly and never staying still. His name was Poon.

“I know, Ma’am; he reminds us of...” that boy answered promptly and then paused because of an interruption of his uncontrolled giggle. “Sorry, Ma’am, he reminds us of...a buffalo!”

A torrent of laughter followed. Their bodies were squirming from their laughing fit.

“Ah! We can’t find a better answer. Thank you, Poon.

To spice up the scene, my teacher’s hand fumbled inside her desk drawer and eagerly pulled out a picture. She lifted the picture and showed it to the whole class, causing noises of laughter to reach a crescendo. It was a pencil-sketched drawing of a water buffalo immersing its body in a muddy pond, only its dump-looking face and a pair of long curved horns surfacing.

“Put down the chalk and come over here.”

She beckoned to me. I dragged the weight of my limbs toward her, step by step, as if on my way to the execution gallows. The closer I approached her, the clearer she was on the verge of drooling. She wiped her red, saliva-ridden lips with her red-blotted handkerchief.

Before I realized what was happening to me, she had strung

that picture with a thread and hung it around my neck. She burst into a shriek of laughter so hard I believed she would have a fit. The horrible sound of her laughter terrified me to the point that I nearly wet my pants.

To the Siamese, some animals represented something due to their appearance and behavior. Elephants signified sacred and greatness; peacocks signified grace and beauty; horses velocity; feline stealth; canine loyalty; crows slyness; monkeys agility and mischief; vipers villainy; and cattle, especially water buffalos, stood for downright dumbness.

Then, she asked all my classmates why she had put me up front. Everyone shouted and pointed at me in synchrony.

“It’s because he’s so dumb, Ma’am.”

“Does anyone want to be like him, class?”

“No, Ma’am, we don’t,” they all chanted like a chorus supervised by their conductor, their arms folded, their eyes explicitly mocking me.

The scene ended with her satisfied smirk, followed by the second round of wild chortles from all my classmates. Hot tears streaked quietly down my face, but I hung my head just in time to hide them. I was too afraid to cry openly and risk more taunting.

Her plan was carried out successfully, so after that scene, no one would ever blame her for my incompetence in writing.

That night, I cried my heart out as my father was snoring steadily beside me. I had never experienced such a humiliation up to this level before. However, I decided Papa would be the last person to know. I would ruin all his hope in me if he found out what a dumb boy he had. I lost almost all my appetite. At night, I tossed and turned, weighed down by guilt and shame. Worst of all, I avoided being with my father as much as possible for fear that I would not be able to hide from him my agony.

But he did notice it. Nothing about me could escape his keen eyes. One afternoon after school, he caught me alone on the veranda, my head bending to my knee, quietly weeping.

“All right, this is a man-to-man talk. What’s troubling you

lately? Can we share?" he was straight to the point. "Now, take me for your trusted friend, not your authoritative parent."

Only one glimpse of his encouraging smile made me downpour all my hidden agony on him like a torrent of water gushing down a broken dam. I tried with a choked cry to utter words between my sobs.

"Papa, I can't make out any letter in the class. My fingers are so stiff I can't force them to move with a pencil. And Kun Kru...she...she put me in front of the class and...and forced me to hang...hang a drawing of...of a water buffalo while all my classmates laughed and called me dumb—"

Before I finished, he grabbed both my hands and inspected them thoroughly. Then he asked me to wiggle all my fingers, which I did with no problem. It seemed he couldn't find anything wrong with either hand.

There was a dead silence.

He stared at me as I sat with my head hung to avoid his stare. Neither reproach nor console slipped from his lips. Only the whole silence drowned the entire room. So silent that if someone accidentally dropped a needle onto the floor, it would startle me as if hearing the gunfire.

It was the most dreadful moment, far more terrifying than the humiliation and intimidation I had experienced in the classroom. I would have endured that kind of bully every single day from my class rather than being seated in front of my father with absolute silence. I could not afford to lose his trust and the fondness that he had been giving me.

Papa, please say something to me. I welcome a spanking more than your silence.

He now seemed absorbed in his thoughts, shifting his absentminded gaze from that sheet of paper to me back and forth. Finally, it was he who broke the terrible silence. He told me he needed to be alone to figure things out. Meanwhile, he allowed me to step outside and have fun with my recent favorite plaything, a slingshot.

Lek, his friend, had made me a slingshot a couple of months ago. He sharpened a guava wood stick, considered the most qualified for carving a slingshot. He then made it into a y shape and tied rubber elastic between two arms to propel small pellets of solid dried clay. But Papa said it would belong to me only on one condition: he would never allow me to shoot all animals: sparrows, squirrels, lizards, small reptiles, or whatever that breathed. I promised him promptly.

The living things I found around my house daily, except slimy earthworms, fascinated me. Those which I loved to spend hours watching curiously were mourning doves cooing sadly on the roof, crickets chirping in harmony at dusk, or a swarm of tiny tadpoles with their little tails swimming to and fro in the shallow rain pool after the rainfall, or dragonflies with their iridescent and gauzy wings hovering and ferreting in pairs around the lily pads in our pond.

Consequently, slingshot shooting targets were reduced to bark on tree trunks, an empty can and bottle on the ground, or any small, unmoving objects dangled on a rope.

Surprisingly, after a short practice, I could hit a target with accuracy. Even my father teased me that I could have a promising career as a hitman when I grew up.

Usually, he let me play alone in the front yard. But today, I found him stepping out and standing at the corner of the veranda under the deep shade of magenta bougainvillea, which covered the lattice trellis over his head. He was gazing down at me while I was toying with my slingshot.

His arms leaned against the railing while his squinting eyes focused on every movement of mine, hard and long as if he had nothing else to pay attention to. It was hard to tell what was on his mind. I sheepishly glanced in his direction and slowly breathed a sigh of relief. At least I did not detect any hint of anger on his face. Indeed, it was rare to see him on edge or ill-tempered with anyone, let alone in genuine anger.

He shouted at me across the yard.

“Can you aim to hit a can over there?” He pointed his finger to an empty can lying on the ground by the barbed wire fence that lined the perimeter of our property.

“It’s too far for me, Papa,” I protested hesitantly, afraid to upset him.

“Just try it once,” he coaxed me. “You won’t lose anything by trying. But if you don’t try, you might lose a chance to know your potential.”

So, I tried it. I hold the slingshot firmly in one hand, stretching its rubber elastic with another. With a steady and deadly aim, I narrowed one of my eyes, let a clay bullet go off, and held my breath.

Bang!

The can bounced off and spun like a top in the middle of the air before dropping to the ground. It kept rolling a few feet forward before completely stopping. I ran to pick it up, and it was a shallow dent caused by the bullet right on the can. The feeling of triumph radiated all over me. Now, I saw my father clapping his hands with excitement on the deck as if he had performed all the shooting himself.

“The fun is over,” he announced. “Now, it’s time to get back to work. You come right up to me.”

Now what? He brought me to our desk at one corner of our packed bedroom with his larger-than-life bookshelf looming against the wall. With heaps of books squeezed in, the bookshelf alone took up the whole length and height of one side of the walls. The left-over books, which were hopeless for cramming in, were stacked on the floors by their category. There was barely enough space to move freely because those books cluttered the whole room. On the opposite wall stood our bed, which I had to inch and zigzag my way to sleep under a canopy of white mosquito net protected from an army of nocturnal blood-thirsty mosquitoes.

He told me to sit before him as he handed me one blank sheet of paper and a pencil. His face now turned serious, and

my heart started pounding. I began to shift uncomfortably in my chair. It was not hard to guess what would be happening.

“Now, write any letter that you can memorize, and let me look at it,” said he solemnly.

“Papa...Papa...please,” I stuttered.

The brief glorious triumph I had tasted a short moment ago immediately evaporated. Shame and an intense feeling of self-worthlessness loomed over me again. I had no choice except to let him witness what I feared the most. I was downright insulting him. The man who valued books over wealth, prosperity, and all other earthly possessions had a son who struggled to write one simple letter.

I forced my rust-eaten hand to grab a pencil. Gritting my teeth, I drew one letter on the sheet as slowly and meticulously as possible to delay time to hand it to him.

There it was. No miracle occurred. What appeared plainly on that sheet was a grotesque and distorted letter *Ko Kai*, out of shape and control. My eyes brimmed with stinging tears as my father picked it up and peered down.

The biggest surprise of all was seeing his smile return. I blinked a couple of times, yet my eyes were not mistaken.

“Now try to use your other hand instead,” he said heartily. “The one you always use for holding your slingshot. Try that one.”

“Papa...the whole class writes with the right hand,” I gasped, too stunned to find more to say. “Kun Kru ordered everyone to use their right hand to hold a pencil.”

“It never hurts to try. You know I don’t like to give orders like a commander. I’m asking you to try this just for your own sake, please.”

We were generally brought up to look at our teacher as a towering, venerable figure. A teacher’s words were treated as being absolute. I wondered how he dared to challenge a teacher’s authority over her students. However, to please my father, I started to draw the same letter, switching a pencil to my left

hand. The fear was now overwhelming. I was too afraid to peer down that sheet, and even though I did, I probably saw nothing. The tears were blurring my vision.

“Look! Look!”

I heard him shouting, so I blinked to clear my cloudy vision. I heard him cry again in exuberance. His voice was bursting with pride.

“This is the letter *Ko Kai*. No doubt about it.”

I blinked my eyes again in disbelief. A miracle did happen this time, but I did not know how. The letter’s line suddenly came out sharp and straight, its curve smooth and gentle. It was as good and clear as a six-year-old could make it out.

My face flushed with a thrill of triumph. I tried another letter, at first, with reluctance. Once again, the curve came out curvy, and the line was straight. I tried another and another, each time with increasing confidence while my father was beaming at me.

Have you ever seen a nearly dead fish lying stiff and gasping for air on the dry ground? An instant later, it was picked up by a merciful hand and thrown into the water. In one splash, it vanished from one’s sight. Down there, under deep water, it was alive. It swam and swam tirelessly and freely in every direction that its tail and fins could propel, exploring the soft, cool world that was once again its home.

Freedom at last.

When our exaltation from discovery died down a little, he put me onto his lap as if I were still a little child. His voice turned grave again.

“You are left-handed. But it’s absolutely no problem. The only problem is you do have an ignorant teacher,”

I gasped, but he still used his matter-of-fact tone.

“Well, probably it isn’t her entire fault either if she presumes the only way to write is with the right hand because she has seen that all the time. But let me explain more. According to the latest medical research I have had a chance to read, the right

side of our brain takes control of the left part of the body and vice versa. To make it shorter, the left brain is basically more powerful than the right brain in controlling our anatomy. That explains how the right part of the body of most people, including their right hand, can function better, such as in writing and handling things. But in your case, for reasons still unclear to us, it's all reversing. Your right brain instead becomes dominant, making your left-handed work more handily for you. You are born not only different but also unique, son."

"Are there other left-handed people besides me?" I asked skeptically.

"Of course," he gave me a reassuring smile. "But not so many, only a handful of your kind. And since people always believe in the *more* over the *less*, the right-handed believe they are *right* whereas you are *wrong*."

"So, it means at least I'm not different from everyone in class, right Papa?" I almost smiled with relief. Who wanted to be an outstanding and easy target to pick on?

"Yes and no," my father sighed. "The lefty and the righty have nearly everything in common. The only difference is the mind of a lefty seems more creative, while the mind of a righty is more practical and logical. Well, both can coexist in harmony. However, the world needs both of them to maintain its existence. So, both can't live without one another, just like Zen's Yin-Yang that coexists to balance one another," he completely forgot I had never heard of such words like *Yin-Yang*.

"Tomorrow, I will talk with your teacher when I walk you to school. So, she will be more open-minded about your being lefty. Feel better now, Pran?"

I said yes to him, but I know I did not.

"How about you, Papa? Are you lefty like me?" I asked with hope. I had never noticed which hand he normally used.

"Oh! Unfortunately, I'm not," he shook his head sadly and laughed good-naturedly. "I am just an insignificant right-handed person among millions and millions." Suddenly, it seemed

something was crossing his mind. “Oh, I forgot. Lek is left-handed, too. And he’s a wizard of all handicrafts.” He was talking about the only friend he had.

That night, Kru Riam came to visit me, not in reality, but in the dream. It was an ordinary dream at the beginning, the one that rendered your everyday life. I was seated with the rest of the children in the class; a slate tablet was in our hand, waiting for the approach from our teacher. Then, the nightmare started with a thundering footstep followed by a shriek of laughter so piercing it rattled the ceiling. Everyone looked at one another, and immediately I heard someone shout—*run everybody, run for your life.*

In a flash, the class was deserted. All the children left me behind, alone and terrified beyond words.

Where’s everybody? Don’t leave me alone, please. Is anyone still here?

I heard my hollow voice echoing back and forth, mocking me. Then I gasped. I felt someone was breathing heavily behind my back. And I heard something dripping, dripping to the cement floor. *Plink! Plink! Plink!* I swiftly turned around and winced.

There, right behind me, Kru Riam was standing with her legs spread, her blood-red saliva from chewing betel nuts dripping down the floor. *Plink! Plink! Plink!* Every time she put one step forward, I recoiled another step backward. In one of her hands, she carried a heavy bamboo-woven basket. I could not peer down what was inside because a lid covered that basket. Then, she handed it to me as she opened her hearty smile.

I have something for you and hope you’ll love it. Be a good boy and open it, dear. A little boy like you is always curious, aren’t you?

She coaxed and urged me to take that mysterious basket from her, but she was probably unaware that her blood-red saliva kept on drooling from her gaping mouth and dripping to the floor. *Plink! Plink! Plink!* And that creepy *Plink! Plink! Plink!*

sounds forced me to take more steps farther from her.

Before I was fully aware, all my classmates had come back. I heard their quiet footsteps closer and closer. Now, they were standing in a circle, Kru Riam and I facing each other at the center. There was no way to flee, no way to run. I was in their trap and their grip.

Open it. Don't you want to see a good present from our teacher? Open it. Open it now.

They all growled and snarled in unison while taking a few more steps to threaten me.

I knew I had no choice but to reluctantly open the basket's lid.

When I saw the inside, my hands brushed that basket away in shock. It thumped on the ground, forcing dozens of severed hands to fly out before they lay scattered on the floor.

All were left hands, clean cut to the wrist.

Some were still soaked with blood. Some looked mummified and dried with gore. But one of those hands looked so fresh I saw its blood-riddled fingers still move feebly. Sheer horror gripped my throat and sent icy shivers over my skin. I felt like I was going to faint.

Whoever writes with his wrong hand will meet their fate this way.

As she thundered, her finger pointed to that horrid hand, which was still alive. It started crawling clumsily along the floor, its fingers scrambling blindly to find a way to escape. When she saw the hand was moving away, she swiftly lifted one of her feet and stomped it with all her force. The hand trembled and came to a stop, but its fingers still struggled beneath her shoe, wriggling and wriggling to set the hand free.

I chopped that damned hand myself just minutes ago. Ooh, its fingers are still moving. See that? Now, your turn is coming!

A big, razor-sharp butcher knife appeared out of nowhere. Now, it was in her grip firmly.

I stood paralyzed in the same spot only a few feet away

from her, too terrified to move, let alone to think right. As the butcher knife flashed over my head, I tightly closed my eyes. In a split second, I heard the funny sound of a sharp thing penetrating the air. *Chop! Chop! Chop!* I opened my eyes again, baffled, only to see a jet of blood gushing down my left arm, causing a blood-curdling scene with blood splashing all over the floor and spattering my clothes. Still baffled and numb, I heard my classmates laughing and shouting.

Look! Look! Look what's on the floor now, you dumb ass.

So, I did what they urged me; I peered down and looked. What I saw with my own eyes was my left hand—the wrong hand that sailed—lying stiff and lifeless by my feet like a chunk of dead meat.

Abruptly, my hand jumped up my throat and, with all its attempts, tried to choke me to death.

I opened my mouth and let go of a scream so loud that I felt someone shaking my body hard, pulling me out of the whirlpool of my gruesome nightmare. My eyes were wide open as I suddenly saw my father's face peering at me, his eyes showing concern.

“Are you all right?” asked my father as he stroked my hair, trying to comfort me. “You must have a nightmare. It's only two o'clock in the morning. Let me scratch your back so you can go back to sleep.”

I was fully awake now and still sweating profusely. It was still so lucid, so real, the sight of my severed left hand. But I said nothing to him. I closed my eyes again and pretended to fall asleep. Soon enough, I heard his steady snores. I felt terrible about disturbing my father, who had already collapsed from his day-work exhaustion.

Although he did not tell me in detail about his discussion with Kru Riam, I sensed that it should have worked better or, in other words, failed.

Most people in his contemporary were illiterate. If some males were fortunate enough to enter school, taught mainly by

monks at a temple, their education range was limited to mere spelling, reading, and basic mathematics like addition and subtraction. Science, politics, foreign languages, and so forth were not introduced outside a small royalty and prestigious elite circle. Most females have yet to have a chance to own a pen to practice their writing, let alone lay their eyes on any book. Only pots, pans, threads, and needles were counted as tickets to their domestic achievement.

A career given to a few literate women was limited to teaching small children at the entry level. Yet it made them carry their pride up their shoulders like warriors carrying their weapons. On their warpath, they always craved some bloodshed of any souls who challenged them.

No wonder why my intellectual yet naïve father severely bruised my teacher's ego and sense of superior authority. He might give her some of his well-intentioned lectures on the scientific fact of the influence of a right brain over a left hand, which she probably could not make heads or tails of what he was talking about. Who the hell he was? A Nobody. A nobody who spoke with his big and fancy words meant to hit her at the heart of her self-esteem.

Poor Papa was never aware of her grudge, which fiercely erupted after that day.

The Cold War then started.

She let me sit undisturbed, using my left hand freely and easily to copy words on the blackboard. It was hard to deny that my handwriting was outstanding compared to most of the class. I had no clue whether my left-hand ability surprised or even shocked her. As far as I was concerned, she ignored my handwriting and my presence in the class.

She neither scolded me, asked me questions, nor urged me to participate in any activity with the rest of the class. In certain circumstances, she could no longer avoid my presence. She would speak to me with her icy cold voice and scornful look.

Soon enough, her hostility against me spread across the classroom like a plaque. One by one, the children in my class began to imitate her. No one talked to me.

Everyone, including me, brought their lunch from home. While they clustered together at the far corner, eating and chatting boisterously, I had lunch in my lunch box that Papa had prepared for me at the opposite corner, all alone, and wondered what I had done wrong to deserve this kind of punishment.

I figured they now must hate me for one more reason. I used to be their laughingstock, their ugly duckling. They had enjoyed targeting me for my writing incompetence for quite a while, and one day, I knocked them out hard. I suddenly emerged as a white swan, as if in a fairy tale Papa used to tell me. Not only was I able to write, but I also performed better and faster than most of them, especially the boy Poon who used to pride himself on his writing and spelling progress. Yes, all from that forbidden hand of mine.

So, they ganged up and started attacking me with their new game. As long as I was still in the class, they only smirked, sneered, and hissed at me when they walked past where I was seated. But when the class dismissed, and I tried to sneak out as quietly and unnoticed as possible, they ambushed me with shrieks of laughter as they started chanting.

*Left hand for wiping shit
Right hand for writing verse
Who writes with a left-hand
May his ass rot from our curse*

Over time, they found a new name for me: *Mr. Shit-Hand*.

One day, after the class was dismissed and as I walked home alone because my father said I was big enough, three boys in my class stalked me. They sneakily followed me and then ambushed me midway on my way home. I was totally off guard when two of them suddenly hurled themselves at me, forcing

me to stumble and sprawl on the ground, face down. I felt blood slowly streaking down from my nose, dripping to the ground.

As I struggled to my feet, still shocked and baffled, one of them raised his foot and stomped hard on the back of my hand: *Stomp, stomp, stomp*. A sharp pain shot up my whole arm as if someone was stabbing that part with a sharp knife. Then, I was forced into the kneeling position like a convict who was awaiting his execution for a serious crime he had committed.

The third boy, Poon, the biggest and stoutest one, who had stood folding his arms and acted as an on-looker since the beginning, started to unfold a small wrap made from a strip of banana leaf in his hand. I'd never forgotten that he was the one in the class who had raised his hand and introduced the name 'water buffalo' to the teacher for calling me. As he opened the wrap in an exaggeratedly slow ritual act, the stench of feces suddenly hit my nostrils. While the other boys held me firmly, he jabbed a thin wood stick into a small lump of feces inside the wrap, drew it out, and smeared the feces still glued to the stick thoroughly on my left hand.

"Your shit hand is now finding its match," the boy Poon hissed at me. "That thing inside the banana wrap was freshly dropped from my ass and as shitty as your left hand," he turned to his gang. "Now, let him smell his hand; how disgusting, so he will never work on that hand again, ever."

The other boys, obviously his followers, seized my left arm as their ringleader commanded. Terror froze my body as I saw them pull my smeared hand closer and closer to my face. All I could do was squeeze my eyes shut from that nauseous sight. Suddenly, he raised his hand to make a sign.

"Hold it. I'll give him one more chance," he turned to talk to me for a bargain. "Prostrate yourself and lick my feet and beg. Maybe I'll change my mind and leave you alone if you beg hard enough. Now beg!" He raised his voice to a scream.

I managed to wrestle with all my force to set myself free from their fierce hug, but their hands were now on my throat,

gripping and squeezing until I almost choked.

“Aha! This bastard is so damned stubborn. So, we’ll have him taste my shit for extra punishment. Now, let’s do it,” he shrieked.

With wild, gleeful chortles, the two boys bent my smeared hand until it finally touched my face. The palm of my hand was now rubbing against my face repeatedly. That stench punched me so ferociously that I almost gagged. As they forced open my mouth and watched their chief approaching me with the stick coated with feces, ready to jab it into my mouth, a lump of nausea shot up my throat so forcefully that I had to let out my uncontrollable vomit. Whatever had left inside my stomach now exploded with all its force. With screams of disgust, all the boys shrank back, hastily dropping me to the ground.

Before I could scramble to my feet, they all had fled the scene and disappeared. They were aware that the tide was turning. After this, I could easily take revenge by tainting them with my repugnant hand. They left me alone to squat on the ground and went on emptying my stomach until nothing was left but the bitter-sour taste of bile in my mouth.

At one corner of my eyes, I saw a slight movement in the banana wrap those boys had left on the ground before they fled. It was lying open with Poon’s feces inside. Terror seized me the instant I began to see the things that made the wrap move was a knot of pale pink worms wriggling and crawling inside his feces. Of all the creatures in the world, worms were the most terrifying, especially when these disgusting creatures came right out of someone’s bowel through his feces.

I staggered home and flung myself into the canal, cleaning my body thoroughly. I threw my torn shirt, smeared with his feces and my vomit, into the water and watched the sluggish movement of the current carry it away from my sight. If my father questioned me about the bruise on my face and the sprain on my left hand, I decided to tell him I had clumsily slipped and

fallen on my way home. It wasn't a lie, just a half-truth.

Since that day, I always carried my slingshot with me to school. No more whining. Like an abused dog at bay, dread and frustration could turn someone into a daredevil. I took great caution on my way to and from school. I walked every step so warily, my eyes alert, my ears perking, not a slight movement escaping my awareness. I could sense they always lurked somewhere nearby, behind a clump of trees or even on one of the tree branches, crouching and waiting like a claw of malicious panthers.

Once again, on my way home, as soon as I suspiciously heard a faint rustle behind a bush, a clay bullet flew from my slingshot. The bush squirmed once it hit a target, followed by a muffled cry. Then, some retreating footsteps. And finally, the dead silence. I stared at the slingshot controlled with my left hand in awe and disbelief. The sense of triumph was so overwhelming my whole body was shaken. At least I had let them know that I was not a chicken shit as they had assumed. I fought back and would fight hard. An eye for an eye if I had to. Papa once told me I had fought to the hilt for my breath in my grave the day I was born, so I survived as if a miracle had occurred. And so he named me *Pran*, meaning the breath of life.

The following day in school, I noticed a swollen bruise on the ringleader's forehead. It worked. At least a bump on his forehead kept him away from me for a while. A big bully like him would never tell other children what caused that big bump, and neither would I tell anyone.

I wanted to keep my brief victory secret to savor the sweet taste of vengeance alone, with no need to share it with the world and dilute its zest. For now, my retaliation had surprised him and made him shun. However, the tension stayed, and it kept me on my toes. Any time, any moment, they would gang up like a hungry hyena pack, ready to attack me once again.

As I became a grown man, whenever I recalled this traumatic episode, I realized that under some circumstances, children were

always capable of committing cruelty beyond their presumed naive appearance. Once those primal instincts were triggered, they were not different from a pack of wild animals on their prowl. When they smelled the presence of any weaker child on their way, they ruthlessly jumped and pounced at him. School became their perfect hunting ground, and a weaker, less favored fell into their perfect victim. The only difference was animals hunted their prey for their sole survival, whereas children hunted for a far more sordid and darker purpose. Their purpose was to torture a weaker and defenseless child, physically, mentally, or both, so that they could see the pain and humiliation of their victim. The pain of others brought great pleasure and satisfaction to them. Children were adults in the making. No wonder why the world had to be what it always was since the first human being emerged.

Most of my classmates did it to taunt and bully me, but at least a few did it for fear of displeasing their teacher if they openly showed their sympathies to me.

A girl my age was seated in front of me. She sometimes sneaked some of her hidden candies to me after carefully craning her head to ensure no one had seen her. Her Chinese father owned a grocery store in the nearby market. Yue Liang—meaning ‘The Moon’—was her Chinese name. For a girl, it took quite a brave heart to do that. Smuggling anything to eat in class, including food and candies, was strictly forbidden. If a student were caught red-handed, he or she would be spanked with a long and thick ruler, a girl on her palm, and a boy on his butt. We never had a chance to exchange words, but when no one saw us, Yue Liang would quickly turn her head to flash me a kind, sympathetic smile. She seemed to be my only ally in this small, hostile world. Every day, as our eyes met, we shared a secretive friendship with a hasty smile used as a code of camaraderie.

As little as it seemed, it became sunlight shining through a tiny crack in the icy cold, thick walls that were trapping me

within. I felt warm and not alone anymore.

Whether or not I was too young, I told myself I fell in love with that big-hearted girl. Her rosy, round face with two long pigtails and deep dimples were on my mind most of the time.

But as far as I knew, any good thing only lasted briefly.

One morning, as the class was about to start, I sensed something had changed. Right before me, Yue Liang was seated so still, her posture stiff, her eyes fixed only on the blackboard, and all her attention focused on Kru Riam, who shot a sharp and infuriating glance at her occasionally. She apparently avoided my eye contact for the whole day, no matter how often I tried to signal her with gestures and my whisper.

The following day, she began to act in unison with the rest of the class. At first, with some embarrassment, she tried pretending she had never been aware of my presence in the class. By the end of the week, her transformation was complete. She could walk past me with her eyes so blank that it seemed my existence was not in her field of view.

I accepted that change with tears to shed from losing her for good. But in fact, I was not surprised. Yue Liang had no other choice. Poor girl, I couldn't blame her. Who dared to challenge a teacher whose word was law?

Another factor was added to this case. Using right hand for tasks like writing, was believed to bring auspiciousness to the owner. Therefore, the far inferior left hand was left entirely to handle dirt and impurities. Violation against this superstitious belief might result in bad luck and misfortune throughout one's life, they believed. Since using one's left hand on certain things was strictly forbidden or at least inappropriate for so many, once a left-handed child emerged in school, he would be coerced to convert to the right-handed by all means.

In severe cases, his left hand would be bound to his chair with a rope by a stern teacher, forcing him to use only his sacred one thoroughly. If he were caught using his left hand, the teacher would try to figure out the most effective way to punish him.

Pulling his fingers backward, bending them until tears from pain ran down his face was considered one suitable method. He must be possessed by a demon. He needs to be purified. The teacher would announce. Very few survived such a humiliation. Sooner or later, he would surrender. He would be reborn and emerge a right-handed child like the rest of humanity. The teacher's credentials accrued regardless of the inner damage she had permanently done to that child.

My father had rescued me from that kind of 'exorcism.' He had fought against that conviction, which was, in his view, based purely on superstition, only to pay a more costly price afterward. He won the battle over Kru Riam based on the scientific fact of the coordination between the brain and hands. I believed he must bring with him and show her some medical books printed in English, even though he knew she did not understand a word, only to prove this indisputable fact.

But it was me who'd lost the actual combat in my classroom. I became the Untouchable, no different from the one at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. By close contact, by sharing a meal and a roof, or more ridiculously, if an untouchable's feet stepped on the shadow of a higher caste person intentionally and accidentally likewise while they were walking past one another, the person of higher caste would be instantly contaminated and doomed by that untouchable's impurity. Consequently, the poor untouchable's life would be in grave danger in allegedly committing both a severe crime and an unredeemable sin.

I had sat at my desk, invisible and cut off from the small yet active world surrounding me, for almost a month as I waited for my father to enroll me in another school. Each day was nothing but the addition of unrelenting torment.

Then came the day when the gang of three found a new way to insult me, besides calling me a shit-eater. Now they recited a riddle every time they passed me.

*Let's guess, who is he
Whose father is a wimp
Whose mother a whore
Himself a bastard to his core?
Let's guess, who is he?*

My father wanted me to leave Kru Riam's place right after his failed attempt. He planned to enroll me in Bangkok's most prominent Catholic school, which he told me he had attended when he was young. However, I had to wait for approval from the administration staff, which took quite a while. Though he knew how frantic I felt with each passing day, he kept asking me to be patient, attend class, and hold on to that situation for my best benefit.

"Papa, now they start calling me Mr. Shit-Wiping Hand," I wailed. "I can't take it anymore, please Papa. Let me wait at home for a new school."

"If your hand is shitty, but your head is not. For me, that only counts."

"Why does everyone hate me? I wish..." I swallowed the sobbing, "I wish Mama could have come to bring me with her. Maybe no one will pick on me up there."

I suddenly broke into hysterical tears. And my breakdown startled me. At school, I tried to keep my composure in front of everyone. I walked tall and straight, plugging my vulnerability with my nonchalant and impassive face and lying to all of them as well as to myself that all the unfair and cruel treatment did not concern me in the slightest. Until that terrible feeling had come out and become the actual words, I had never been aware of how close I was to the hysterical outburst.

"I want Mama to bring me with her...Papa."

His face suddenly darkened. So, I stopped my whimper, too stunned to see his tears welling up his eyes. But before they ran down his face, he swiftly wiped them in time with the back of his hand. I had never seen his tears, not even once, so I threw

myself into his arms in great alarm. We huddled and wept together, I loudly, he silently.

“Never say that again. Promise me,” he crushed me onto his chest, his voice so strange it frightened me, “I won’t let anyone take you from me, your mother or not.”

After collecting himself, his voice became softened.

“Pran, don’t hate anyone. You don’t have to love everyone but don’t hate any of them. You hear that?”

“But...they are so mean,” I shivered, “they are all bad people out there, Papa. You have no clue how bad they—”

*Whose father is a wimp
Whose mother a whore,
Himself a bastard to...*

I was glad he could not hear what was echoing so deafeningly inside my head.

I never expected to see him nodding, a defeated sign, he admitted, although grudgingly. He might still fear that accepting that fact would significantly impact and tear apart the eggshell wall defending his world.

“Yes, you are right,” he managed a feeble smile, his face surprisingly saddened. “They are mean and vile... I know.”

He lowered his voice to a whisper and seemed again absorbed in his thoughts. Our conversation suddenly lapsed into another long silence. He moved his gaze to a far distance through an open window, across the front yard, the tamarind tree by the fence, the canal, and far beyond, his eyes so bleak and his body slightly shuddering. I wondered who he was thinking of at that moment.

Oh! Who had ever harmed him? Terrifying him? Who had still deeply injured such a saintly person like him for so long? I wondered.

At least he admitted that bad people did exist.

After a long pause, he finally came back to me. This time,

he managed to hold his voice more steadily.

“Yes, there are bad and even evil people. But I want you to have gratitude for your life, that you were born a good human being instead of an evil one. Because a lot of them weren’t. Instead of being outraged at them, you should feel guilty for having better chances than they do. Had anyone ever had his own choice before he entered this world, do you think he would have chosen to be a good or a bad one?”

“A good one, I think,” I muttered darkly, yet my eyes clouded with doubt.

“That’s why you’re lucky. No one has a choice. They have to be what Fate has chosen for them. Perhaps Fate flipped the coin before each of us was born. If a head side turned up, you’re lucky; if a tail, you’re inevitably born evil.” He chuckled at his imagery, but there was no amusement in his voice.

“Papa, what if you’re wrong? What if bad people are instead the lucky ones?”

Now, I was thinking of Poon, the bad boy in the class who suddenly gave me that weird idea and an urge to slip it out. And at the corner of my mind, I couldn’t help including one more, Kru Riam.

“Papa, bad people can do whatever they want, like hurting people, and they never feel bad about doing it. Aren’t they lucky? But, oh my! I am not that lucky because though I really want to hurt someone, I feel bad to hurt him even though he deserves it. Just like indulging the bad to go on hurting people because he knows we won’t hurt him back. Sometimes...” I gulped. “I wonder what’s so good about being good.”

It seemed what I said had stunned him. He kept staring at me, a strange expression crossing his face.

“Papa, is something wrong?” I was alarmed at his strange expression.

“Where did you get that idea from, the idea that bad people are lucky?”

“But aren’t they lucky?” I whispered. I felt scared now at

his grim voice.

“Um...I know you try to explain to me that the good are born prisoners of their own mind while the bad are born free to roam everywhere and feel free to take everything from imprisoned people like us. Now, listen to me. Of all the creatures on Earth, only humans possess this unique quality. Can you guess what quality I’m talking about?”

“We are smarter, right?”

“No. I mean a quality that enables us to know right from wrong while all other creatures are guided only by their impulse to help them survive. Now, I’m talking about ‘conscience’.”

He went on with a more serious tone. He probably forgot that I understood less than half of what he was discussing with me, not to mention a grand word like ‘conscience.’ Poor Papa was desperate to share his insight into things with someone. But he needed someone his equal to discuss such a substantial topic with, not barely a seven-year-old boy like me. However, he had only me. So, I tried to please him by absorbing it at my best.

“I read that humans are the latest species that emerged onto earth. We are different from the other animals that appeared in this world earlier. It’s because we are a single species that has developed a conscience, although animals’ impulse still occupies parts of our brains. However, our consciences are just budding and need to mature more. But the main point is that the growth of the conscience differs for each individual. Many are still far behind others, making their minds somewhat close to the level of animals, which means they have little conscience or none. The worst is that those conscience-free men become dangerous to fellow humans like us. Because their primitive, animal-prone minds are covered by their human shells. There’s no distinct sign to warn from their looks telling the difference between them and us. And this is why the good and the evil mix perpetually in this human race. The evil always takes, and the good always gives,” he sighed. “Perhaps this is what we’re meant for in the first place and will remain that way till the end

of this human race. Or maybe this is a balance that is set for humans. Or maybe both good and evil have no values to begin with. Yes, you may be right, and I'm wrong... But what if you're wrong and I'm right."

He kept on, his face more and more saddened and despaired.

"No matter what, one thing is sure; everyone comes into this world with a mind and a body he never asked for in the first place..." he sighed deeply. "So, don't hate any of them. No one chooses who they become," mumbled him again as he closed his eyes to hide his tears. "Promise me you won't let these bad creatures set alighted your hate. Pran, they need our pity more than our hate. If I am not around one day, remember my words: hate doesn't destroy the hated as much as it destroys the hater. I know someone... whose soul was badly destroyed. No one did that to her. Only her own hatred destroyed her..." he was shuddering. "Someone who had once told me exactly what you just told me: conscience-free people are luckier because they are carefree to hurt anyone, while good people are perpetually paralyzed by their own conscience."

His voice was nearly inaudible now. He turned his head so I would not see his eyes. Yet I could feel his agony.

His sudden change started to intrigue me.

"Who is she you're talking about, Papa?"

He paused and then firmly shook his head.

"Oh! It doesn't matter. Just someone you don't know, and I'm glad you don't. But what matters the most is not begrudge anyone. Promise me. Now!"

After my firm promise made him more relaxed, my heart rebelliously shouted. *But they deserve my hate, Papa.* I vowed that no day would pass without my hate for anyone who deserved it.

At the end of that week, he withdrew me from Kru Riam's school after I'd finally decided to tell him that a group of bad boys in school called me a bastard. That word melted down his

determination to see me staying in that place and learning to be more resilient and stronger. However, I skipped the worst part of what they had called Mama. I couldn't imagine its consequence if I ever let him know they called her whore.

"Papa, why does Kru Riam hate me? She encouraged the whole class to bully me. Why does my left hand bother her that much? Isn't it unusual?"

I saw a flash in his eyes. An instant later, it had gone, leaving his eyes relaxed and calm as ever. If he hadn't known why before, he must now have known the reason. But whatever he knew would never unfold to me. It seemed to be his way to solve any problem. He would shroud a mystery by adding a new one on top to cover it, heaping them up more and more until they grew into a staggering, unreachable height.

Was it possible that my father was really a wimp, a namby-pamby, as those bullies had made fun of him?

* * * * *

"*Lust*," his eyes were piercing me. "I need *that*. The primary source of my diet that has kept me *alive* is the fiery lust from all of you."

"Why?" My expression was still as blank as ever.

"Lust is vital to me as the protein is to you. I use it for my life force." he nodded. "I am so fortunate that lust is the most abundant food source. Why? Anywhere on this planet, if you find two human beings, there you find lust."

His voice was growing more insidious.

"But lust alone can't provide my overall well-being. I need more various stuff to keep my nutrients in balance."

Little by little, I began to see the whole picture of this mysterious Stalker, which was once the scattering pieces of some jigsaw puzzle to me.

"So, I need your *hatred* and *wrath*, just like you need carbohydrates, to generate my energy."

"So do our *greed*, our *fear*, and *despondence*..." I added.

He looked pleased. "They work as minerals and vitamins that boost all my function systems, enabling me to stay immune and invincible to all odds."

"Is that all we are for you?" I asked incredulously.

"In a nutshell, you are my food. Nothing more."

"You *eat* me?" My question was blunt. But I couldn't find any that sounded better.

"Yes, only that I don't eat you as you eat all your food in your primitive process. It's your toxic and negative thoughts that I consume and digest. More accurately, I live on human beings' *miseries*. And now you know humans' *miseries* and *sufferings* do happen for a reason."



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Among her other published works are the novels *Till the Last Breath* and *Once Upon a Dream* and three short story collections: *Whispers from the Other World*, *The Dream Digger*, and *The Message in the Box*.

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