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(Non-fiction)



Preuksa Mata

Suffering Mother

By
Chanwalee

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Translated by Anchalee Kongrut

Ton Pai, the Bamboo Mother of Devotion

I stood up and offered a welcoming smile when the father of Dok Pai, a young man with a tinge of melancholia in his eyes, and the grandmother, a woman with the wrinkles of age on her face, brought Dok Pai (Bamboo Blossom) to greet me.

“Dok Pai. Now you must say hello to the doctor.”

“*Sawasdee ka.*” Dok Pai raised her chubby, round little hands and pressed them together as a sign of respect. The girl’s dimples popped up as she flashed a smile.

I patted her head gently while her father kissed the girl’s plump cheek.

“Does she have a vaccination appointment today?”

“Yes, a vaccine shot and a routine check-up on her development,” the father replied.

“It’s hard to believe,” said the grandmother. “Dok Pai is so smart and easy to take care of now. This girl was so tiny when she was born.”

The father’s face grew sad; his eyes turned red as if about to

tear up. He gave the girl another kiss.

“You miss the girl’s mum, don’t you?” said the old lady, eyes growing solemn and starting to well up.

My eyes did the same. I knew Ton Pai, the little girl’s mother, well. Time could not erase her memory. For me she was an example of selfless generosity and devotion.

My sense of time and space disappeared when I stared at little Dok Pai. I was brought back to the past, seeing what happened one year ago.

Ton Pai, or Bamboo, was 24 when she travelled from a nearby province to sign up with me for prenatal care and delivery.

Ton Pai was already five months pregnant. She had had checks at the community public health office when she was two months pregnant. The young mother was determined to have the baby. She meticulously recorded her menstrual cycle. She had been waiting for a baby for a long time.

Ton Pai had been married for 19 years and four months. After the long years of waiting, the baby was finally going to arrive.

She came to see me because she suffered from problems eating – alternate nausea, indigestion and constipation.

Ton Pai was a petite woman, only 150 centimetres tall, with a weight just over 40 kilograms. She was bony and only the enlarged belly suggested impending motherhood.

The mother-in-law who accompanied Ton Pai shared more details about her husband’s daughter.

“Ton Pai has always been thin. She weighed only 42 kilograms when she got married. It took years for her to finally get pregnant. Then when she did, it turned out that morning sickness upset her appetite and digestion and made her lose more weight. I brought her here to check whether the baby is strong enough.”

“I try to eat. I really do,” said the expectant mother. “I eat

because I'm so afraid that the baby will be weak. But I end up vomiting."

I used my hands and the ultrasound scanner to inspect her abdomen. The 25-week-old fetus weighed 700 grams.

"The mother is too thin, but the baby looks quite strong. It kicks very hard and seems lively. Its weight is within a healthy level," I explained to Ton Pai, her husband and her mother-in-law.

"What a relief!" the mother-in-law said. Ton Pai and her husband finally smiled.

After scanning the head of the baby in the womb, I moved the scanner to other parts of the belly. Suddenly I frowned, because the scanner showed an uneven object on the left side of the uterus.

I moved the scanner in all directions, trying to find out what it was.

The ultrasound image showed an object located in the colon.

"Do you suffer any stomach pain?" I asked Ton Pai.

"Yes," her mother-in-law answered for her. "She's had frequent stomach pains since she got pregnant. Ton Pai usually has indigestion and constipation. Sometimes it takes her seven days to manage a bowel movement." The old lady did take good care of her daughter-in-law.

"And how do you solve the stomach problem?"

"We just take the medicine prescribed by the local health care office," the mother-in-law said.

"It appears that Ton Pai has a digestion problem," I said, adding a request: "I need to inspect her anus."

The result of the examination weighed me down.

Since the days of being a medical student, I'd known that a patient develops cancer when there is a tumour in the tissue of the colon. The tumour protrudes from the colon wall like a bookshelf. A colonic shelf.

I found such a protruding tumour in Ton Pai's anus. I was certain that Ton Pai had cancer. She may have had cancer for a long time, since the tumour was not small. Indeed, it had grown big enough to partially block the anus.

Ton Pai was too young. Giving birth at 24 was young, much less getting cancer.

It is not an easy disease to explain. I simply told the young mother: "I found a tumour in your belly. This tumour might be in the colon. You need to stay at hospital for treatment. I'll send you to a surgeon to take care of you." My heart grew heavy.

"Surgeon ... You're saying she might need an operation?" the mother-in-law asked.

"Yes. You need a surgeon to remove the tumour from the colon."

"I need to undergo surgery? Is it going to affect my baby? I've only been pregnant for five months." Pai did not seem too concerned for her own health; it was the baby's health that worried her.

"Just try to be calm. We need to investigate it more so we know what the best solution is." I tried to avoid Ton Pai's question.

I invited the mother-in-law and husband for a private consultation. I was more straightforward this time. "From the diagnosis, I suspect that Ton Pai might have colon cancer."

"Cancer?" the husband blurted out, his voice shaking.

The mother-in-law covered her head with her hands, fingers stroking her temples. "Is it curable?"

"It's quite serious. She needs to get medical treatment right away." I did not answer the mother-in-law's question.

"So what are we going to do?"

"I'll send her case to the surgery department."

"Surgery! So Pai will have to undergo an operation?"

"I don't know if an operation is required at this stage. We

need to consult with the surgeon first to find out what the best treatment might be.”

When I was very young, my favourite entertainment was *likay* – traditional Thai theatre. One of the lines from *likay* is “time flies when you are living in a dream”. I thought that this was very true.

Three weeks later, I saw Ton Pai again. I hardly recognized her now. Ton Pai was skin and bones, her weight down to 36 kilograms. Her cheeks looked hollow, the flesh receding from her face. She was worn out; walking was almost impossible. She was being fed intravenously. Her abdomen was attached to a plastic excretory bag to help with voiding the bowels and urinating.

“Doctor ... I know I have cancer of the colon. Dr Naet tells me that I’m seriously ill and need to have an operation and chemotherapy right away. But If I do that, I might not live long enough to see my baby. I know my condition is serious but I need more time to feed the baby until it grows old enough. I asked Dr Naet to operate and open my belly so I can excrete and urinate through my stomach,” Ton Pai said with a faltering voice. Tears welled up in her eyes, yet she managed to smile. She lightly touched her growing belly, which seemed to sway as something moved. “Look. The baby is kicking.”

I ran out of words to say. All I could do was touch her arm in an attempt to console her.

The faces of her husband and mother-in-law were strained when I saw them later. The mother-in-law said: “Ton Pai is so stubborn. She refuses to get treatment, either an operation or chemotherapy. She says she chooses the baby. The doctor told her if she doesn’t have the operation right away, she’ll die. My daughter-in-law insists the safety of the baby should come first and other matters can be discussed later.”

Visiting patients in a terminal stage is a depressing experience for everyone, including doctors. I did not want to see Ton Pai in this condition. Two weeks later, Dr Naet called me.

“Dr Chan. You must come see Ton Pai. We don’t know what to do. Her condition is very serious but the baby is still alive and kicking.”

“I’ll be there right away,” I said.

This time Ton Pai was in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). Her gaunt face was covered with an oxygen mask. Facial flesh and muscles were disappearing. Her eyes bulged from her bony face. Luck had forsaken this young woman and her condition was deteriorating. Cancer had already spread to her lungs and liver. She breathed with difficulty, and needed a device to help her with respiration. She had been pregnant for 20 weeks.

I inspected the baby with the ultrasound scanner. The baby weighed 1,400 grams.

Dr Naet whispered: “The mother’s condition is really serious. She’ll die faster if we do a Caesarean section and take the baby out of the womb.”

That also meant the baby and mother would die together without a Caesarean section. Both of us understood this harsh reality, but neither of us dared say it.

“Doc,” Ton Pai murmured. Her lips were parched and pale. Her voice faltered. “Help ... my baby. Please help my baby ... survive.”

I ran out of words. All I could say was: “Don’t worry about your baby. Stay calm and relaxed.”

“You must ... promise ... to help ... my ... child,” Ton Pai continued.

What could I do? I simply nodded.

I walked out of the ICU to consult with the mother-in-law and husband. Both insisted Ton Pai had to be saved. That decision prevented me from performing a Caesarean operation.

One week passed.

During the night I received a phone call from Dr Naet. The doctor updated me on Ton Pai's deterioration. She could no longer breathe by herself. But the doctor saw amniotic fluid running down from her womb. Dr Naet asked me to come to the hospital immediately.

As soon as I arrived, I knew that Ton Pai was going to give birth. I asked for permission from the husband and the mother-in-law. This time, they permitted the operation, to save the baby's life.

As I prepared for the operation, a miracle happened. Without consciousness, Ton Pai started to deliver her baby.

I inspected the womb. The opening was only six centimetres wide but I already saw the baby's head. Normally the opening of the uterus had to be at least 10 centimetres wide for the baby to come out. But Ton Pai was very small, and the baby had to come out despite the narrowness of the uterine passage.

The nurse prepared for the operation in case I had to do a C-section in the ICU, not in an operating room as was customary.

The mother was unconscious. A respiratory tube protruded from her mouth. Yet she dutifully performed her motherly role. Only three pushes, and the baby came out to see the world.

Even though the mother was unresponsive, I lifted the baby up and spoke to her. "Ton Pai, you are a mother now. You now have a daughter and the baby girl is very strong."

The baby cried out. Perhaps I imagined it but I saw tears welling up in the corners of Ton Pai's closed eyes.

Before losing consciousness, the mother had ordered that her daughter be nicknamed Dok Pai.

Dok Pai weighed only 1,600 grams and needed to be kept in the incubator, which was being injected with extra oxygen. Yet the baby girl did not need a respiratory tube because her lungs were active and strong, thanks to the liquid nutrition given

to the baby after the mother lost consciousness. The mother's unconsciousness might have helped the baby's lungs work better.

It is a fact that prematurely born babies with a substandard weight will grow stronger with breast milk. Drinking breast milk increases the survival rate. But no one dared mention it because the mother was dying. Someone ventured the idea that Dok Pai could get breast milk from other mothers. But before we sought out a source of breast milk, a phone call came in to the paediatric ward from the ICU.

"I need to consult with you. The mother has a high fever. The doctor found that she's suffering from an engorged breast. Can you bring the baby to the mother so she can breastfeed?"

The nurse asked for my opinion. Ton Pai had not received any medication or treatment that would affect her breast milk, so I simply said: "Of course. Bring the baby in. Ton Pai can breastfeed her daughter. Nothing in the world can stop a mother from breastfeeding her child."

The sight of a mother in a coma, with a nurse helping a tiny baby to drink from the mother's breasts, can bring anyone to tears.

It is almost impossible to imagine that the dying Ton Pai dutifully performed this maternal role for 10 days before peacefully leaving the world.

Her gaunt face looked serene, without any sign of struggle.

I have utmost respect for the heart of a mother like Ton Pai. She is an example of the miracle of life and an astonishing person. She performed her motherly duty until her dying breath.

I call this Preuksa Mata the Mother of the Bamboo, because bamboo is beautiful and very strong. A grove of bamboos is a stunning sight. And bamboo is very useful; almost every part can be used as food. But we know that bamboo will wither and die

when the flowers start budding from the trunk.

A bamboo keeps on reproducing even though the emergence of flowers means the end of its life. A bamboo might be happy and welcome death if this helps spread its seeds throughout the land. Such a role is no different to that of Ton Pai, the Mother of Devotion who chose to give her life in exchange for the baby she brought into the world.

Phayom, the White Meranti Mother of Sacrifice

I have encountered many mothers of teenage girls who get pregnant. They come for examinations to find out whether their daughters are pregnant. Even when it is their idea to bring the girls in, they seem unable to face it when the test comes back positive. Some ask me to confirm that their daughters are not pregnant. Some come just because their girls disappeared from home one night. One mother dragged her daughter in because she saw a boy lying on her bed. A daughter's swelling belly or weight gain are sufficient grounds for a pregnancy test. When they do learn their daughters are pregnant, many mothers can't handle the truth. Some are shocked, some burst into tears or even faint. There are those who hit their daughters right in front of me. Some manage to address their daughters politely while others scream and make a scene. Usually there are some sarcastic remarks: "Maybe I raised you too well. We tried to give you everything you wanted. Maybe you'd have been a good girl if you'd been caned like the neighbour's daughter." Or: "Don't you love your

father and mother? Don't you have mercy on your parents? How can you do this to us?" "Do you realize the magnitude of the situation you've put yourself in? Do you know how this mess will ruin your future?" "Do you have any idea what you did? Do you know what will happen to your future?" "Do you want to see your mother die right in front of you? If you watch me die, maybe you'll become a good girl!" "Do you know what will happen to your future? You're hopeless!" "Why did you become such a bad girl?" Or: "Be as bad as you can be. I'll take you out of school. No more education." And more. Yet no curses or barbs emerged from the mouth of the mother of a girl named Benchaphon.

When I first met Benchaphon she came with a handsome guy with light skin who was tall and older than her. This 24-year-old boyfriend brought her to the clinic for a pregnancy test.

"I'm bringing my girlfriend for an ultrasound pregnancy test," he told the nurse.

After filling out the documents, measuring blood pressure and weight, the nurse led Benchaphon and her boyfriend to meet me in the testing room.

Benchaphon was a good-looking girl with a slender figure. I waited until they sat down before asking questions.

"How long have you been pregnant?"

Though the question was directed at the girl, her boyfriend answered. "I don't know. But she must be pregnant because her belly has grown bigger."

"Did you take a urine test?"

"No. But I'm sure she's pregnant," the boyfriend said with confidence.

I had seen cases like this before. Older men married to much younger girls with the consent of the girls' parents. I did not suspect any irregularity here. However I did bring up the girl's age.

“You’re too young to become a mother. Only 14! How many months ago did your menstruation stop?”

The girl shook her head.

“My question is whether you stopped menstruating or not? And if so, how many months ago? Do you remember?”

“I can’t remember,” Benchaphon responded naively.

“In that case, I’ll use the ultrasound scanner as a pregnancy test. I’ll explain it to both of you, but please look at the monitor first.”

The ultrasound confirmed that Benchaphon had been pregnant for five months. The result is reliable because it measures the size of the fetus in the womb.

The guy did not show any emotion, neither signs of happiness nor disappointment. Benchaphon, though, became alarmed. Her face turned pale. Despite my presence, she turned to her boyfriend. “Phi Tas. I’m pregnant! What are we going to do?”

Even though I sat in front of them, he raised his hand, prepared to hit the girl’s ear. I realized then that the boyfriend was not a good, decent guy at all. He lowered his hand, and responded curtly: “You just have to raise the baby, you silly cow!”

I stared at the boyfriend. The situation had grown uncomfortable. How could he be so rude to a girlfriend who was so much younger? I looked the ultrasound over again, and asked the boyfriend to leave. “Could you please step outside for a moment? I need to have my assistant clean the gel from the girl’s belly.”

Once Tas left the room, I fired more questions at Benchaphon.

“Are you married?”

“Not yet.”

“Do you still live with your parents?”

“Yes.” The girl frowned.

“Do you dad and mum know that you’re pregnant?”

"Not yet."

"Did they know you have a boyfriend?"

"Nope."

"Benchaphon ... I don't know how long you've been going out with Tas. But you're pregnant now ... You're going to be a mother. The two people who love you more than anything and are ready to forgive you, or even die for you, are your parents. I've been a doctor for many years. My experience tells me that Tas is violent and hot-tempered. Do you know that your pregnancy might be against the law because you're underage? My sincere advice is that you have to tell your parents you're pregnant."

The girl nodded.

There was a knock on the door. The nurse came in to say: "Doctor, the boyfriend of the patient asks to come in."

Tas came in and hurled abuse right away. "Why is it taking so long? Are you pulling any tricks on me?"

Tas grasped the girl's arm and dragged her out of the room.

One week later, Phayom, Benchaphon's mother, brought the girl in again to sign up for prenatal care and delivery.

"When did you learn your daughter was pregnant?" I asked Phayom.

"Today."

I gazed into her face and saw tears well up in her eyes. The mother appeared worn out.

"So I came to see you to sign her up. I wish I'd known much earlier so I could have signed her up for your care right from the start. Is it too late? Can we still feed and nurture the baby?"

"Late is better than never," I reassured. I was surprised that Benchaphon's mother possessed such grace under fire. She could handle it calmly, without whining or becoming dramatic. "Did you know that your daughter had a boyfriend?" I asked, fishing

for information.

Phayom used a handkerchief to wipe away tears. “Not a bit. I’m clueless. I’m shocked. All of a sudden I’m going to have a son-in-law. But what can I do? Whatever will be, will be. We love our daughter, so we need to love her husband. I only have one daughter. It won’t cause me much trouble if I have to take care of a grandchild. If Benchaphon wants to continue her education, she can do that after having the baby. If she doesn’t, she can become a farmer like her parents.”

“Did your daughter’s boyfriend come with you?” The registration process required a blood test from the husband.

“He can’t make it this time. He’s going to get ordained. What a nice guy! He wants to follow the tradition of entering the monkhood before getting married.”

“How long will he be ordained for?”

“Seven days.”

“Seven days is not very long.”

“No. It’s too short. He’d stay in the temple longer to study and understand dharma, but he’s in quite a hurry to get married to my girl.”

Phayom began sharing her life story. “Benchaphon is my only child. My family and my husband’s family also don’t have many children. I’m an only child and so is my husband. We both come from farming families. But we don’t have money problems. We have a large property and 100 *rai* of rice fields. We also have a tractor for ploughing the paddies. We harvest our own fields and also do harvesting in other fields. We harvest the year round because our land is blessed with a lot of water.

“I can’t believe my daughter got pregnant. It’s hard to even imagine she has a boyfriend. She’s a diligent student and a very obedient daughter. She’s the domestic type, hardly hanging out with friends. If she does go out she’s always accompanied by parents or relatives. After school she comes home at the same

time every day. She never had any boyfriend. She might look like a budding teenager but she's just a little girl. I can't believe she got pregnant."

After completing the registration, I asked Benchaphon to come back in two weeks.

Phayom and the girl came to see me again, but a month later.

"Please accept my apologies for being late. We ran into trouble."

"Don't worry. But what happened?" Benchaphon had sacred threads tied to each of her arms, so I said: "You just completed the wedding ceremony?" In this town, a marriage ceremony required the tying of sacred threads around the wrists of the bride and groom.

"No, we just completed a rite to dispel bad luck," Phayom answered. I decided to close my mouth.

The check-up showed that the baby's growth and development were healthy. Then I asked Phayom: "Where is the father?"

The "father" in question was Tas, the father of the baby in Benchaphon's womb. But Phayom thought I meant Sa-ngar, her husband and Benchaphon's father.

"Sa-ngar is going to the police station."

"Why does he have to see the police?"

"To press charges against our son-in-law. So he'll be kept in prison longer."

Seeing my shock, Phayom decided to tell me the whole saga.

"Doctor, I never imagined my daughter could be so naive and so terrified at the thought Tas would hurt her parents. When Tas sent his aunt to act as a suitor, asking for our permission to get married, my only question was whether they loved each other. My daughter didn't say a word, but Tas said they loved each other. But he said he had to get ordained first to make merit

for his parents who had died many years ago, and after that they could get married.

“But people told me that Tas is a crook. The guy asked his aunt to act as go-between, but not because he loves my daughter. Someone told us Tas has been saying he wants to get married so he can live comfortably for the rest of his life. Because his father and mother-in-law would be wealthy. And the sooner his wife’s parents die, the quicker he’ll get rich. Ah ... isn’t it cruel to hear such things? But his aunt agreed to act as a go-between – on the condition that Tas enter the monkhood before getting married.

“Tas’s ordination ceremony was lavish. His aunt hosted the rites but all the expenses were covered by me. A rumour spread again that Tas boasted his in-laws were rich and gave him lots of money to squander. He never consulted us about the expenses. He only came to get reimbursed.”

Before Tas completed his week in the monkhood, trouble began. Four people paid Tas a visit at the temple. The first was a man named Prasit, the second was his wife Anong and the third was their daughter Poom. The fourth was a police lieutenant.

Prasit pressed police charges against Tas for raping Poom. But the story was much more complex. Before Tas raped Poom, he had had an affair with Anong, the girl’s mother. Prasit found out about the affair and separated from his wife, giving Tas more opportunity to come to Anong’s place. One day he raped and impregnated Poom. After the girl got pregnant, Tas left Anong and got involved with Benchaphon.

The police insisted Tas had to disrobe and defend the rape charges in court. “You can no longer stay at the temple,” they said. “You have to leave the monkhood to fight the charges. Prasit and Anong allege that you raped their daughter and she is seven months pregnant. Medical tests have confirmed the pregnancy. If you deny the charges, Poom will take a DNA test to confirm that you’re the father of the baby.”

After the police forced Tas to leave the monkhood, Prasit paid a visit to Phayom and her husband.

Even before Prasit's visit, many relatives had warned Phayom about the marriage.

"Tas boasted in a bar that he'll make you and your husband know what hell is. Do you still want to take him into your family as your son-in-law?"

"Tas has impregnated many women and has always denied responsibility. He's taking Benchaphon as his wife not because he loves her but because he plans to take all your wealth. Don't fall into his trap. If you let Benchaphon marry him, the girl will suffer for the rest of her life."

Phayom knew these warnings were well intentioned, yet she simply responded: "I can't meddle in the married life of my daughter. Benchaphon has made up her mind. We're willing to bear the consequences for the sake of our daughter's happiness. We've worked so hard for our daughter and everything that belongs to us is hers. We'll give her anything, even if it means we have to suffer."

Prasit then came to see Phayom and her husband, to tell his side of the story.

Prasit began awkwardly. "I don't know how to tell you this. I never imagined that my wife ... Anong ... could become such an indecent person. She had an affair but that wasn't enough. She let her lover ruin our daughter's life in our own home. I'll get to the point," Prasit blurted out, his eyes turning red. "My daughter Poom is seven months pregnant."

"Poom's been pregnant for seven months?" Phayom said in alarm.

"And Tas ... is the father?" Sa-ngar asked in a faltering voice.

"Yes. Poom insists that Tas raped her in her own home. Poom didn't dare tell anyone because she knew her mother loved

Tas very much and would be hurt. And Tas threatened that he would kill everyone in her family if she ever told anyone. But I refuse to let him have his way when I know the truth. I'm seeking justice by the law, and asked the police to force Tas to disrobe so they could arrest him. Now Tas is in jail."

"But how can you be so sure Tas is the father of Poom's child?" Phayom asked.

"Phayom ... we're neighbours. I believe you know Poom quite well. Poom has never left home without someone accompanying her. She's never gone out with a boy and never had a boyfriend. And Poom provided the police with all the details of the rape during the re-enactment of the crime."

"But why are you sharing the dirty laundry of your family with us?" Sa-ngar was still dumbfounded.

"Sa-ngar, everyone in the village knows Tas is to become your son-in-law. I came to convince you to press charges against him as well. I don't know much about the law, but both Benchaphon and Poom are 14-year-old minors," Prasit said angrily. "Even if it's consensual, it's still against the law to have sex with minors. The only exception is if the couple get married. But I'm convinced that Benchaphon and Poom are in the same situation. They didn't have any choice but to comply with Tas's demands. Did you know Tas pointed a gun at my daughter's head?"

After listening to the story, Phayom broke her silence. "Prasit, I understand your feelings and I'm so sorry that such a terrible thing could happen in your family. But I don't know what Benchaphon will do or even what she'll think of all this. My husband and I love our daughter no less than you love yours. My daughter is planning to marry Tas, and I'm afraid this story will break her heart. I don't know what to do with this request to press rape charges."

"Phayom, our families have known each other for a long

time. I have to insist that you press charges against Tas, but not because I want revenge – even though Tas had an affair with my wife and raped my girl. The truth is that Tas is a very dangerous person who needs to be put in prison for the rest of his life. He'll continue destroying the lives of many women and girls if he walks away unpunished."

Tears fell from Phayom's eyes as she told me the story. "I talked to my husband about it. I said I hoped he would share my sentiment that we respect our daughter's decision. Even if Tas is a terrible person and does awful things to others, we need to accept him into our family if he treats our daughter with love and respect. Taking him in as a son-in-law might be a sin, but we'll accept this sin if it makes our daughter happy."

Phayom went on to tell the story to her daughter, revealing that Tas had raped Poom, who was now seven months pregnant. She told Benchaphon that her boyfriend was in jail facing rape charges, and asked: "Do you want me to help Tas?"

"Is he still in jail?" Benchaphon asked.

Phayom did not understand the question. "Tas is being kept in prison. But we might be able to help him. We can find him a good lawyer or pay bail to get him out."

"Being in prison means he can't walk away, right?"

"Yes, my dear. But Mum and Dad will go to get him out because he is your man and you love him."

Benchaphon screamed and wept. "Why do you want to help him? I don't love him, I hate him! I'm so afraid of him. He kidnapped me when I was waiting for the car in front of my school. He put a gun to my head, raping me and beating me. I had to do what he wanted."

Phayom and her husband were shocked. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Mother ... Tas always carries that gun. He told me he'll kill everyone in my family if I tell this secret. He kept threatening

me. I was so afraid that he'd kill you both, so I decided to hide everything."

After hearing Benchaphon's side of the story, Phayom and her husband wanted to run to the prison to kill Tas.

The couple tried to calm down. Sa-ngar said calmly: "After we press charges against Tas, I'll try to find a good abortion clinic. The baby would be a bastard. This child would shame our family."

Phayom looked at her husband, before exclaiming: "Our daughter is five months pregnant! Isn't it dangerous?"

Sa-ngar shook his head. "Didn't you hear what Prasit said? He said he and his wife had decided on an abortion for Poom as they wouldn't be able to tolerate seeing Tas's baby. If Poom can get an abortion, our daughter can too – Poom's been pregnant for seven months already."

Phayom touched her husband's arm. "You want us to make our daughter get an abortion. And that's a sin. I'm begging you to reconsider. Don't do this. For many years I've been ordaining as a nun every December just to make merit for the souls of our parents. If we do this abortion, all the merit that I've made will be lost."

"But keeping the baby will shame your family." Sa-ngar knotted his brow. "Aren't you ashamed? Can you put up with the gossip?"

Phayom's answer was honest. "Yes, it will be shameful for me. Who wouldn't feel that shame? I even told the whole village my daughter would get married after her boyfriend left the monkhood. I'll be ashamed that my daughter carries a bastard in her womb. But I'd rather bear the shame than commit a sin."

Phayom hugged her husband. "We shouldn't commit any sin. Getting an abortion is a big sin because an innocent child will be killed. I think that heavenly beings have already helped protect our family from the evil of Tas, who raped our daughter

and planned to take our money. Divine intervention helped expose his rape of Poom before he became our son-in-law.”

Benchaphon signed up for maternity care with me up to the delivery. The baby was a girl – weighing three kilograms and quite strong.

Benchaphon dropped out of school but was determined to continue her education through an adult high school. Phayom and Sa-ngar adopted the baby as their daughter. I think they are both head over heels in love with the baby.

I name this Preuksa Mata after the *phayom* tree.

The *phayom*, or white meranti, is a huge deciduous tree. Its clean white blossoms give off a sweet odour. White meranti flowers can be used in cooking. The tree is strong and sturdy because its root network runs deep below the earth. Wind might bring down other trees, but the white meranti always stays standing. The tree has an extra root called a *phuporn*. This is a root system that itself resembles a tree. It usually stands at the base of the tree, shoring it up, making the tree even stronger.

This mother reminds me of the white meranti. Her love for her daughter is like that of a root system that keeps her upright, tall, unwavering, positive in her thoughts. When weak mothers collapse as their lives are swept away by monsoons of misery, Phayom faces such trouble with grace. She stands against the wind, strong, upright, unbreakable.

Kratin, the Yellow-eyed Grass Mother of Misery

Kratin is a mother who reminds me of one truth: we might lose what's valuable in life if we do not put enough effort into safeguarding what we love.

Kratin was a 38-year-old divorcee. She had married twice and had two children. The first child was from her first husband, and this daughter married and moved with her husband into a new home. The second child, Bancha, was a nine-year-old boy from her second husband. Bancha was overweight relative to his young age, as he already weighed 69 kilograms. People called him "Koh Tee", the same name as a famous comedian, a clownish plump man with dark skin and an ever smiling round face that could make people happy. Bancha looked like Koh Tee, with a round face and short, fat figure. His plump belly would pop out when his student shirt ran up. Bancha always smiled, showing bright white teeth that contrasted with his dark complexion. He was the Koh Tee for his community. His presence could make people smile.

And everyone, from his mother to his teachers, loved the boy, who was diligent and helpful without making any demands in return. He never complained or pulled a face when asked to lend a hand. Teachers at the school adored him despite his poor marks. Everyone there grew accustomed to his round, smiling face because he usually showed up earlier than the other students. He would run to help teachers carry their bags or parcels. Koh Tee's eagerness to please knew no bounds, and his classroom was cleaner and shinier than others because he regularly removed the rubbish and scrubbed the floor. Cleaning was like a passion for him, so he also helped his classmates clean the room even when it was not his turn.

Kratin lived with her son in a place not worth calling a home. It was a run-down single room covered with layers of corroded tin plates that served as roof and walls. This decrepit adobe served as home to the widow and her son. The boy's father had died a month before, after being shot by an unknown gunman. A police investigation concluded that the shooting was a mistake and the father had not been the intended target. The perpetrator, however, was never found. The father's death was like salt rubbed into a wound. The family's already precarious financial situation grew even worse. Kratin did not have the money to arrange a funeral for her husband. She had to get the funds from a loan shark named Prik, a tout in the market who charged five per cent interest.

After her husband died, Kratin became the sole breadwinner and took back-breaking jobs. Working as a traditional masseuse did not bring in enough money, barely enough to cover the interest to pay the loan shark. She could hardly make ends meet.

Prik was merciless. She hired crooks and thugs to serve as debt collectors. Their methods began with public denunciations and would then turn to more violent tactics.

The sun rose above the horizon, its soft red colour pleasant to look at even by the naked eye. Koh Tee was putting on his

school uniform, and Kratin asked: "Are you going to school now? It's so early."

Koh Tee smiled. "I need to help Mrs Samnieng move stuff to her new office. Do you want me to do anything? I can do it for you right after I get back home."

Kratin looked at her son adoringly. Although her husband had left the world, his legacy was this kind and decent son. Koh Tee was a lovely boy. Her neighbours heaped praise on his conduct, manners and diligence, hard to find in other children his age.

"I don't need you to do anything. I was just asking. Go to school and help your teacher."

When the boy arrived at school, he was alone. A ray of sunshine coated the school building and reflected a light gold colour. Koh Tee walked into the classroom as usual, placing his bag at his desk. He washed a rag in order to wipe down the desks and chairs.

Mrs Samnieng, a middle-aged teacher with a smiling, kind face, walked into the classroom. The boy hurried over to her, belly wobbling up and down.

"Do you want me to move your things now?"

"Koh Tee, you're such a wonderful boy. You came so early just to help me?" She patted his head affectionately.

She led Koh Tee into her office to move the computer. The boy ran up the stairs with the monitor in his hands. As he walked up to the second floor, he suddenly put the monitor down on the floor. His face was pale, sweat streaming down.

"Koh Tee, what's happening?" Mrs Samnieng asked in alarm when she saw his face. "Are you all right?"

"Teacher, my stomach hurts." Koh Tee seemed to be in great pain.

"You might have a gastric ulcer. You often come very early and maybe you don't eat breakfast. Come, I'll take you to the

nurse's room. I'll give you a digestive solution to help with the pain."

After taking the medicine, Koh Tee felt the pain subside. He returned to the classroom for his lessons.

After class, Koh Tee felt better. He went back to the nurse's room, and they gave him two paracetamol tablets and had him wait. He sat there for a short while and once he felt better asked to return home.

His mother was not at home. Koh Tee covered his belly with his hands as he went to bed on the floor. The pain was so strong it was impossible for him to stretch out. Eventually he fell asleep despite the pain. Darkness and silence descended on the home as Koh Tee slept.

Kratin got home late at night. Seeing her son sleeping in his school uniform, she touched his forehead. Koh Tee's skin was hot. She woke him up and gave him two more paracetamol. He fell into a deep sleep again before waking at dawn.

Again he felt pain in his stomach, but less than before.

"Your temperature has eased off," Kratin said, hand on her son's brow. Before the boy replied, she murmured: "I don't know if I can make enough money to pay the loan interest today."

Koh Tee gave his mother a consoling hug. He forced himself to take a shower and prepare for school.

His mother said: "Don't forget to eat grilled chicken and sticky rice before you go to school. I bought this meal for you."

Koh Tee looked at the food. The smell of roast chicken usually perked up his appetite, but today it was gone. "I'm not hungry."

"Are you kidding? This is your favourite!" Kratin grew worried.

"I'm all right. I just don't feel like eating today. I have to go to school now." Koh Tee pressed his hands together to say goodbye.

The walk to school took unusually long. The one kilometre seemed harder than usual as Koh Tee placed one foot in front of the other. Each step caused him pain.

At school he went straight to the nurse's room. Again the teacher asked about the symptoms and gave him two paracetamol.

Gradually he felt better and began helping his classmates clean the room. But the pain returned.

"Hey guys ... I can't help you out today," Koh Tee said, crouching down at his desk. "I don't feel well. I need to take a rest,"

Mrs Samnieng walked in to find Koh Tee's slumped form. She ordered the classmates to help him up and take him to the nurse's room. After class she visited him again.

"Koh Tee, you need to go home. I think your condition is quite serious." She placed a hand on his hot brow.

"I'm all right. But may I stay in the nurse's room? My mother isn't home now. If I rest a bit I'll be fine."

Koh Tee stayed there the whole day, not eating anything. All he could take in was water. Again the teacher gave him two paracetamol, and he stayed until the evening.

Mrs Samnieng came in again, this time to pick him up and take him home on her motorbike.

"I feel much better now," Koh Tee said as she dropped him off.

Once she was gone, though, the boy collapsed on the floor, exhausted.

Kratin returned home late at night. She placed a hand on his brow and gave him another two pills. Then the exhausted mother also fell asleep.

On the third day, Koh Tee felt worn out again. Kratin placed a hand on his forehead to feel for fever. Heat radiated from his skin.

"How do you feel? Can you go to school today?"

"I can go to school, Mum." Koh Tee's voice was unusually weak.

The boy still could not eat. He only drank a cup of water. Kratin gave him another two paracetamol, which he duly swallowed before walking to school.

After a hundred metres, Koh Tee felt excruciating pain in his abdomen. He could no longer walk upright, and grabbed the pole of a grocery stall by the side of the road. To Auntie Maen, the owner of stall, the boy looked frail and exhausted.

"What's wrong? Are you all right, Koh Tee?"

"Hello, Auntie Maen. I just have a bit of stomach pain. Can I rest at your stall for a while?"

"Sure, sure. Come sleep on this cot." Auntie Maen used a cloth to wipe the bed clean. She also gave him some worn pillows. "Did you take medicine?"

"Yes, Mum gave me some paracetamol."

"How can Kratin let her son go to school in this state?" Auntie Maen complained. "Do you want to go back home? I can take you."

"Mum might be at work now. I'd better go to school."

"I'll give you a ride on my motorbike."

"Thank you." The boy placed his hands together in gratitude.

When he arrived at school, the pain was bad. He could not move or climb down off the motorbike. Mrs Samnieng offered to take him home.

"You're too ill to go to school. Your mother should take you to a doctor right away."

Koh Tee looked unusually subdued. He did not speak. Mrs Samnieng took the boy home and sent someone to find Kratin.

When the teacher found her, she said: "Your boy is seriously ill. He's been ill for several days. You have to take him to the health clinic as soon as possible."

Kratin saw that her son was in great pain. She hired a tuk-

tuk to take them to the local health office.

There were more patients than chairs, some sitting on the stairs and others waiting outside on their motorcycles.

“Doctor, please take a look at my son. He’s terribly ill!” Kratin shouted at staff as they were drawing blood from other patients.

“You have to wait,” replied Orn-anong, a staff member. “We have a lot of diabetes patients today. We’re facing a staff shortage too – we only have two doctors and one went to a meeting in the province.”

Nevertheless, she examined the boy. Orn-anong knew Koh Tee and the boy’s family. She asked Kratin: “How long has he been ill?”

“Three days,” the boy whispered.

“Your condition doesn’t look good. You have a 40-degree fever.” Orn-anong read the mercury, then placed her hands on the boy’s abdomen. “Can you show me where it hurts?”

“Here.” The boy pointed to his right lower side.

“Right side,” Orn-anong repeated. She pressed down on the spot. The boy’s face contorted in excruciating pain. “The right side means you might be suffering from appendicitis.”

What are we going to do?” Kratin turned pale.

“He might have to go to Sapan Hospital.”

“Can the staff there treat appendicitis?”

“They should. Sapan Hospital is the district hospital. You have to go there whether they can treat it or not,” the nurse explained. “It’s the rule for transferring patients. We send patients from a lower to a higher level. If the local health office can’t deal with a case, the patient goes to a district hospital, then a provincial one. Expenses are covered by the Gold Card health care system. If patients want to skip the process, they have to pay out of their own pocket.”

Orn-anong looked at the boy’s face and saw that the pain

was excruciating. “Koh Tee,” she said. “I’ll give you an injection to lower the fever and relieve the pain. You won’t feel pain during your trip to the hospital.”

“Doctor, does the health care centre have an ambulance to take my boy to the hospital?”

Orn-anong nodded. “I’ll contact the local administrative office. It has emergency vehicles.”

Local administration received more funding from the central government now and had purchased a few emergency vehicles, to much public acclaim.

When Koh Tee arrived at Sapan Hospital the staff wheeled him straight to the emergency room. A doctor who looked as if he was just out of university examined him with great attention and care. He asked Koh Tee about his condition and sent him for a blood test and X-ray. The close attention relieved Kratin somewhat.

She waited outside the emergency room for hours until the doctor asked her for a consultation.

“We’ll send Koh Tee to the provincial hospital. There’s a surgeon there, but the only anaesthetist took sick leave today.”

“What will happen to my boy?” Kratin asked the young doctor.

“The blood test, X-ray and other tests suggest your son might have acute appendicitis. He needs an immediate operation. The boy is in great pain, so I’ll give him a painkiller before sending him on to the provincial hospital.”

After taking the medicine, Koh Tee’s condition improved. His eyes were vacant, though, and his face had turned red from fever. He slept in the speeding ambulance as the siren wailed and other cars gave way. In an hour Koh Tee arrived.

Kratin felt more confident when nurses rushed Koh Tee to the emergency room. A young doctor was waiting to treat him. After a brief examination, he said: “The boy has an infection.

We'll send him to the paediatrics department to monitor his condition."

Kratin glanced at the clock on the wall of the ER. It was already five in the evening. She assumed the surgeons would soon operate on the problematic appendix.

Kratin followed the hospital staff as they rolled the gurney to the paediatric ward. A number of young patients were already waiting for treatment. Some slept in the corridors or on the balcony. Koh Tee would have had to sleep on the balcony as well if the nurse hadn't moved a young girl from the room, saying: "There's another patient whose condition is more serious than yours. Your stomach pain is subsiding so you can sleep outside. I'll prepare a mosquito net for you."

The boy got a place to sleep right in front of the nurse's station.

Despite the crowds of the paediatric ward, Kratin was hopeful. Koh Tee should be safe now as he was in the provincial hospital and in good hands.

Kratin could not believe there were so many patients. Many children had tangles of saline and intravenous tubes attached to their veins. Some wore oxygen masks. A cart came to pick up one young patient who was wearing an oxygen mask. Kratin asked the nurse about the child's condition. "He has a serious heart problem and is going to the intensive care unit," a relative replied instead.

Nearby a skinny boy was complaining about the sharp pain in his stomach. His mother told Kratin that he had had a stomach ache for weeks.

Listening to these tales, Kratin felt there were patients in worse shape than her son.

Koh Tee then opened his eyes and started groaning again. "Mama. Mama, help me. My tummy is so painful. Mama, help!"

Her son's moaning and agony was heartbreaking for Kratin.

She glanced again at the clock on the wall. It was seven; they had been there for two hours without getting any treatment.

“Doctor, my son has a serious stomach ache!” she told a nurse.

The plump nurse said: “I’ll tell the doctor. Just wait a few more minutes.”

A doctor arrived 10 minutes later. The nurse introduced him as Dr Prem, a medical intern in the surgery department. The young doctor pressed a stethoscope to Koh Tee’s chest and abdomen, and placed his hands on several points of the abdomen. He asked the boy about the exact location of the pain. The boy seemed lost and shook his head several times, unable to answer.

During a mobile phone conversation, Kratin overheard Dr Prem say: “Doctor, I can’t confirm if the patient has appendicitis or not. His name is Bancha and he is nine years old and weighs almost 70 kilograms. The boy is quite overweight. Would you like to come and take a look at him yourself?”

After ending the call, the young doctor said to the nurse: “Dr Phitsanu is performing an operation to remove an infected appendix from another patient, indeed the fifth case of appendicitis. I don’t know why there are so many cases of appendicitis today. It seems Bancha will have to wait until Dr Phitsanu has finished his current operation.”

Koh Tee stopped screaming and sat up, jolted by an acute pang in his stomach. His eyes bulged and he howled: “You stupid doctor!”

Dr Prem was taken aback, yet managed to ask Kratin: “Does your son have any record of mental illness?”

Kratin, shocked by her son’s outburst, only shook her head.

Sureerad, another nurse with a stocky body, approached the boy. “It’s not nice to be rude to the doctor! He’s doing the best he can to take care of you. Another doctor is coming now to help take care of you too.”

Before the nurse finished, Koh Tee screamed and shouted: “Stay away from me you fat crazy bitch!” This boy also spat saliva and mucus at the nurse’s face.

Nurse Sureerad felt a burst of anger as she wiped the spit and gluey mucus from her face with a tissue. As a well trained, experienced nurse, she smiled and tried to speak calmly. “Please don’t do this. Calm down.”

Koh Tee’s eyes crossed. His head lurched. The boy’s personality had completely transformed. He no longer moaned about his stomach. Now he moved his lips, preparing to spit on the nurse’s face again. She stepped aside, and Koh Tee held the phlegm and saliva in his mouth until the foamy fluid began to run out of the corner of his mouth.

Exhausted, he collapsed on the bed again. Nurse Sureerad used a cloth to wipe the saliva from his mouth.

As she wiped, something terrible happened. The boy choked violently. His limbs jolted. He arched his back and his breathing stopped. The feverish red lips turned a deep green.

Dr Prem hadn’t expected such a turn of events. He had thought the boy’s churlishness was a symptom of some mental illness. The rookie MD didn’t know that infections could also cause mental disorders.

Dr Prem inspected Koh Tee and called for help from the staff. “Hurry! The patient has stopped breathing!”

Kratin jumped to his bedside. “Help! The nurse is stuffing cloth into my boy’s nose. She’s suffocating my boy!”

It was an emergency and no one had time to explain anything to Kratin. A wasted second could cost the patient his life.

“Prepare for CPR.”

Nurses came to Koh Tee’s bed to help with cardiopulmonary resuscitation. The curtain around the bed was drawn closed. A nurse even elbowed Kratin out. But the mother pushed back, shouting: “Koh Tee! Stay alive! Don’t leave me. I have only you

in my life.”

Kratin saw her boy extend his hand as if wanting her to hold it. She tried to shake off the nurse’s grasp.

“Calm down,” an assistant told her. “You can’t interfere right now. The doctor is trying to help.”

The assistant finally led Kratin away, but the mother kept her eyes on the boy, gazing through the narrow gap between the curtains. She saw blood spill out of Koh Tee’s mouth and assumed that the fat nurse had slapped Koh Tee’s face to punish him for his behaviour. She did not understand that the blood was the result of the breathing tube Dr Prem was inserting into the boy’s throat.

“Koh Tee, don’t leave me. Don’t leave Mama!” Kratin screamed. The beeps of the pulse monitoring equipment grew flat.

Dr Nisara, a senior paediatrician, ran into the room and ordered more CPR.

Ten minutes later the monitor indicated that the boy’s heart had begun beating again. Dr Nisara wiped the sweat from her face before speaking to Kratin. “Bancha’s condition is quite serious. His heart stopped for a while but we managed to resuscitate him. We need to move him to the ICU.”

Kratin screamed back: “His heart stopped because the nurse suffocated him! She held a cloth over his nose and mouth. When we got here he was still able to speak. So what happened? The doctors and nurses are responsible!”

Dr Nisara was perplexed. She had just stepped in and was unfamiliar with the case.

“I didn’t try to suffocate your son,” Nurse Sureerad explained. “I simply wiped away the saliva and mucus.”

“And no nurse will harm the patients,” Dr Nisara said.

“The doctors and nurses conspired to harm my son! He was all right when we got here. And now the doctor says his heart

stopped beating!” Kratin glared at the doctors and nurses and shook Koh Tee’s body.

“Wake up. Wake up, my boy. Mummy is here.”

“Ma’am, we need to get him to the ICU now. His life is in grave danger.”

“Why does he need the ICU? Why not let him stay here with me? My boy has appendicitis and all he needs is an operation to remove it. Why don’t the doctors give him the operation? The doctors aren’t doing anything! They’re just leaving my boy in pain.”

Dr Prem took a deep breath. “Ma’am, we can’t confirm the appendicitis. I have to wait for Dr Phitsanu, the senior surgeon, to examine him. There are many operations today and Dr Phitsanu is the only available surgeon. As we speak, he is performing another operation. Your son stopped breathing because his infection got so severe that it caused his heart to stop.”

Kratin shook her head. She no longer wanted to listen. “Doctor, don’t make up excuses. If you and the nurses had done your job, why would my boy’s condition have deteriorated like this? Do you think I’m stupid enough to believe you? I kept my eyes on him the whole time. I know what happened! I saw who wasn’t performing their duty.”

At nine that night, Dr Nisara came out of the ICU looking worn out. Kratin, with tears in her eyes, rushed to the doctor. Before she could ask, Dr Nisara said: “I’m so sorry. We did our best. But the boy had a serious blood infection. His heart stopped. We tried to resuscitate him for an hour, but we couldn’t save him.”

Kratin felt her heart might stop beating along with her son’s. She rushed into the ICU, unafraid that anyone would stop her. On the bed was the body of her son. Kratin ran to him and held his body, wailing. “Koh Tee. My boy. When we got here you were still able to talk to me. We arrived in the afternoon but the doctors

did nothing and let you die. Maybe they wouldn't give you an operation because we're so poor. Koh Tee, wake up! Wake up, my son. How can I live without you?"

A hand touched her shoulder. Kratin turned around to see Mrs Samnieng standing there in tears. The teacher tried to console the bereaved mother.

"Kratin, tell me." Mrs Samnieng was also shocked and barely coherent. "What's the doctor's explanation of the cause of death?"

"Mrs Samnieng, the doctors and nurses here think I'm stupid. They told me Koh Tee died of a blood infection. They wouldn't give him an operation. And a nurse called Sureerad put a cloth over his nose to suffocate him. How can people be so cruel?"

Mrs Samnieng approached Dr Nisara and Dr Prem. "Doctor, what was the cause of Bancha's death?"

"The boy ... had pain in his stomach," Dr Nisara said falteringly. "He also had a high fever. The results of the blood test and X-ray show he had a severe infection in his abdomen. After two hours he went into shock, even though he was being treated with antibiotics. We assume he died of acute blood poisoning. It's too sudden..."

Kratin screamed: "Stop making excuses, doctor! Mrs Samnieng, don't believe them. The doctors at the local clinic and at Sapan Hospital said he had appendicitis. Why did no one treat it?"

"Calm down, Kratin." Mrs Samnieng tried to console her, before turning back to the doctors. "No one will believe you. I'll take his body for an autopsy. If he died of a burst appendicitis or of suffocation, it means his death was caused by negligence. Doctor, you know what will happen to the hospital. Don't think that poor people can't do anything. You'll have to answer to the police."

Dr Prem was only an intern. He pursed his lips, trying to stop from crying. Then tears flowed down his face. This tragedy was an entirely new experience for him. He had never faced such pressure before. Inexperience had meant he was unable to give an immediate diagnosis and so had had to wait for the senior doctor, who was too busy to come. A patient had died suddenly under his care, and Dr Prem felt the utmost regret. He wanted to turn to the wall, cover his mouth with his hands and muffle the sounds of his crying.

An autopsy performed by the Department of Forensic Science showed that a burst appendix was the cause of Koh Tee's death. Yet the appendix had burst before his arrival at the hospital. An abscess had formed and the pus had spread through his abdomen and infected the bloodstream. Blood poisoning was the cause of his sudden death.

Kratin and Mrs Samnieng pressed charges against the doctor and nurse. Dr Prem faced a charge of negligence and Nurse Sureerad of attempted murder.

When hospitals face charges after treatment doesn't turn out as planned, or even in the case of mistakes by the staff, they often use a legal team to negotiate a settlement. After the release of the autopsy report, the hospital director invited Kratin and Mrs Samnieng to meet the hospital's risk assessment team.

The director clarified to them that the boy's appendix had burst before his arrival at the hospital. The doctor had been unable to give a clear diagnosis because the boy was obese and had earlier been injected with painkillers and antibiotics. It was also impossible for the hospital to operate immediately because the only surgeon available at the time was operating on another patient. Nurse Sureerad did not try to murder the boy; she used the cloth to wipe away saliva and mucus. The boy just happened

to stop breathing when she wiped his face.

“Don’t try to make excuses!” Kratin said, raising her voice.

Mrs Samnieng tapped her hand, urging her to calm down. “Director, you need to understand too,” she said. “How can the mother hold herself together when her only son dies? The doctors at the local health office and Sapan Hospital confirmed that the boy had appendicitis. But the provincial hospital failed to perform the operation the boy needed and let him die. Who should bear responsibility, if not the hospital?”

The hospital director and the risk assessment team listened calmly. They tried to clarify and provide answers and offer solutions.

The story of Koh Tee ends here.

After hearing the explanation given by the director and risk assessment team, Kratin and Mrs Samnieng withdrew charges against the doctor. However, Kratin continued to press charges against Nurse Sureerad.

Police interrogated the nurse and witnesses who were at the hospital that day. Testimony confirmed that Nurse Sureerad did not try to suffocate the boy. The case was dropped.

Nurse Sureerad and Dr Prem took leave due to stress.

Kratin lost her only son but received some financial compensation. Article 41 of the Public Health Law stipulates the amount of financial liability from public medical treatment. The payment was 100,000 baht, yet the sum could not bring back her son.

Mrs Samnieng’s question remained unanswered. Others in the village also wondered and asked the same question:

Who should be responsible for Koh Tee’s death?

I decided to name this mother after *kratin*, or the yellow-eyed grass.

Yellow-eyed grass is a well known plant with many uses. Its wood can be used as a cooking ingredient or as animal feed.

But it is difficult to grow. Yellow-eyed grass costs a lot and attracts insects. This type of tree can easily die from the activities of pests.

Yellow-eyed grass is little different from Kratin, the dead boy's mother. Her harsh life made it is impossible for her to protect herself from social predators. When a mother cannot defend herself, it becomes impossible for her to protect her son.

Hardship is not only the mother's problem. When a mother suffers, her children become victims and suffer as well.