

PROLOGUE

That night, the rain poured and wind howled, raindrops crashing like solid objects onto the ground and water. A passenger boat from Ban Phaen to Bangkok, packed with people, pressed on through the current amidst the rising clamour of the rain and storm. It was late, and pitch dark. Some passengers had curled up to sleep in any space they could find; others sat hugging their knees, staring vacantly into the enveloping darkness. The sound of the rain and wind beating the canvas awning on the side of the boat almost drowned out the noise of the motor, but the boat still strained to surge ahead as if it were a living animal, goaded and beaten, dragging a load along a rough track. Voices chatting when the boat left the jetty gradually faded, overpowered by the noise of wind and rain. Only the vibrating engine showed that the boat was still moving. Occasionally someone would break the silence by yawning loudly or sighing, changing position or shifting their belongings around.

The boat passed along the river through densely- populated areas of the district town. Electric light from the sawmills on the riverbank reflected in the endless torrents of raindrops, like a curtain of water. As the boat moved past the scattered houses on the fringe of the town, towards the open fields, the wind and rain increased in intensity. Most of the passengers began to shift about uneasily, glancing at each other. At Khung Samphao junction the full force of the storm hit the boat right in the centre. People screamed and shouted; children cried in fright. Sleepers woke, startled. Everyone scrambled to grab the side that was still upright, and at that moment, the boat flung back the other way under the full weight of gravity. Then, without further warning, amidst incoherent screams and the ringing of the bell which the helmsman pulled in panic, the boat capsized. The motor pattered on for a moment then fell silent after a last violent shudder like the struggling heartbeat of a dying animal, stopped only by death itself.

The water was jet black. The storm seemed to gather strength, as if death were exalting in its victory. Voices called to each other across the darkness, but were wafted away along the swirling current. Eventually all noise ceased, leaving only the sounds of wind and rain, and the current flowing past the reeds and the root's of the sorghum grasses on the riverbank. Nature exercised its awesome powers undisturbed by humankind.

At dawn next morning the sun shone brightly down, and the raindrops lingering on the leaves and clumps of grass shimmered in the light. The glowering rainclouds of the previous night were transformed into tiny balls of fluff blown to the farthest edge of the sky. A flock of herons flew slowly over the surface of the

water at Khung Samphao to gather in the field nearby. Nature had forgotten completely the rage of the night before, and was starting the new day with a bright countenance, like a child smiling through its tears.

District officials, police officers, village headmen, and many nearby residents who had come to help the victims of the previous night's disaster glanced up at the sky, then lowered their heads and went on with their bitter and tragic task.

On the bank, the bodies of the drowned were laid out in the bright sunlight. The corpses were still fresh and looked as though they were asleep. But the brisk morning air, the sound of birds chirping and settling on the bushes, and the crowing of the cock to herald the dawn would never again awaken them. Among the dead were men, women and children; young and old. There were rich men, travelling on business; some civil servants; and Buddhist monks. Their age, sex and occupation varied. Each had had a profession, life, knowledge; each had known sorrow and joy, the heat and chill of the climate, tears and laughter, love and suffering. Each had lived separately, but all died together.

Thus many lives came together at one time from different places. Each life already had its own share of karma – whether more or less depended on the individual. But why did all those lives have to end in the same incident, at the same time, in the same place? Many lives, yet all met the same end, death by drowning, at the same instant – a cruel blow. Could each have carried the same weight of heinous karma? That does not seem possible. But if we study each life separately, we might be able to discover how this course of events was ordained. We might find that the death which came to all of them was, for some, retribution for their own misdeeds; for others, a fulfilment of their wishes and a reward for determination; for some an escape, and for others merely the end to a long life. The story of these lives, now to be unfolded, forms part of the disjointed answer that ordinary mortals, lacking the wisdom of sages, can give each other.

THONGPROI – THE RICH GIRL

Thongproi was aware that she was extremely fortunate.

She had never experienced the suffering which comes from deprivation or unfulfilled desire. Even though she was the youngest daughter in the large family of a couple running a business in Chao Ched, Thongproi had always received special attention from her parents and her elder siblings. She was, after all, the youngest; and she had been so ill when she was little that her parents had despaired of her life, but she had survived miraculously; moreover, her parents believed that their youngest daughter had brought good fortune to the family. Ever since her birth her parents' business had boomed, and now they were reputed to be the most prosperous family in the district.

For these reasons, Thongproi was born into a world full of people ready to pander to her every whim. She got everything she wanted, because none of her elder brothers or sisters ever opposed her. When she wanted something that was going to be expensive, her parents did not refuse but said instead, "Let Proi have what she wants. We owe her our fortune, she brought it with her when she was born. She must have made merit in her previous life. There's no point regretting the expense."

No-one ever opposed any of Thongproi's demands in childhood. Whether it was food, toys or clothes, she only had to ask and it would be hers. She enjoyed a happy childhood, as her childish wants were easily satisfied. The family never let her ask twice for anything, and she was happy with the knowledge that all her wants would be met. Lying in bed under her mosquito net, she sometimes thought, as children do, about all the things she still wanted, and made a mental note to tell her parents the next day. She would fall asleep then, secure in the certainty that she would have no problem getting them.

Had Thongproi had been able to remain in a state of perpetual childhood, or had her demands never gone beyond childish whims, she might never have had to suffer.

Thongproi grew up to be one of the most beautiful young women in the district. Her parents took greater care of her than ever. Because of her family's wealth, her natural beauty never needed to be marred by exposure to the elements, or the need to do the ordinary tasks usually undertaken by girls of her age. Her parents' meticulous care, protection, and indulgence had bestowed on her the reputation of a beauty.

Apart from her physical qualities, it was known that as a millionaire's daughter she was materially well endowed. With these two points in her favour, Thongproi should have been an object of interest to numerous young men, but every time anyone mentioned her name in connection with marriage, someone would say, "The likes of you or I wouldn't be able to provide for her. That Proi's parents didn't bring her up like everyone else. They've indulged her since childhood, never reproached or scolded her, and always given her everything she wanted. She's never done a stroke of work – she couldn't even so much as steam rice or boil soup. They've always been rich enough to hire servants for all that. When people like us marry, our wives have to help us earn a living. If you took a wife who did nothing but sleep and eat, and you had to indulge her whims like her parents did, it'd be like bringing somebody into the house simply to take command, and who could put up with that?"

Observations like this discouraged the young men, who wanted their wives to share their work as well as leisure. So even though Thongproi was blossoming into womanhood, nobody showed any interest in her. Knowing that she was used to a lifestyle beyond their means and status, none of the village elders had singled her

out for a marriage proposal with their sons. As for Thongproi herself, she was not interested in these matters. Although her needs had changed with maturity, the need for love and a marriage partner had not yet emerged. Her parents, too, had other plans for her. They wanted her to be better educated than themselves and to have a higher position in the world. One of her father's cousins was a senior government official in Bangkok. She was sent to live with him to further her education and practice a 'civilized' lifestyle, to mix with people of name and fame, and to learn the rules of behaviour and etiquette favoured by high society.

Life in Bangkok did not excite Thongproi as it should have done. From the time she could read, and first developed an interest in the world around her, she had used all her spare time in the leisurely manner of a millionaire's daughter. She had read books and magazines from Bangkok, most of which, naturally, were about Bangkok's people, its life and atmosphere. Thongproi knew more about Bangkok than anyone else in the district, and had built up an image of it in her mind. Even before she had ever been there she dressed and behaved as a Bangkok girl would, following what she had read and heard of from city visitors.

When she finally got there she was not greatly impressed, and even a little disappointed. The real Bangkok lacked the splendour and sparkle of the city of her imagination. Yet she was not greatly upset either, because she had only to reach for a piece of paper and write a letter home, for her parents to send money by return mail for whatever it was she wanted in Bangkok – clothes, cosmetics, or money for entertainment. She hardly even needed to remind them.

Possessing money, the most important means of leading a life of independence and self-indulgence, Thongproi failed to realise its true value. And naturally, life soon became bland and boring. Life in Bangkok, which should have meant so much to Thongproi, became instead insipid and flavourless. Although she clutched at everything she had ever heard existed there – cinema, theatre, shops, fairs and parties – and although the relatives she stayed with had children around her own age, who were her companions in eating, gadding about, and spending money, it was not long before these pleasures began to pall from sheer familiarity. Jaded, Thongproi saw Bangkok as empty and meaningless. The subjects her relatives suggested she take up – domestic science, sewing – did not interest her. She saw no need to acquire such skills. Why should she learn housekeeping, when there were others to do it for her? Why should she learn dressmaking when she could always pay someone else to do it better? Thongproi began to yearn for a life free from boredom, something more enjoyable than she had previously experienced. Before she left home she had imagined she would find this in Bangkok, but after living there she realized that her hopes were not to be fulfilled. Life in Bangkok was as boring as it was at home. Thongproi was still too inexperienced to know that happiness and suffering were relative. Excessive happiness, unrestrained indulgence, and constant fulfilment of her every want had, in the end, deprived her life of all meaning.

The hopes of the poor or the luckless contain the possibility of eventual satisfaction, but the deep-seated malaise of the person who has everything is harder by far to cure. When Thongproi finally despaired of finding anything more to do in Bangkok, she decided to return home. The decision once made, she packed her belongings, said farewell her friends and relatives, and set off home by boat, refusing to be dissuaded. She did not know that her relatives had written to her parents complaining bitterly of her selfishness and refusal to listen to the advice of her elders. Her parents did not reproach her, as it had become habitual with them to let her have her own way.

On the boat trip back from Bangkok, Thongproi became aware that the young man beside her was taking an intense interest in her. He was about her age, or not more than three years older, handsome, polite, and well-groomed. She learnt from the nametag on the large suitcase by his side that his name was San, and that he was a deputy district officer of her own district. She guessed, immediately, both from his behaviour and because she had never seen him in the area before, that he must be travelling to take up duty. As the boat moved steadily away from Bangkok, San frequently glanced at Thongproi. Seeing that she seemed agreeable to making his acquaintance, he introduced himself before the boat reached the junction. By the time it had turned into the waterway and was moving past the paddy fields, he had begun to tell her his life story. He told her he was from Bangkok, and that this was the first time he had been out to the provinces on an official posting. He felt very nervous, as well as excited, but had accepted because it meant a promotion. The two of them sat chatting on about various things. San agreed with whatever opinion she expressed. By the time the boat reached Ban Phaen, Thongproi knew her own mind. She wanted San to be her life's partner. It could not be said that Thongproi's feelings were those of love at first sight, or of love borne of compassion, and certainly they did not represent love flowing from mutual sympathy. All Thongproi knew was that she wanted him to belong to her just as she had wanted, and got, possession of so many other things in the past. As San's looks and manner of speaking were to her liking, she wanted him for those same reasons, unaware that at the same time he had fallen hopelessly in love with her, with a love which could only continue to grow, and which would never diminish.

When Thongproi's fancy coincided with San's falling madly in love with her from their first meeting, it was not surprising that he was a frequent visitor. Over the next seven months, her indulgent parents organized an ostentatious wedding for them and built a modern house near to their own for the young couple, decked out with any expensive items she happened to fancy. They also provided a substantial sum of money to start them off, without asking for anything in exchange from the groom.

Thongproi experienced untold happiness in the first year of marriage. Her life was now fulfilled, as her husband had become the focus of interest and desire she had previously lacked. She wanted nothing other than him, and he surrendered

himself to her completely. He was a hundred times more indulgent than her parents. She wanted for nothing, and he carried out her every wish. He even did all the little household things she should have done for him, as if he were one of the two servants she had hired to do her bidding. Everyone who saw Thongproi's marriage said that she was incredibly lucky and, for the first year, she agreed with them.

In fact, the early stages of Thongproi's married life were so smooth and free from difficulties that she began to tire of it as she had of everything else before. Her husband's readiness to grant her every whim would have been gratifying had it been, a novelty. No obstacle ever seemed to hinder the even course of the marriage. San showed no sign of changing! The more Thongproi reflected on her life, the more bored she became, and having once admitted that boredom she found that it gathered force with every passing day. Her life was like that of a caged bird with a conscientious keeper. She wanted for nothing. She encountered no dangers, felt no suffering, took no risks, and was without hopes or worries. Life flowed on abundantly. She got everything she wanted, as she always had. San did everything she told him to. Life was becoming flat and insipid again, devoid of the sadness or anxiety that made times of happiness and freedom from care appear all the more brilliant by contrast.

Thongproi spent most of her time sitting at the front of the house watching the boats pass up and down the waterway. Poor couples rowed past, their faces burnt by the sun. Although they wore ragged clothes and their faces were lined with the marks of their harsh existence, she glimpsed flashes of a happiness which eluded her. Sometimes the riverboat couples would moor their loaded boats by the bank near her house. Occasionally she heard the sounds of quarrels and fights, which made her think that maybe conflict and disagreement between lovers was like a spice, or sharp curry paste, which added pungency to an otherwise monotonous diet. She had been unable to add savour to her own life in this way, because her husband took no notice of the wiles she used to try to pick quarrels with him. He was always the first to make up and placate her, which forced her to shed bitter tears over the loneliness and monotony of her life.

San had a group of friends, most of whom had been at school with him. All were young and dashing, and most did not have families of their own. Whenever one of them passed through the district he stayed with San, so Thongproi came to know them too. She was a beautiful woman, and it was natural that some of the young men could not resist taking an interest in her. To enliven her existence, she went out of her way to attract those who came to stay for any length of time. But far from becoming possessive or standing in her way, San pretended not to notice. At times he even seemed to encourage her to associate with other men. As time went on, his generosity of spirit made her increasingly resentful. She came to regard her husband as of little importance, like a piece of furniture which had outlived its day and needed to be stored away. Still, because he was indeed not an inanimate

object but a person, and her husband in name at least, she had to endure a life now totally devoid of meaning.

Most people would have envied her lot, because she always had her way. But life without passion or suffering is inevitably trivial. Having always got everything she wanted, she began to long for the impossible. She wanted San to oppose her and take advantage of her, like men in novels she had read, but he did not. It would have gone against his habitual indulgence of her every wish.

In the third year of marriage, Thongproi fell prey to ill health. San and her relatives took her to goodness knows how many doctors, but her symptoms proved quite intractable. The truth of the matter was, life contained nothing which made her wish to prolong it. The mixture of happiness and sorrow that made up most people's lives was not for Thongproi, who had everything anyone could ever want – money, a house, and an attentive husband. People could not imagine what more she could possibly want. She herself did not know the answer to this question. So it was that she gradually lost the will to go on living from day to day. Finally, San decided to take leave and to accompany his wife to Bangkok for treatment, thinking that a change of scene and a chance of some outings might alleviate her symptoms.

Thongproi sat silently in the boat with San. When it left Ban Phaen that evening she let her thoughts wander and mingle with the sounds of the rain and thunderstorm around her. San was speaking softly to her, but she was not listening. He was probably asking whether she wanted anything, so he could get it for her as he always did, but Thongproi was overcome by a profound distaste for everything. There was nothing more that she wanted.

No-one could say how many more years Thongproi would have endured her sterile existence had the boat not overturned. She was sitting staring into space as if only half awake when the boat keeled to one side and capsized. San was flung violently in another direction. When she hit the surface of the water Thongproi let herself sink without making the slightest effort to save herself.

Looking on the face of his lifeless wife at dawn next morning, after the villagers had raised her dead body from the river, San noticed that her eyes were shut and there was a smile playing around her lips. It was the way she used to look whenever he brought her something she particularly wanted, or did exactly what she wished.