SHORT STORY

The Ink Readers of Doi Saket

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illustration by **Victo Ngai**

It was during a night in the twelfth lunar month of this year when two strong hands pushed young Tangmoo down into the bed of the Mae Ping River, and by doing so, ironically, fulfilled his only wish. Tangmoo flailed his arms wildly, churning up the swirling water. The whites of his eyes reflected flashes from the fireworks as his smothered cries rose in bubbles to the surface, where they burst in silence: *help, help, help, help!*

These filtered cries of alarm were mistaken by a pair of dragonflies fused in flight, their only wish to remain larvaless and so prolong their love dance endlessly, for the dripping of morning dew. So unsettled was the pair that their breaths caught, and for a second, just when the male ejaculated, they separated. Force of habit subsequently incited them to repeat this in all their future climaxes, making their fondest wish actually come true.

But this was a chance circumstance. The point here is that young Tangmoo screamed, and his lungs filled with water, and please, he did not want to die this way.

In order to fully grasp the tragedy of this drama, we'll have to flash back a few days and take a peek at the village of Doi Saket, situated on the exact same river shore. Late one afternoon, about an hour before it was time for his third bowl of rice of the day, the well-bellied weed exterminator Uan[1] came running into the temple square. Winded as a consequence of the oversized behind that had given him his name, he stopped to catch his breath, leaning against the enormous stone phallus outside the temple (though not on the temple grounds themselves, since Buddha doesn't approve of that kind of non-Buddhist folly), before wheezing, "Come see, come see! The first wish has arrived!"

"Watch out!" cried the malodorous lampshade maker Tao[2], whose nickname did not spring from his shell head or his tortoise appearance, but from his extreme robustness, and he nodded toward the phallus.

In his frenzy, Uan had forgotten all about the general consensus around the ancient fertility symbol. The adulterous rice peeler Somchai[3] had once cheated on her husband with three neighbors and a shopkeeper from a nearby village after she had been spotted on the phallic altar, touching herself and wrapped in nothing but silk ribbons. As a penalty, Somchai was buried waist deep in the rice field so that her excess fertility could seep into the crops, and it was decided that the bewitched phallus was never to be touched again, and was only to be greeted by passersby with a brief nod of the head, something that was ardently copied by the villagers and which consequently led to an abundance of oral sex. (There were rumors that the stone was not in fact bewitched at all, but that lustful Somchai suffered from some type of obsessive exhibitionism. Nonsense, of course.)

Quick as lightning, Uan let go of the stone (but he was too late: in the following year his wife would give birth to triplets) and yelled, "Come to the river, all of you! The first wish is arriving—I've seen it with my own eyes!"

"So soon?" said the well-mannered crab gatherer Kulap, just returning from the rice field with her basket. "I don't believe it. It's way too early."

1 Uan means "hugely fat" in Thai – not necessarily an insult

2 "Turtle"

3 "Real woman"

Inside his house the generally respected Puu Yaybaan, chief of the village, heard the commotion and came running out the door. "What's going on?" he shouted, scattering chickens in his wild dash. "What's all this racket?"

"Uan says the first wish is here," Kulap said, crinkling her nose in a way that was all in contrast to her gentle nature. "But I don't believe it."

"Is this true?" the Puu Yaybaan asked.

"It's as true as me standing here," Uan insisted, and indeed, there he stood.

"Well . . . so did you retrieve it?" Tao asked, placing his lampshade at his feet.

"Certainly not," Uan responded. "I can't swim, I'm too heavy to stay afloat. Come on, everybody! To the river!"

The hubbub caused many a window shutter to open, many a cell phone to ring, and many a banana leaf to furl bashfully back into its tree, as curiosity was the one thing that could mobilize all the villagers in unison. And sure enough, when they arrived at the riverside, they all saw it. A trace of brilliance on the tranquil stream. A floating lily made of plastic and crepe paper. A pearl inside a lotus blossom. The first wish of Loi Krathong.

The philosophical irrigator Daeng[4], named after the blood that covered him when he was born, waded through the shallows saying, "Is it a wish for happiness? A love wish? A last wish? Wishful thinking?"

The short-spoken restaurant owner Sorn[5], named after some curious agricultural mishap that no one remembered, pointed his stone pestle toward the brilliance on the water and said, "If we don't do something, it's going to float right past."

"Someone needs to go get it!" the Puu Yaybaan cried, shushing the onlookers. Men hesitated on the shore, children waded into the river until their mothers whistled them back, and the scrawny frog catcher Yai[6] took off his clothes and dove into the deep green water.[7]

"What is it? What's the first wish?" the people shouted when Yai finally resurfaced and reached the little boat. "Does it have a note inside?"

Treading water, Yai unfolded the lotus leaves and produced a moist piece of paper. "Wait. I'm having trouble reading it. The words are smudged. But it says"—dramatic pause as the river held its breath in anticipation—"'I wish for my dying water buffalo to get well —Bovorn S. from San Phak Wan."'

"LOI KRATHONG HAS STARTED!" the Puu Yaybaan declared over the PA system, used for announcing all important and unimportant news in the village, and his tinny words were greeted by cheers from the crowds on the riverbank. The cunning monk Sûa[8] broke into the traditional Loi Krathong song, soon joined by the village elders clapping their hands and the children splashing one another with water, while miles upstream, in the city of Chiang Mai, thousands upon thousands of wishes were being launched onto the river.

November full moon shines
Loi Krathong, Loi Krathong
And the water's high in local river and the klong

Loi, Loi Krathong, Loi, Loi Krathong
Loi Krathong is here and everybody's full of cheer

We're together at the klong
Each one with his krathong
As we push away we pray
We can see a better day

Young Tangmoo[9] heard the noise from where he was perched in the crown of the slender teng-rang tree, slinging a piece of plaited cotton around a broken and dreadfully sagging branch. The tree had been struck by lightning the previous summer. No matter how Tangmoo propped, nailed, tethered, or jiggled the dead wood, every day around noontime it produced a loud *crack* and the infernal thing sank down a little closer toward his father's house. Every day Tangmoo climbed the tree with new boards or ropes, and every day the proportion of natural versus artificial outgrowths in the teng-rang tree shifted a little more in favor of the shoring material. His mother kept her tip money in an old wok, saving up so she could one day afford to call in a landscaper to eliminate the danger. But Tangmoo did not mind his daily chore. It somehow reminded him of a sacred ritual. The crown and leaves of the tree triggered a subconscious memory of the hollowed-out watermelon after which he had been named; a

4 "Red"

5 "Wild goat"

6 "Beanpole"

7 The Thai custom of addressing one another by nicknames is meant to remember oneself better and to fool the spirits into forgetting people's real names. As do the Thai themselves, for that matter. Irrespective of how unflattering the nickname may be, it is freely used in everyday life and no longer necessarily has a traditional origin. The wayward harvester driver Sungkaew, for instance, named his daughter Loli, after Marlboro Lights, and the unemployed mushroom picker Pakpao named her son Ham, after David Beckham. (Until his classmates discovered that in the mountain dialect "Ham" means "sack full of testicles," causing his well-meaning mother, unable to resist his ceaseless badgering, to rename him Porn.)

8 "Tiger"

9 "Watermelon"

crib that had afforded him many sheltered days and nights when he was a baby.

"EVERYBODY DOWN TO THE RIVER!" the Puu Yaybaan's voice rang across the fields. "THERE ARE WISHES TO BE GRANTED! OH, AND REMEMBER TO PIN PLENTY A PENNY TO THE MONEY TREE OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE. WE WILL SEE A BETTER DAY!"

Tangmoo climbed down. He stopped to leave an offering of fresh oranges and cigarettes in the little spirit house and say a prayer, to thank the tree spirit for blessing them with a still-uncrushed house beneath the dead branch. (While Tangmoo naturally believed in Buddha and his lessons and rebirth and all, it didn't mean he had no room for spirits. And in fact the branch's benevolence had nothing to do with the tree spirit—so traumatized by the lightning strike that it had long since gone to live in another tree—but was closely related to young Tangmoo's own exceptional karma.)

Arriving at the riverside, Tangmoo spotted his little brother Nataphun vacantly digging holes in the sand.

"Hey, Tangmoo," Nataphun said.

"Aren't you going to watch?" Tangmoo asked. "The wishes are here."

"Nah, don't wanna. I'm hungry. I wish time would go faster so I could have supper."

"M'okay," Tangmoo said, shrugging.

A bit farther down, where the tranquil Mae Ping River was now the scene of a splashing and churning bustle, Tangmoo picked a butterfly orchid, merely on impulse. As he did so, the orchid's calyx shook, causing minute grains of pollen, invisible to the naked eye, to drift into the air and be carried upstream by a sudden gust of wind. A tremor went through the village. Those who peeled rice looked up from their work. Lovers fell silent. And the pollen? It landed on one of bored little Nataphun's nostrils. As soon as the boy took a breath, a rare allergy made him fall asleep instantly, only to be woken by the chirping of crickets about an hour later. Surprised by the swift fulfillment of his wish, Nataphun ran home to fill his growling stomach.

But this, the same as with the dragonflies, was purely coincidental, and nothing should be read into it.

By now the surface of the river was teeming with *krathongs*. Like any other boy in Doi Saket, Tangmoo had been told the tragicomic story of Loi Krathong's origins countless times, and so he was aware of the invaluable influence of the village he called home. Seven hundred years ago Neng Tanapong, daughter of a Brahman priest in the kingdom of Sukhothai, had been playing on the riverbank. The wench was so startled by the appearance of river goddess Phra Mae Khongkha (who by coincidence had picked the exact same spot to take a bath) that she made an unfortunate tumble into the water and drowned. Everyone knew that, in death, she read the wishes in the lotus boats passing above her dead eyes and made them all come true. And everyone knew that this event in honor of the river goddess was reenacted in Doi Saket every year, and it was *they* who granted the wishes with their ceremony.

Oh, the festival! All over Thailand people drank themselves into a stupor on cheap whiskey, sang their throats sore at moonlit karaoke parties, and made love, night after night, beneath fireworks and lantern lights. Everyone, everyone launched *krathongs* on the water and floated *khom loi*[10] into the air. Everyone made wishes.

But while the people in Chiang Mai partied, the villagers of Doi Saket set to work. Under guidance of the wayward harvester driver Sungkaew, they strung nets across the river and caught the *krathongs*. Men rowed to and fro in tiny boats while women waited on the bank to unburden them. Burnt incense sticks were tossed onto a pile of smoldering embers, spreading a fabulous aroma that the sultry breeze carried across the rice fields like a whispered message. Candle stubs were melted down, the wax used as fuel for the *khom loi*. Money, jewelry, and other valuables sacrificed to the river goddess were collected by the Puu Yaybaan and pinned to the timber tree frame standing beside the stone phallus outside the temple, so that all could follow the example of the generous ones. Woe the mortal who tried to steal: a night of dangling upside down from the holy daeng tree would await him, and a next life as the larva of a dengue mosquito.

"Filthy thieves," the Puu Yaybaan would fume.

But the wish notes were what mattered most. If they were still legible they were collected in a pile: *a life filled with love and happiness* here, *a new hip joint for my mother* there, and sometimes entire wish lists: *1) A fair amount of luck; 2) 20,000 baht*[11] *(that ain't too much, is it?); 3) A bit more headway with my neighbor girl Phailin, though rumor has it that just recently she spread her legs for chicken farmer Kai, and if that's true then never mind; 4) A new screen door, which I would have bought ages ago if my boss Kemkhaeng wasn't too bloody stingy to give me a leg up from time to time; 5) A broken leg for Kemkhaeng; 6) . . .*

In other wish notes the ink had run so much from the journey on the water that special Ink Readers, initiated for the occasion, were sent into the river. Two monks, Sûa and Mongkut, were given the task of interpreting the running tendrils of ink beneath the water's surface. For three days they swam back and forth, dragging themselves ashore, watery eyed, to reel off their messages to the scribes on the riverbank before

10 Wish lanterns made of rice paper with a burning firelighter underneath

11 About 650 dollars

they submerged again. If no note was found at all, the *krathong* was taken to the Exalted Abbot Chanarong[12], who would metaphysically distill the intended wish from its little boat.

Everyone in the village would tell you that they had once seen the Exalted Abbot floating a meditative little bit over his prayer rug, a *krathong* in his hands and mountains upon mountains of them beneath his exalted bare feet. All of them had been told the story so often in their formative years that they firmly believed it to be true. Yet no one had seen it with their own eyes. In fact, the Abbot was a senile old man who had trouble reading the verses and, more important, who drooled a lot. If at some point he had been able to levitate, he had forgotten how ever since his first walker. Still, after much heated debate, voting, counting, and recounting, the village council had decided that clairvoyance was more sacred than dementia and therefore should always be given the benefit of the doubt. And so they unscrambled the Exalted Abbot's inarticulate prattle, and every single wish from northern Thailand was read in anticipation of the ceremony to be performed on the final night.

And the wishes?

They came true. At least, some of them.

Because in the dead of night the Puu Yaybaan, accompanied by his monks Sûa and Mongkut, drove his rickety pickup truck to the village of San Phak Wan. On the way over, they spotted a water buffalo in radiant health and coaxed it from its rice paddy. While Mongkut kept watch outside the hut of sleeping Bovorn S., the other two swapped his terminally ill buffalo, more dead than alive where it lay tied to a rope, for the perfectly fit animal. Downstream, they tossed the weakened ox off a bridge. It resurfaced only once, mooing, and after that nothing more was heard besides the cicadas.

"SUCH GOOD FORTUNE!" the Puu Yaybaan declared when the new day dawned. "BOVORN S. FROM SAN PHAK WAN FILLED HIS *KRATHONG* WITH ONE HUNDRED BAHT AND HIS WIFE'S GOLDEN RING, AND HIS WISH CAME TRUE! HIS BUFFALO IS SPRY AS A JUMPING MOUSE! DO AS HE DID, DONATE GENEROUSLY, AND YOUR WISHES SHALL BE HEARD! OH, AND PLEASE SPECIFY YOUR NAME CLEARLY ON YOUR WISH NOTE—BUDDHA IS NOT A MINDREADER, YOU KNOW."

The rumor spread like wildfire through the PA systems of the surrounding villages and the villages beyond, and it was not long before the miracle was confirmed by a rapturous Bovorn S., who wept tears of joy on the hide of his bewildered buffalo.

Huh? some people in Doi Saket thought. *But the ceremony isn't until tomorrow night. We haven't even granted his wish yet.*

Sûa, however, stated that the ritual in itself was purely symbolical and that granting wishes is about karma (of the wish granters, of course, shrewdly leaving aside whether he was referring to the gullible villagers or the flaccid monks), and that was the end of it.

More riches than ever before were piled onto the *krathongs*. From far and wide, people flocked to the temple to donate money, which looked very handsome on the money tree (making it increasingly healthy) and then looked very handsome in the Puu Yaybaan's bank account (making him increasingly wealthy). The temple didn't see a penny. A shamefully puny amount was budgeted for granting a wish here and there, just to keep the legend alive. The Exalted Abbot invariably mumbled a thank-you and would have no part of the deception, for if there was anyone who would not take the old geezer seriously, it was the Puu Yaybaan.

Of course, the villagers themselves had their wishes too. Countless wishes. Widely varying wishes that would be floated into the air on wish balloons during the ceremony. And even though they were adept at granting wishes and so, at least in theory, should be able to reshape their own lives, every man needs wishes to be able to believe in something.

The well-bellied weed exterminator Uan wished for love, and if that wasn't in the books, the *idea* of love, and if that wasn't in the books, a cursory embrace.

The mournful neighbor Isra had been wishing for a letter from her grandson Om for six years, as he had gone to study "computer" in Singapore and never wrote.

The well-mannered crab huntress Kulap wished for a gong, just because she loved the sound.

Tangmoo's benevolent father Gaew wished for a good life for his children, Singha, Nataphun, and Noi, and of course for Tangmoo himself.

The philosophical irrigator Daeng wished he were dead.

The adulterous rice peeler Somchai begged for potency in her husband's ever-failing manhood so that she could finally, after all these years, take his virginity.

Even the corrupt monk Sûa had a wish. He wished that, just for once, he could set eyes on river goddess Phra Mae Khongkha, even though he did not believe in her.

Only young Tangmoo wished for nothing. He had never wished for anything. *Wouldn't it be wonderful if I had something to wish for?* he often thought. Tangmoo approached the world in all sincerity, always searching for something worth wishing for, but he never found anything that moved him sufficiently to engender a desire. All the things that occupied the other villagers, their disputes and worries, their questions

12 "Mighty warrior;" the Abbot is the head monk of the temple

and futilities, their dramas and embraces . . . nothing felt like it was more than what it seemed to be. And so Tangmoo's life became a string of pure experiences that he endured, and in which he performed no appreciable miracles.

But on that first night of Loi Krathong he could not sleep. Silently, he padded outside. Farther down, by the river, the night shift and the Ink Readers continued their work, but here in the village only the chichaks[13] were awake.

Tangmoo looked up. Thousands upon thousands of *khom loi* floated like swarms of fluorescent jellyfish against the nocturnal canopy. The sky was laden with wishes. The closest ones seemed to be moving more quickly, drifting southward. When they reached higher altitudes they veered west, toward the mountains. *Where are they going?* Tangmoo wondered. They all drifted past steadily, purposely, aiming for an unknown destination. They flew toward the edge of the universe and then beyond.

Next morning, Tangmoo set out at dawn. He walked all day, for miles and miles, and when evening fell he reached the golden temple of Doi Suthep, situated on a hilltop with a view of Chiang Mai. The Gentle Abbot gave him a small bowl of rice to eat and sat beside him on the steps.

"Why have you come here, my son?" the wise man asked.

Tangmoo nodded at the purple sky above the city and said, "The wishes. I want to know where they're going."

The Gentle Abbot had an exceptional talent for invoking Buddha's teachings on all relevant and irrelevant matters people came to him for advice on. Even when a dilemma seemed nigh on impossible to solve, he would astound his audience with the only correct and always uniform answer: that the question was confusing and therefore by definition irrelevant, as the purpose of any spiritual life is to avoid confusion. And this was why the Abbot of Doi Suthep was the most beloved man in northern Thailand: he made everything seem so conveniently simple.

"Oh, no one knows," the Abbot enlightened in this case. He smoothed the wrinkles from his robe and smiled politely.

Is that it? anyone else might have thought, affronted. *Is that what I trudged up this bloody mountain for? Barefoot?* But not Tangmoo. Tangmoo looked at the confusion of fireworks over Chiang Mai and the procession of lights in the Night Bazaar, reflecting on the surface of the river that was or was not to take his life the very next day. The burning water, the whistles and bangs, the partying people, they all created a disorder so consistent that it reverted back into order. And everywhere, everywhere *khom loi* rose up into the air, as if the city were weeping inverted tears of fire.

"Chiang Mai consists of three worlds," the Abbot explained. "The first world is the one you see before you. A world that is vibrant; living and partying and wishing. Then there's the world above it, a world of serenity where people can rise above the mundane. By releasing their wishes, people try to reach that higher world, to become a part of it. They are two layers, sliding across each other."

Tangmoo gazed at the *khom loi*, steadily drifting past above the chaos.

"But then there's another world below," the monk continued. "A world of alleys, of darkness, of backstreets and corruption. The world of the blind. You see? The surface, wild and light; the dark side below; and finally, above, the serene, the transcendent, wishing to do good. Looking at it like that, it's very much like a human being. Chiang Mai, the Rose of the North, is a living, breathing person."

"But what does that tell me about where the wishes go?" Tangmoo asked.

"Maybe it doesn't matter where our wishes go," the Abbot said. "Maybe the question should be how we *ourselves* can get there. Look over there."

He pointed toward two *khom loi* rising up into the air with incredible speed, overtaking all the rest. Suddenly one of them started glowing more brightly and veering sharply to the west, while the other flickered, fluttered down, and fizzled out. "What do you think was the matter with those two wishes? Why did they ascend more rapidly than the others?"

"Maybe they were really burning wishes," Tangmoo guessed.

"Love? Happiness? Money? What could be worth going so fast for?"

"The wish to desire something . . ."

"Or maybe the wish to release all desire."

But . . . Tangmoo thought. *But* . . .

"And why is one wish so strong and sure, while the other extinguished like a candle?"

"Maybe it was a bad wish, a wish for revenge, a death wish . . ."

"Or maybe it was simply a matter of sloppy fuel distribution," the monk said, shrugging, and then he smiled. "It's time for you to go home now, my son. Your parents must be worried."

The boy has a good heart, the Gentle Abbot thought benevolently after they had said goodbye. He ordered a *tuk-tuk* to be waiting for the boy to take him home as soon as he reached the last of the three hundred steps leading down. When the wise man entered the temple, carrying Tangmoo's empty rice bowl in his right hand, he tripped on his robes and landed flat on his face. The rice bowl shattered on the floor. Miraculously, the Abbot himself was unharmed. However, while sweeping up the shards he was soon overcome by a

13 Small lizards intelligent enough to articulate their own name

long-nourished but diligently repressed desire to express his creativity, like fashioning pretty little mosaics. All night long, the monk worked with the shards and felt happier than he had in a long time. And so the Gentle Abbot, not nearly as far along on his path toward Enlightenment as young Tangmoo himself, saw his fondest wish fulfilled, smashing all of his china in the process.

But this, in all probability, had nothing to do with the boy's coming.

The next day all the dirt roads of Doi Saket had been strung with lanterns. In every color and size they dangled from branches, electric wires, and scurrying chickens. More had been placed on walls, in gardens, and around the temple square. The well-bellied weed exterminator Uan busied himself with the table setting at the west end of the square, making sure that everyone he disliked would be seated far, far away from him, directly beneath the booming speakers of the karaoke set. All the villagers were busy preparing delicacies or setting up the thousands of *khom loi* so they could all be lit simultaneously that night—a logistical nightmare of incredible proportions.

When evening finally fell, after the exhausted Ink Readers had returned from the river with dripping robes and a last handful of wishes and the Exalted Abbot had fallen asleep on his meditation rug . . . that's when the party started in Doi Saket. People sang and stuffed themselves like there was no tomorrow. Boys caught lizards and bet on which one would run fastest. Girls tied strings to brightly colored atlas butterflies and led them around like kites. Men and women lasciviously tore at one another's clothes and limbs beneath the bewitched phallus.

"ALL RIGHT, FOLKS. THAT'S ENOUGH," the Puu Yaybaan broadcasted around ten o'clock that night. "LET THE CEREMONY BEGIN!"

The Exalted Abbot (still asleep and therefore perfectly resigned to his role) was carried outside in his seat to lead the villagers in meditation. The silence that descended on the crowd was so deafening that even the crabs in the rice field looked up in surprise; this was the only time of the year when all the villagers collectively kept their mouths shut (because even at night most of them never stopped talking in their sleep).

Only Tangmoo was no part of this communal introspection, just like he had been no part of the communal festivities. After shoring the dead branch on the teng-rang tree with a fresh piece of wood, he had retreated to a quiet place behind the temple. He had been sitting there for hours, his back resting against a wheel of the giant mechanical replica of river goddess Phra Mae Khongkha, which would be rolled out into the temple square during the ceremony. *By releasing their wishes, people try to reach that world.* Tangmoo felt like a drowning person, flailing. If releasing desire was the pinnacle of achievement, how then was he supposed to justify his own existence?

A portentous shrew taking a nap on the wooden axle of the river goddess suddenly pricked up its ears. A second later it scurried off, squeaking. It seemed spooked, Tangmoo thought, as if it had spotted a tiger. Then he heard approaching voices. Suddenly, Tangmoo felt afraid, as he was not supposed to be here. On an impulse, he dove into the same bushes the shrew had disappeared into and hunkered there silently, unaware of his right foot balancing on a dry twig on the verge of snapping. (Ironically, the confounded twig came from a teng-rang tree; a much smaller specimen than the one threatening his father's house, but with much more far-reaching consequences.)

From his hiding place, Tangmoo watched as the generally respected Puu Yaybaan and the monks Sûa and Mongkut appeared. The threesome stopped beside the wooden construction of the river goddess, not two feet from where Tangmoo was concealed. He was afraid to breathe. The men were engrossed in a heated argument, of which only snippets reached Tangmoo's ears: "... m ustn't raise suspicion ..." and "... didn't dive myself silly for nothing, dammit ..." and "... six wishes granted, that's more than ..." and "Fine! But it's going to come out of *your* share ..."

Is the twig to blame for the fact that it chose to snap at that precise moment and play such a pivotal role in the destruction and creation of so many lives in northern Thailand? Be that as it may, it happened, and the echo reverberated in Tangmoo's ringing ears.

"What was that!" the Puu Yaybaan cried.

"Here!" Sûa said, triumphant. Two strong hands, quick as snakes, darted into the bushes and grabbed Tangmoo by the scruff of his neck, dragging him out. "An eavesdropper! What're you doing here, you little fraud?"

"I . . . nothing," Tangmoo stammered. "I was just . . . thinking."

"In the bushes?" the Puu Yaybaan said dubiously.

Mongkut glanced around nervously. "How long has he been here?"

"He heard everything," the village chief hissed.

"I . . . no, really, I have no idea what you were talking about," Tangmoo said. He tried to free his arm. "I think I should go back to the temple square now, or my mom will . . ."

"He's going to tell them everything," Sûa said, tightening his hold on the boy's arm. "We need to do something."

"No, I truly don't know what you . . ."

"Liar! Traitor!" Sûa fumed suddenly, spraying Tangmoo's face with foul strings of saliva.

"We can't give him a chance to ruin everything," the Puu

Yaybaan decided in a whisper. Even more than Sûa's uncontrolled outburst, this was a signal for Tangmoo to yank himself free with a rip and a twist, and to start running like mad.

"Hey!" Sûa shouted.

"After him!" Mongkut yelled.

"Take care of this," the Puu Yaybaan barked at Sûa. "Am I making myself clear? Mongkut and I will begin the ceremony, before people start wondering what's keeping us."

Fumbling blind, Tangmoo ran through the darkness. Sûa ran after him. They sped across the winding path away from the temple, through the woods, across the thickets. Sûa was right behind him, growling like a feral cat, while not four hundred yards away from them in the temple square all the wish balloons had been lit and were starting to fill up with hot air. Loud cheers rose up as the wooden Phra Mae Khongkha was rolled out into the square, and no one heard Sûa's insane roars: *"GET BACK HERE, YOU MISERABLE LIAR! HAVEN'T YOU DONE ENOUGH?"*

Finally, the moonlit path opened out. Feet splashed through water. Dismayed, Tangmoo realized he had reached the river. He turned to his assailant at the same time that his little sister Noi turned around on the podium outside the temple. She had been chosen to play the role of Neng Tanapong this year, beaming proudly in her beautiful costume. Undoubtedly Noi was thinking of her big brother, somewhere out there in the frenzied crowd.

"Now I've got you." Sûa grinned, wading into the shallow riverbed.

"Listen," Tangmoo wept, stumbling backward, up to his thighs in the water now. "I have no idea what you were talking about. How could I talk about something I don't know?"

"Little boy," the tiger said, "it doesn't matter what you know."

Snarling, he threw himself at Tangmoo, his saffron robes billowing on the water like a cloud of blood: *no, no, no, no*, the gigantic wooden arm of the river goddess descended on little Noi and she looked up with a gasp, the crowd cheered with so much excitement and so little restraint that they seemed to be going mad; *yes, yes, yes, yes*, the river foamed over Tangmoo, flashes lit up the night, fireworks crackled, spattered, whirled, feet kicked desperately, dislodging starfish from the riverbed, smothered cries rose in bubbles to the surface, popping soundlessly; *help, help, help, help*, little Neng Tanapong drowned in satin fabric as thousands of *khom loi* all rose up simultaneously, the crowd fell to their knees, looking up in tears toward the fiery miracle, wishes filled the night, the stone phallus shrank in shame, and Tangmoo drowned in the river.

But not without a witness.

Because from the shadows by the riverbank one shade extricated itself, bigger than all the others. This was, of course, Phra Mae Khongkha who, after bestowing life on the river a long time ago, had stopped for a breather in the riverbed. And so it happened that Sûa the monk, dripping wet and flushed with exertion, glanced over his shoulder and saw his fondest wish fulfilled, even though he did not believe what he was seeing. His body was found downstream the next day, but not his ripped-off hands. They were never found.

And Tangmoo?

I'm sure that if you had looked closely, you could have seen a tiny speck of light rise from the river. It fluttered up into the night sky, hastily climbing past a swarm of surprised purple swamp hens, and then joined the *khom loi*. That's where the little light found peace. In Tangmoo's dead eyes on the bottom of the river you could see a starry sky full of wishes reflected. Around him whirled running tendrils of ink, and he read them all.

Next day around noon there was a *crack* when the dead branch on the teng-rang tree sagged, but there was no one to prop it back up. Two days later it finally snapped off and destroyed besides the house also the part of Tangmoo's father's brain that was responsible for redirecting grief. From then on Gaew, who had been inconsolable after the death of his son, devoted his deliriously happy life to his remaining children, aided by his wife who admitted to herself sadly: *Thinking that life is good is better than not living at all.*

The collapse of the damnable branch had the added consequence that now, every morning, a particularly bothersome ray of sunlight tormented the eye of the philosophical and always death-wishing irrigator Daeng, causing uncontrollable screaming fits and severe sleep deprivation. It was not long, therefore, before Daeng nodded off behind the wheel while driving along the main road. He rammed a truck full of pigs on their way to the slaughterhouse, rolled fourteen times, and found new joy in life when he realized he had survived the crash without a scratch. Contrary to the pigs. So lugubrious was the scene of the accident—chunks of bloody pork all over the place—that it made the news broadcasts all over Southeast Asia. Even in Singapore, where Om had been working at a Thai restaurant for six years and sending a monthly email to his mourning grandmother Isra, who had no email address. Om then wrote her a letter, saying: *I'm doing fine, Grandmother. I have a PhD in computer and I'm making lots of money now. Here, have some*—and added his tips to the envelope. When Isra found the letter in her mailbox a week later, she died of happiness.

Wishes, wishes, wishes everywhere. The well-mannered crab huntress Kulap found some scrap metal from Daeng's wrecked truck in the rice field and used it to forge a gong. When she sounded it one night, she touched such a probing

frequency that every man in Doi Saket was enchanted and lured toward her little house. As soon as the well-bellied weed exterminator Uan saw her, he fell head over heels in love. Kulap, not a bad sort, gave him a cursory embrace, and at least the idea of love.

Wishes, like pearls on a string of cause and effect. Kulap's gong kept chiming across the rice fields for nights on end, finally resonating in the blood supply to Somchai's husband's failing manhood and dislodging something in the veins. He immediately ravaged her with all the lust that had been denied him all these years, and Somchai was engulfed in waves of coital energy that were tangible for miles around—even as far as Chiang Mai, where legs were spread, thighs were kneaded, and orgasms were shrieked out. All over northern Thailand wishes came true. Bonds of love were forged. Children were being born. Kemkhaeng broke his leg.

And maybe this was all coincidence, like so much in life.

But let me tell you that, somewhere, a tiny little light had found its swarm. It let itself drift along on the winds toward the west. All the while, it wished and wished and wished. And so, wishing, the light and its wishes flew toward the edge of the universe and beyond.