

ghosts

SEINEE SAOWAPHONG

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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Her lover was an ordinary man. He had no especially attractive feature or noticeable deformity that would have immediately singled him out among other ordinary people. He was neither taller nor shorter than the average Thai man at large, and he came from a family of simple folk who had – to use her own parents’ expression – no blue blood in their veins, whereas she, in the opinion of most, did not stand in the back rows of feminine beauty, and was born into an aristocratic family whose ancestors could be traced as far back as the Ayutthaya kingdom. Yet when these dissimilar man and woman came to meet, befriend and love each other, her father blamed this unforgivable mistake on the modern way of life, which granted women too much freedom. Part of the problem was that women were allowed to study at the university together with male students. Even though access to the various university levels was restricted through high tuition fees and expensive books and services, it was not enough to ensure that only children of families of suitable or at least almost suitable social standing could attend. True enough, as a rule the

children of the poor did not get past the gates of academe, but it happened all too often that some of them did manage to sneak their way in, and by mixing and socialising with this lowly lot, the other children developed preposterous ideas and were led astray from accepted behaviour, forgetting themselves, their rank and their dignity.

And another reason was that women were given the opportunity to leave the house to work in offices, venturing out of safe and orderly homes into a wide, wild world full of trickery and deceit.

Her father thought that because she had entered university and studied together with other girls and boys of the same age, some friends of the same sex who were never brought up in good families had put improper ideas into her head. As for the young fellows there who came from lowly families, he thought with contempt that they had no other purpose than to shed their skin and pass themselves off as gentlemen with these girls of good breeding and high standing through all kinds of artifice and fraud.

Ratchanee's grandmother had opposed sending her to senior high school because she could not bear the shame of having to meet and listen to these people and she knew that her granddaughter, who was now a fully grown woman, would have to wear shorts and raise her legs and thrust her bosom and wag her behind and squat and jump in public in what was now an adjunct to

education they called 'physical exercise' or 'sport'. She had successfully opposed Ratchanee's elder sisters from doing the same, which explains why they only graduated at secondary-school level and stayed at their grandmother's beck and call for years on end doing nothing but waiting until a bride's settlement took place and they passed from her custody to someone else's. It was Ratchanee's good fortune that she grew up much later than her sisters, and her grandmother's ill fortune that she had aged so much that she no longer had the strength and stamina to prod and poke until her opinion prevailed and became the supreme law enforced over the whole family as was the case in the past. Ratchanee was thus able to escape from her frighteningly strong embrace.

Her mother, who held slightly more advanced opinions than her grandmother because she was born a generation later, just kept her misgivings to herself, maybe because she was too weak to oppose her little daughter whom she loved and had always allowed to have her way, and because she could see that times had changed during her own lifetime.

These were no longer the days of powder and turmeric but of all kinds of goods with foreign-sounding names that those overseas creatures made and sent over to sell, names so odd that a sheltered woman in her fifties could neither catch nor remember them. Her childhood was all topknots and anklets, and her adolescence had meant a belt of splendid brass. She still remembered the ceremo-

ny of cutting the topknot, a magnificent and protracted affair which had left her sore and exhausted to the point of collapse. But these days such rites were all gone. Only Ratchanee's two elder sisters had worn topknots, but the cutting ceremony had been so simplified as to be hardly a ceremony at all. Ratchanee was the only one who had not worn a topknot as a child, and when she came of age she did not show any interest in a copper or brass belt. She was satisfied with a mere leather belt that cost nothing much at all, and simply asked for different colours – red, green, brown, blue – to match the shirts and skirts she wore. Gone were the days of silk robes and chintzes and loose bodices and simple cloth wrapped around the waist or tied at the back; now it was all trousers for men and skirts for women. Gone also were the days of powder and turmeric and beeswax, replaced by creams and lipsticks and hair lotions. Ratchanee's elder sisters were both married and had households of their own, which was extremely fortunate because it left only this youngest daughter to fuss about, and her mother looked at Ratchanee with constant worry in her heart, silently praying for her, hoping for some kind of miracle which would turn her again into the good girl she used to be, amid all the changes that were going on everywhere...

When they first met, Ratchanee became interested in the young man for only one reason, which is that he did not show any kind of interest in her at all. When one of her friends introduced him, he did not utter a word, not

even that he was pleased to meet her, as everybody says upon being introduced. Even though she was old enough to know that the sentence usually carried no meaning and was blurted out automatically for the sake of politeness, she still would have liked to hear it, and she thought with contempt that that fellow had no manners at all. As he sat in front of her, he spoke very little and in a half-hearted manner. She believed it was for the man to strike up a conversation and that the woman should wait before pitching in. So she waited, but he showed no inclination to talk, and both remained silent. She looked at him repeatedly from the corner of her eye and sensed that he felt no less oppressed than she did.

As she went to leave, her friend, who was the owner of the house, and who was busy chatting with the other guests, saw that he was sitting idly by, so she asked him to do her the favour of accompanying Ratchanee to her car, which was waiting at the entrance of the lane.

‘Thank you, that won’t be necessary, I can take care of myself,’ Ratchanee said with a sarcastic undertone when she saw him standing up. He did not say anything and looked as if he had not noticed her tone but he followed her to the door, so she turned around and looked him in the face in a way which meant ‘Didn’t you understand what I said?’

His impassive face seemed to show some sort of concern. ‘...unless it bothers you,’ he muttered.

The fierce glitter in her eyes abated and he must have understood from her expression that she would not object because he went on following her quietly. She was not going to keep her feelings to herself any longer, so she turned to him and asked bluntly: 'Why are you following me?'

He looked at a loss. 'Well, I'm seeing you to your car, aren't I?'

'You don't want to know me or even talk to me, isn't that so?'

'I never said that, or if you think I did, then tell me where and when it happened.'

'Your behaviour is more telling than anything you say.'

'What!' he exclaimed, then fell silent. Ratchanee thought that his remark, indeed his whole attitude, was a deliberate and outrageous provocation and she felt utterly offended.

'You misunderstand my reserve and restraint,' he said forcefully.

'Restraint?' Ratchanee repeated in a loud voice and thought that he was lamely trying to excuse himself.

He nodded. 'I'm restraining myself in front of you for two reasons. The first is that I know who you are, and the second is that you're a beautiful woman and you're well aware of it. You've seen enough men fall over themselves in their eagerness to approach you. Indeed you're beautiful and I don't deny it, but I'm not one of

those men and, as for the first reason, you and I are as different as the sky and the earth.'

Ratchanee blushed deeply, seething inside. She had never heard such infuriating probing.

'You only know that my name is Citizen Sai and my surname Seema,' he went on. 'You still don't know who I am. Therefore you can't understand my own restraint. People with different stations in life see everything differently. But this isn't your fault, and anyway there's one thing I appreciate in you, and that's your frankness. When you're upset, you say so without beating about the bush. That's something that's hard to find – I think that once you know me better, you'll understand me better.'

Ratchanee shook her head brusquely, entered the car, slammed the door and drove away without a goodbye.

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In the early 1950s, novelist-diplomat Sakchai Bamrungphong, now better known under his pen name Seinee Saowaphong, wrote two socially committed novels that flopped – *Wanlaya's love* and *Ghosts* – and as the diplomat prospered the novelist fell into oblivion. Two decades later, however, the 'student revolution' of 1973 resurrected these generous, prophetic works and their author was given a second literary life and pride of place

as Thailand's foremost progressive writer. Proclaimed a National Artist in 1990, Seinee Saowaphong is ninety-one years old this year.