

Thai Fiction

an ordinary story

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TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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...Granny has just left my room, together with her (to her) lovely white kitten. Nothing special, you know. She merely came to tell me the same old story. Actually, it was I who told it to her in the first place and I believe it must have given her happiness and hope, so she's kept telling it time and again tirelessly and finally the story has become hers, that is, she's been doing the rounds telling it to everyone in the house (and to each of us many times), so that yes, it's the same story alright, except that she's changed the sets and props a little, enough to turn it into a new story she keeps repeating ad nauseam.

For my part, I've never criticized her for repeating it to everyone in the house. For a start (I'd like to point out) she hasn't used it to turn it into a book or sell its rights for a movie, nor to obtain remuneration or profit of any kind, so I've never thought of asking for a share of it.

Secondly, the (new) story she peddles around has little to do now with the one I told her; she's added to it her own thinking, her own interpretation, just as you'd spice up a dish to enhance its flavour: it's still the same

dish but it's got a different flavour altogether. This should be enough for you to realize that, though she got her inspiration from me for some parts, the rest is her own creation.

Lastly, if I haven't taken her to task, it's because I can see she's an old woman, a lonely old woman (deserving of sympathy). Inasmuch as the story provides an old woman with a measure of happiness and hope, I'm happy enough to let her have it, out of compassion, out of human kindness, without my having to forfeit anything.

But then, as you can see, before I let her have the story, I had to put forward no fewer than three reasons, and human compassion comes last.

In any case, for these three reasons, I've never let anyone (in the house) know that it's actually from me that she got it.

She likes to come and sit in my room and tell it to me often, just as she did right now. Today, as it happens, I'm in a particularly good mood, so I showed interest to please her, but if I happen to be in a bad mood when she comes, let me tell you frankly that I don't want to listen to her. Sometimes I feel like chasing her away but in the end I never do so, except that sometimes I deliberately show her I'm not happy and she soon goes out, off her own bat, leaving the story unfinished. I'd rather not look at her sluggish doddering as she walks out. It isn't a nice scene – that of a white-haired old woman, short and stooped, shuffling out quietly, listless and disappointed.

Sometimes I call her back. Assuredly I'm not being quite honest. I quickly change the expression on my face and hold her back by saying, 'Hey, why are you leaving? I want to listen to the rest of the story.' This bloody stupid sentence of mine is always effective. Sometimes it comes out of my mouth without my even realising it.

And if you could see her then, you'd feel I'm a wonderful chap who knows how to please an old woman (at the end of her tether).

She instantly goes from sluggishness to eagerness, all traces of disappointment left behind.

The downturned wrinkled lips rise into a sweet smile clearly visible (showing pale brown gums). The eyes welling up with tears sparkle with happiness and the tears trickle down as an expression of joy. And when she resumes her story, her whole face radiates happiness and hope right down to her wrinkles and liver spots.

You should see this yourself some day. I'm not able to adequately describe with words this mixture of tension and happiness which appears to the naked eye.

At those times when I show off my impatience, which results in her leaving my room, I don't call her back. I tell myself it's just as well she doesn't come to bother me often (old people are such a pain!). But after a few days, here she comes again! She must've forgotten my reaction then...

Sometimes a new tenant moves in. It happens

frequently in this house with rooms to let where the oldest residents leave one after the other and are soon replaced. The coming and going is ceaseless, just as in this world the dead leave and the newborn come to replace them – that’s right, our planet is like a house in which we all live together.

(Well, maybe it isn’t exactly the same actually, I’m making the comparison just like that, don’t be hard on me.)

Whenever new tenants move in, Granny isn’t slow in cosying up to them and very soon, in a matter of days, she undertakes to treat them to her old story without them having any idea of where it comes from. Think about it: you’ve just settled down in a new abode when an old woman comes along to tell you a story about ghosts in the house. Would you think that funny?

I overheard (quite by chance) a couple of newcomers talking about Granny in the following terms: ‘We can’t resent her, old people are like that.’ Two months later, they moved out – I’ve no idea why (and probably neither does Granny).

She and I are veterans in the house. We know what’s been happening all along. We’ve followed the story from beginning to end. Maybe that’s why I alone (in the house) must bear the burden of listening to her, even though on some days I don’t feel like it at all...

But I must, it seems to me, inform you about the latest developments, because if you’re interested in

Granny's old story, it might be good for you to know its origins and ups and downs. But where to begin? (It's a long story.)

Well, I'll try to be as brief as possible, so that no time is wasted (neither yours nor mine). I know what we say about time these days: we give it importance to the point of claiming that time is money (would you believe it!). Knowing this, I must endeavour not to waste any.

Ah! I know where I shall begin, so that it's short and crisp, time being valuable as we've just said. The story begins...

...when Granny's daughter learned she had cancer.

Yes, this is truly where I must begin, because it sums up the story well, it makes it sound interesting. But on second thoughts I'd better go back a little and begin...

...when I moved here, into this house.

...

Chart Korbjitti, born 1954, is a highly successful, self-publishing



Thai novelist and short story writer with a wide range of styles. Both *The judgment*, 1981, and *Time*, 1993, received the SEA Write Award and were translated into French, English and other languages. They can be downloaded from thaifiction.com, along with *Mad dogs & co*, 1988, and his best novellas and short stories.